

Liverpool Lecture - The Cultural City

Some autobiographical details that are relevant to what I wish to argue in this paper: I was born in Salford which used to be a city north of Manchester. I say used to be because over the years as Manchester has grown Salford's identity has been slowly erased. Although there is a Cathedral, Salford has no centre any more. Pendleton, that used to be its centre, is now a shopping mall and the Cathedral, University and Town Hall are strung along Chapel Street – a busy thoroughfare that leads directly to Manchester. In fact the Town Hall is closer to Manchester than it is to the Cathedral. The council offices have been moved out to Swindon, which used to be a distant suburb. Manchester has become the hub of the region, and its commercial success and rise as an international city, has sucked the life out of Salford as it has out of many of the former cities and towns in its orbit.

For many years Salford was known as the classic slum. Home to many migrant labourers from Scotland and Ireland, in particular, drawn by the industrial revolution it spawned areas of alarming poverty like the famous Hankey Park – scene for Walter Greenwood's novel *Love on the Dole*. It remains a place of poverty, unemployment, high crime rates, drug abuse, broken, dysfunctional families and disaffected youths. In fact the Chief of Police recently described a number of the city kids as 'feral'. When I returned to work in Manchester I returned to live in Salford in the area and indeed the house in which I was born and raised. I don't live in the worst area but I am surrounded by some of the abandoned houses, the building sites now silenced by the credit crunch, and the back allies strewn with household litter. The kids next door rampage out the back in boredom, scaling backyard walls, and hacking down plants. Until recently the house next door but one was a thriving brothel, with clients and prostitutes sitting out in the front garden, all young people. At the corner shops regular groups gather swapping bottles of alcopops and cans of cheap cider. Police cars circulate as regularly as ambulances and helicopters. Buses and taxis get stoned and I have even been refused taxi-rides from Piccadilly Station home at night. The run up to bonfire night is particularly fraught.

I paint this picture to help you to understand my surprise this summer to see advertised throughout Salford a Proms in the Park weekend. I don't know how people were drawn to the event, but it's not the kind of thing I've ever seen in Salford before. Of course, there's the Quays area with its theatre, Conran designed apartments, museum, and soon to be media city, but it feels isolated, built on a former industrialised area, and the accommodation is gated. But here was culture being brought into one of the city's more beautiful parks; a grand symbolic gesture. And I wished it well and welcome all attempts to change the ethos – bringing beauty and aesthetic values into the urban environment. My worry is that it can only be cosmetic because the social problems are entrenched and historical, and the social trends of contemporary urban living, as I will argue, militate against the generation of what is absolutely necessary – the movement towards a common good.

Theologically, let me provide a benchmark for that common urban good as it was once articulated by Thomas Aquinas. As I said, this is a benchmark – a mediaeval ideal. But I will then go on to, in a second part, to show how city's today aspire to the notions of transcendence, in their own way, that Aquinas's picture portrays. (I am not nostalgically dreaming of a return to Roman Catholic Christendom.) In a third, and final part of this paper, I will reflect upon the city's contemporary conditions, pointing out the real problem Council's face that simply bringing culture to the people will not

defray. There is, I will suggest, a struggle being waged for the soul of the city in which aesthetic values can become anaesthetic placebos and entertainment a diversion for existential crisis.

The Vision

Cities are the greatest and most complex of human art-forms. They are aesthetic installations of Juggernaut proportions. And they are shot through with transcendental aspirations. Lewis Mumford raises an important question in the early part of his ambitious study *The City in History*. What, he asks, draws people from the comfortable security of villages into the towers, walls and precincts of the early cities? Cities are not created simply out of large numbers of people coming together – something attracts them into an orbit that feeds not their bodies now, but their desires and imaginations. Mumford pinpoints the catalyst: the figure of the local chieftain merges with the priest and creates the king. With the institution of sacral kingship a new symbolic world order emerges: the city. Only for the gods will human beings exert themselves in the building of citadels and the construction of walls too thick simply to keep out other human and animal invaders. The king became a symbol, a metonymic figure of dazzling ambiguity incarnating the corporate personality of the community. Not that the sacred is invented with kingship, for the shrine had always been a focus point for congregating and prior to city-dwelling for the living there were always *nercopoli*, cities of the dead. But with the institution of sacral kingship comes an urban explosion, for around him grew the scribes, the lawyers, the military that fostered an intellectual and cultural life. As such, the city comes to represent “the cosmos, a means of bringing heaven down to earth, the city [as] a symbol of the possible. Utopia was an integral part of its original constitution, and precisely because it took form as an ideal projection, it brought into existence realities that might have remained latent for an indefinite time in more soberly governed small communities.” The city then has always been shot through with references to the transcendent, whilst simultaneously being the site for the massive extension of what it is to be human. For in cities human capabilities are extended by the aggregate of human beings dwelling there; there is an accumulation of wealth, power and intellectual ingenuity. As well as being the sites for the sacred they are the sites for Promethean aspirations; sites for self-assertion. Here lie the origins over the struggle for the soul of the city.

