

THE ARCHITECTURE OF URBAN ALTRUISM

Learning to really love our neighbour(hood)s.

By James K.A. Smith

When Jesus summarizes “the greatest commandment,” it is a two-fold obligation that hinges on love: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” and “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Luke 10:27, echoing Leviticus 19:18). It is intriguing to me that when Jesus points to the centrality of love, he also invokes a metaphor which is not familial (“brother” or “friend”) or ethnic (“your people”), but almost geographical: we are to love the neighbour—the one next to us, who happens (by providence) to be in proximity. The neighbour could be a friend or an enemy, a foreigner or a brother. The call to love the neighbour is a call to love all of them—that is why all of Jesus’ injunctions to love are taken up in the call to love the neighbour.

THE CULTURE OF “AUTOMOBILITY”

But if we’re honest, the geography of this injunction must sound strange for a culture that dwells in “executive” homes on *cul-de-sacs* with heated garages and massive decks in the backyard. North American culture increasingly inhabits the kind of world

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where we not only don’t *know* our neighbours, we never even *see* them. Many denizens of late modern culture emerge bleary-eyed from bed before dawn, grab a travel mug of coffee while running out the door into the attached garage, and click the electronic opener to begin the daily commute. According to the recent *Commuting in America III* report, for 75% of people this is a journey that happens alone, in a private vehicle. So we begin our day in isolation: the transition from home to garage to vehicle to expressway is insulated from any contact with others. When we get home, there’s little difference. The culture of “automobility” engenders a residential architecture where the three-car garage swallows almost the entire front elevation, leaving a small gap for a front door—but eliminating any room for an expansive front porch. Instead, houses are set back from

the street, guarded by the fortress-like wall of garage doors, leaving us to retreat to the privacy of fenced backyards on sprawling decks—once again, insulated by pressure-treated lumber from any contact with our neighbours. Thus, our suburban “neighbourhoods” are all too often collections of privatized, insulated pods that secure us from any contact with “neighbours.” In such a world, Jesus’ command sounds a tad anachronistic and strange.

So what would it mean to take seriously Jesus’ injunction to love our *neighbours*? How could we recover a sense of the *proximity* of love? And how could we take seriously the *geography* of this ethical vision? If Jesus’ vision of “agapic” love hinges on love of our neighbour, then shouldn’t we think seriously about how this plays itself out in the very real, incarnate, concrete proximity of our *neighbourhoods*? How could we connect Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbour with Jeremiah’s prophetic vision of “seeking the welfare of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7)?

In *The Architecture of Happiness*, the philosopher Alain de Botton explores the way in which the built environment either fosters or detracts from the pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. Jesus’ vision is a call beyond such *eudaimonism*, but Botton is onto something: because we are embodied, physical, yea, “incarnate” creatures, the material conditions of our dwelling shape and mold us more than we often realize. Christian exhortations to love our neighbours usually amount to encouragements to muster the will-power to care about

others—a call to a resolute interiority and attitude. But what if Christian neighbour-love had a structural, material concern at its base: that we care about the very physical shape of our residential dwelling and critically consider how the material conditions of our built environment foster or detract from love of neighbour? In a world where the built environment threatens to squelch the very category of “neighbour,” might not we heed Jesus’ command precisely by being concerned to build communities that encourage encounters with neighbours? Could there be an architecture of neighbour-love? While Botton’s architecture of happiness strikes me as a bit self-absorbed, might we nonetheless be concerned—as Christians—with an *architecture* of altruism?

While Botton’s recent book is an interesting prompt in this regard, my thinking along these lines has been significantly shaped by 19th-century British voices—John Ruskin, William Morris, F. D. Maurice, and others. This circle (once described by Charles Taylor as “our Victorian contemporaries”) was loosely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But more importantly, these characters appear as part of the milieu of a vibrant Christian socialism in Victorian England. One can see a constellation of them in Ford Maddox Brown’s famous painting, *Work*, which hangs in the Manchester City Art Gallery—a piece with F. D. Maurice lurking on the right side of the painting, and flanked on the left side by a notice about classes at the Working Men’s College, a project that was near to the heart of William Morris.

Concerned about the effects of the industrial revolution as evidenced in the urban squalor of the working poor, Ruskin, Maurice, and Morris heard the call to love our neighbours not as a dreamy ideal of caring for souls. Instead, they heard this as a clarion call to care for “the whole neighbour,” as it were—to be concerned with all the gritty messiness of their embodied reality. While Morris tended toward a utopianism, Ruskin and Maurice

built environment itself fosters such concern? In other words, could it be the case that there might be architectural elements that actually mitigate concern for the neighbour, and in fact propagate a kind of egoistic self-interest that blinds us to the neighbour? Conversely, could there be elements of an architecture that foster concern for the neighbour—a mode of design and planning our spaces that regularly and persistently invites us out of ourselves and

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were part of a movement concerned with urban renewal. They realized that loving the neighbour required attention to the material conditions that the neighbour inhabits. This engendered a sweeping movement of social reform especially in northern and industrial England, in cities like Manchester and Liverpool (which is why it is so fitting that Brown's *Work* hangs in the Manchester Gallery which is free and available to all). This story is chronicled with both detail and verve in Tristram Hunt's book, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City*.

INVITING US OUT OF OURSELVES

These Victorian voices invite us to extend their intuitions: If the call to love the neighbour includes a holistic call to be concerned about the material conditions that the neighbour inhabits, could it also include a call to think about the way in which the


our involitional worlds of self-interest, and exposes us to the needs of the Other?

While I have no interest in espousing some kind of architectural determinism, it does seem to me that our desires and our imaginations—our loves—are shaped in significant ways by the rhythms of our habits and practices. And these rhythms are channeled and molded by the shape of our built environment. A construction of the world that finds us sequestered in insulated pods—emerging only into smaller, mobile, insulated pods—must make an impact on how we see ourselves and our relations to (largely invisible) others. Could there not be a link between the increased narcissism and polarity of North American culture and that many adults spend two hours a day by themselves in maddening commuter traffic, with the inanities of talk radio as a soundtrack? Wouldn't we expect this to seep into and shape the imagination in all sorts of deleterious ways?



What if our built environment were less sequestering and insulated? What if we dwelt in houses with front porches on the sidewalk—and actually spent time there, chatting with neighbours who strolled by? What if we began our day not by jumping alone into the *Camry* in a dark garage, but by walking a few blocks to catch the bus, which we rode with others, gradually building up familiarity and even friendship with a cross-section of the city we could never see from inside our automobiles? We would then inhabit a built environment that would

give the neighbour a chance to appear. Fostering such environments would be a way to love our neighbours. Disciples of Jesus could commit themselves to an architecture of altruism as a way of loving God.

Loving our neighbour means more than mustering kind feelings toward anonymous others. It might require, here and now, that we commit ourselves to building (or better, recovering and redeeming) built environments in which neighbours actually show up to be loved. 



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