Cities are not simply then geopolitical systems, nodal points in a functional logic of State economics. Cities like their inhabitants have memories, undergo transformations (for better or for worse), respond to circumstances, try to seize opportunities perceived, bear the scars of defeat, and the laurels of triumphs. Furthermore, cities are sites of infinite mystery, with origins shrouded in mists and mythologies. Boundaries were drawn here not there. In tracts of open savannah, the lines of frontiers were inscribed upon virgin land not in any arbitrary manner but with rites and ceremonies, pieties, prayers and liturgies to transcending powers. At whatever date the city was founded something was always there before it that signalled an occupation that cannot now be recovered. And so the city was always among other things a religious site and the sacrificial rite confirmed its sacrality. Liturgical violence and the utopianism, were the foundations for an ideal commonality that aggrandised (and sometimes conflated) both human potential and divine power. A city as a simulacrum of heaven was the site for the ascent and descent of the gods. It marked a place of transit between the terrestrial and the celestial.

For Aquinas, the builders of cities are imitators of the divine. Towards the end of Aquinas's rather enigmatic treatise *De Regimine Principum*, following a detailed exposition of the role of sovereign and popes, attention is turned, dramatically, to the founding of cities. An important theological analogy shapes Aquinas's thinking: as God creates the world, so in the world kings should found cities. "The founding of a city or kingdom must therefore also be considered as falling within the duty of a king," he writes. The duty is a theological one; its fulfilment a theological task. Conceived in this way cities are always sacred spaces.

Why is the founding of a city a theological task? Answer: human beings are made by God to live in communities. Their happiness is only possible within communities. "[F]or men come together so that they may live well in a way that would not be possible for each of them living singly. For the good life is according to virtue, and so the end of human association is a virtuous life," Aquinas adds. The city is conceived as the space within which human beings achieve their happiness, a happiness born of co-existence and living virtuously. To provide the urban context in which such living is possible, is to provide the theological conditions for human flourishing as God ordained it. The king must provide for the community, therefore, a city that guarantees the following: a) "a place suitable to the preservation of the health of the inhabitants" – and Aquinas will discuss geographical conditions and good aspects for the circulation of air and the balance of sunlight and shade because the social life is related to the natural life; b) "fertile enough to provide them with sufficient food"; c) pleasant enough "to give them enjoyment" and d) "defended enough to afford them protection" and security from enemies. To these four conditions that satisfy the physical, existential and aesthetic must be added a fifth: "places suitable to worship." For, as Aquinas makes evident, "[t]he final end of the multitude united in society... will not be to live according to virtue, but through virtuous living to attain to the enjoyment of the Divine."

With Aquinas, we can lay down a theological marker for the relationship between the city and the ecclesia. It is important to see the point at which he begins his theological construction – a common anthropology in which human beings were created to be happy and therefore require conditions that will best facilitate that 'living well'. But they cannot be happy unless they live in political communities. Living well is not living as individual islands each best seeking to find satisfaction through their own consumer decisions. There is a life in common; a good in common. He was himself a monk who walked the pavements not of a cloistered monastery but a city like Naples, Paris or Rome. He worked out his ministry if not exactly in the streets with respect to citizens, nevertheless caught up in complex affiliations, both secular and ecclesial. He advocates urban conditions that facilitate both the virtues necessary for happiness and the beatification, the vision of God that is the end towards which living virtuously is orientated. The city is then a moral landscape, shaping practices and persons, offering opportunities for developing piety. It is a place where the Good can be lived in community; and it is the political responsibility of citizens to seek out, articulate and practice how the co-flourishing may best be achieved. Happiness here is a goal, a *telos*, towards which human creatures must aspire because it is their deepest and most providential drive.

Inseparable from that transcendent Good and required in the living of these virtues, and the grace from God that blesses them, is enjoyment. And this is where a city and its cultural ethos become important. The king must create a city that is 'enjoyable' to live in because the ultimate end of being human is the 'enjoyment of the Divine'. Since the city accords, in some analogical sense, with the teleological

ordering of creation, so the aesthetic enjoyments of an urban environment are related to the spiritual enjoyments of salvation. Both civic beauty and civic virtue serve the same end – participation in the life of God: they capitulate to the transcendent truth that gives, maintains and operates in all things. The aesthetics of urban developments have then to be conformed to this teleology – to aspire to the truth and to inspire the practice of what is good, what is just.

Aquinas recognises that cities are divided. Primarily they are divided between two iconic sites: the castle or fortress (a symbol of protection and security) and the cathedral (that provides the care and guidance “towards the harbour of eternal salvation”). But between these two topoi are other divisions which, again for Aquinas, accord with the order of creation: the different locations where people will group together “in their various occupations”, the locations where people will dwell, the transport system that will facilitate the flourishing of the city etc.. For the founder of the city must divide it up “in such a way as to supply all the needs which must be met if the kingdom is to be complete.”¹ Division is then not seen as a lack but a positive measure facilitating the autonomy, and strength, of the city. The divisions are hierarchically arranged: *De Regimine Principum* rehearses the Papal line on authority – the king, as a temporal power, must submit the higher spiritual power of the pope and the people must submit to both temporal and spiritual powers. The castle, even though the residence of the founder and designer of the city, is only a passage to the cathedral as the “harbour of eternal salvation”. The orders of occupations or vocations are eschatological orientated, embarked upon a pilgrimage through time and beyond it. The city always looks towards its future.

Although Aquinas leaves off his speculations here, if the designer of the city is analogously associated with God as the creator of the world, then the city too must be analogously associated with the holy city, the heavenly Temple-centred Jerusalem, revealed to Ezekiel, and waged in war with the secular Babylon in the *Book of Revelation*. The secular Babylon, with all its ostentatious magnificence will fall:

Alas, alas, the great city,
Babylon, the mighty city!
For in one hour your judgement has come.

The fate of Babylon in this narration, which many scholars take to be a renaming of Rome, is the fate that befell Sumer, and Jerusalem, Athens, Assur and Benares – ancient cities and the centres of ancient cultures. The smoke from the fall of Babylon will drift along the streets and boulevards of all cities, reminding them of the seductions and consequences of human hubris. Behind the monumental facades of every city lie two mythic possibilities: the heavenly city of new Jerusalem and the demonic city of Babylon. These are the futures that race ahead of their building programmes, urban developments and regeneration schemes, but the “eternal harbouring” that Aquinas’s city-builder aspires to, like the new Jerusalem in the *Book of Revelation*, is no product of human engineering. It comes “down out of heaven by God, prepared” (Rev.21.3). Its coming announces not a continuation but a disruption of the human city. The human city is an entity will pass away.

The Modern City

¹ Ibid.,p.38

Time passes, and if you visit most cities in Europe what you find are the remnants of Aquinas's double-focussed city, with its castle and its Cathedral. Often the castle is in ruins or only recently rebuilt with money from the Heritage Foundation, and open to the public as a museum. The Cathedral, with some exceptions, continues but competes now with buildings just as iconic and imposing: banks, hotels, insurance companies, town halls, stock exchanges. Nevertheless, cities remain haunted by that ancient sacrality that expresses itself in their futuristic and utopian outlooks. The modern designers of cities are all utopian even in their concrete attention to material details. We can hear in the writings of architects like Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe, the visionary nature of their ambitions. Some like Frank Lloyd Wright in his plans for 'Broadacres' or Le Corbusier in his project for the 'Radiant City' are explicitly utopian. They are designers not just of buildings and boulevards, parks, pavements, and shopping malls. They are designers of lifestyles. Every city is an expression of the way its citizens sought and still seek to live out their conception of the good life. This is especially so when we are witnessing a massive return to living in city centres, in preference to the leafy suburbs. All cities are oriented towards an ideal future – the creation of increasing wealth, power and well being. All cities seek a timeless and universal perfection. They seek to show that "Here is a place where human beings prosper." They seek to make a name for themselves. With the contemporary city, it is as if the metaphysical and political ideals of the Enlightenment – the absolute freedom of the individual, total rational transparency, the promise of the New at the heart of the modern – were now made technologically possible with the advent of steel-framework buildings, reinforced concretes and laminated glass. The towers of our aspiring global cities, the crystal palaces of our atriums and arcades are demands for a city without shadows, whose values are immediate and self-evident. They are constructions of light and space, just as much the great gothic cathedrals of Europe. They are the homes and workplaces of angels, or those aspiring to a humanity without limitations, a humanity perfected. Our contemporary cities are conceived as cities for angels. And angels do not die. That is significant. Modernity's emphases upon the immediate and self-evident, the present, the 'now' – even though all its facades are futuristic – are about forgetting death. Death is the ultimate human limitation; the flight from death drives us towards the future conditions of being human that cities dream of embodying.

The contemporary cities then are teleologically driven. They are shot through with echoes of transcendence and, in a more theological idiom, aspirations for a realised eschatology. They participate, or aspire to participate fully in the metaphysics and theologies of globalisation. Central here to this participation is money – money that is both increasingly dematerialised and a sovereign power. The new transcendencies that are being written into the fabrics of our global cities all are made possible by the power of money to transcend all boundaries, laws, limits or norms: moral, political, economic, social, and geographic. The various flows within the city are all, at base, flows of money; money as the constitutive rule of modernity's transcendental logic; its "reality principle." The future orientation of money – towards the begetting of more money – allies with the utopian yearnings of cities to install the heavenly in geometries that emphasise the infinite. They are cities created for endless happiness and perpetual enjoyment – for those who have. For, to return to Aquinas, these cities are not rooted in a common good. The end they seek is their own aggrandisement. And, in a way that makes bringing cultural events to the city, limited in what they can effect, they are rooted in depoliticising hyper individualism, neo-liberal economics that puts property more and more into the hands of fewer and

fewer, and a godlessness that places all its hopes in human endeavour and technological advancement. Our contemporary cities are not sites for the development of virtuous citizenship; they are not sites for the development of citizenship at all. City-dwellers aspire not to the transcendent moral values of the good and a just distribution of the city's goods, but to transcendent aesthetic values of the beautiful and the sublime. They cultivate lifestyles without conscience, beyond good and evil. And aesthetics without ethics become anaesthetics. The city becomes sites where we can be diverted away from the seedy, run down, dysfunctional margins and gloriously entertained. In ambitious city halls around the world, in our electronic global age, the image they wish to impress upon the world is of a city comparable to Oz or some eternal city of glass and halogen uplighting. The contemporary successfully city is measured by how close it can approximate to the clean and radiant cities, cities without shadows: transparent, controlled, reliable, efficient, culturally interesting and diverse.

It is not insignificant here that I have been employing the impersonal pronoun 'they' throughout, as if these cities have corporate personalities utterly detached from the people who inhabit or even help to govern these enterprises. And that is true. Unlike the older cities where the King, Prince or an Oligarchy embodied the city's persona, today the city's ego lacks a face. For there is no focus for the city's power other than its own image. The city's brand name is more important, more powerful symbolically, than the product. This is where today's global cities differ from the modern city.

The modern city, as conceived by Fritz Lang in *Metropolis*, is governed from a panopticon position - its centre is (quite literally) manned - by Johann 'Joh' Fredersen, who, like a secular God, sees all things. But the global city has no panoptic point. There is a power-vacuum in the middle of the city that is most magnificently disguised. There is the illusion of power as pyramidal in what is actually a circulation of forces that contest, combine and compete. And these are not ethereal forces: they are people working in institutions, corporations, academies, courts of law etc.. Of course each city will have its governing, even elected, the Council and its various different departments and offices. But the city is not identified with this Council, which is increasingly hidden and shielded from personal responsibility by out-sourcing its work to various private organisations who bid for short-term contracts. The city then is impersonal - and that's why there is a struggle for its soul. Its soul should be the collection of its citizens all working towards what best cultural and social conditions might be provided for the common pursuit of human happiness and enjoyment. It is this working that I understand as constituting the political and where the real struggle should take place. But who can represent such a collection today? There are other contenders for that soul - every major international consortium or corporation who wants to exploit the city's cultural and social resources; every major stakeholder who wants to increase the volume and value of its stake, including the city's most prominent university; the state at national level wishing to fulfil its own designs for the region; and every political party vying for seats on the Council. In a sense these contenders are not too interested in the soul of the city. They don't believe either the city or the citizens have souls anyway. What they are interested in is the struggle for control. This is what they understand as the political - a share in the power of dominion. But out of that struggle and out of the various interests jostling for control the cultural and social life, which is the soul of the city, is forged.

There are two conceptions of being political involved here: the working on behalf of the common pursuit of human happiness and enjoyment and the contending

for dominion. These two conceptions manifest themselves in two different understandings of the struggle itself: the struggle for maximal human flourishing and the struggle for power. To understand the differences in the nature of the political and the character of the struggle is theologically important, because if the church sees itself simply as another possible stakeholder in the city's life then it will always lose out. It will be working in accord with an understanding of politics and struggle that belong to the market; understandings that are not its own.

I'm not saying that our cities attain this perfection, only pointing to the ways in which transcendence is written into the architectures and layouts of these cities, giving expression to their ambitiousness, their hunger for international recognition, and international tourists. The contemporary city's appeal to an aesthetics of transcendence is the city's most recent attempt to make itself an object of worship. As cities increasingly become multicultural and pluralist and therefore the possibilities of differences become the basis for violences, so cities must turn themselves into sites of veneration and cultivate a new form of civic religion. They must make of themselves an image. The aesthetic seductions of its architecture, shopping and leisure facilities, along with the multiplication of CCTVs, the staging of sports and entertainment events, prominently placed giant plasma screens, heavy, no-tolerance police patrolling - are all attempts at controlling the potential violences out of which the contemporary global city is born.

Mumford, having detailed the rise and splendours of the early cities in Mesopotamia and Egypt, adds a cautionary note: "Even the early civilisations of the East, perhaps *especially* these, suffer from the vice which now threatens to overwhelm our own civilisation in the very midst of its technological advancement: purposeless materialism." The struggle for the soul of the city is a struggle over the shaping and quality of the human culture found there. Our social imaginaries are governed by the cultural possibilities for conceiving how to live the good life. The church must necessarily be involved in that struggle. It must affirm all that is good in city living – the opportunities for enriching social life, its diversity, especially religious diversity; for religious diversity enables the church to reflect upon its own practices of piety. The church can celebrate the transcendent aspirations expressed in the city: the construction of iconic buildings and civic magnificence, even the fostering of civic pride (the pride in belonging); its ambitions to host the world, to be a player on the international stage; its desire to make all the different flows through city easier, cleaner and more efficient; its ability to generate work upon which so much self-worth is founded; its facilities for leisure; its deep and continuing connectedness to the values and meanings of the past, materialised in the Saxon remnants of its Cathedral, the seventeenth and eighteenth century hostels, its nineteenth century public library, town hall and hospital; its energies; its creativity; its festivities; its potential for inclusiveness; its freedoms; and its inventiveness. The church can celebrate the visual paradoxes of white Portland stone and monumental prisms of glass, weighty baroque and Shinto simplicity: violent, even visceral contrasts that make possible, continually, new civic discoveries – an ornate window moulding here, the back-view of a red-brick tenement there; a Doric portico, a reconstructed waterway, a gothic extravagance and a postmodern fantasy of a seaside exterior created inside a derelict printworks. It can even celebrate the contemporary city as an architectural fairground because, as Aquinas reminds us, human beings were born to be happy and they should also enjoy. But the church must use this cityscape for a very different end.

For this new ordering of the city centre –that banishes the primal clutter of poor housing and the badly maintained 1960s council flats - creates a new Kingdom, but at a cost. Though there is a development of mixed housing ‘across the river’ or ‘the other side of the rail-track’, the centre itself is fashioned for the propertied, the landlords with ‘buy-to-rent’ mortgages, the professionals who need gyms in the basements of designer apartment blocks, and saline swimming pools; who gaze at nights out of their floor-to-ceiling windows at the network of lights and the floodlit attractions. And we all want to be with them. And some of us find it hard to admit. But we want to be with them because we too have been sold this dream as the ‘good life’ – that should be available to everyone. So the church has to be alert to dehumanising and godless dangers of the cultural trends outlined in the first part of this book; trends that promote alienation and social atomism, dematerialisation and virtualities, aesthetic sensibilities divorced from ethical ones, postdemocratic disenfranchisement, and reductions to that “purposeless materialism” that Mumford wrote about. The church must not allow areas of the city to be walled up – ghettos and gated-communities must be entered, the no-go zones riddled with racial and economic tensions and ruled by violence must be penetrated and linked back to the wider civic society; and the Christians in these places must be hospitable, opening up the possibilities for transit, for the flow of communications necessary for freedom. The church must work alongside other agencies at every level from city governance and planning to networks dedicated to helping those newly arrived in the city to establish themselves, helping those who fall beneath the pressures of the city’s ambitions, those dwarfed and rendered insignificant by its towering achievements.