

# ECCLESIASTICAL SPRAWL REPAIR

William Dowdy

Now in the midst of Advent, it is time to prepare for a new round of clashes between Church and State. From crèches to Christmas trees, even to Santa Claus, a city official or district judge will decide that the right to religious freedom necessitates the immediate removal of all display of cultural celebration. And it's not just Christmas. Concerns about school prayer and courtrooms' Decalogues perpetuate this controversy throughout the year.

Frustrated Christians ask how this has come to be. Not only did our society once tolerate these practices, but she celebrated them! Churches once were recognized as pillars of the community, a distinction manifested in the pride of place granted to the church buildings: from simple white churches on village greens to grand cathedrals on city plazas, the church was integral to civic life.

Much effort has been put into fixing the sorry state of sacred architecture, but the relationship between a church and its surrounding environment is only beginning to receive the attention it deserves. While creating a beautiful edifice is a significant achievement in today's world, the architecture will always be incomplete if the church stands in a sprawl of parking lots and strip malls. The traditional placing of the church on the public square is important as a symbolic gesture and as a practical means of evangelization. A church is an image of our spiritual nature, transcending the hustle and bustle of daily life, and when the church faces a courthouse, city hall, or bank, it reminds everyone that there is no profit in gaining the whole world at the expense of one's soul. Moreover, when a congregation climbs the front steps of a prominently located church, they stand in witness to the whole community, for "a city on a hill cannot be hid." In contrast to this are the many suburban churches with a barrier of parking and landscaping isolating the church, and decreasing the odds that a curious passerby will drop in on a whim.

Despite the importance of being on the public square, it is typically the



*A current view of St. John the Beloved Parish Church, McClean, VA*

churches themselves that have chosen to locate elsewhere. Changes in demographics, real estate values, and parking demands are just a few of the causes that have enticed churches to the suburbs. These are serious motives, not to be casually dismissed, but nevertheless, churches need to recognize that there are consequences for their actions. As churches have relocated to follow their parishioners, they have alienated their former neighbors. As churches have moved to remote destinations to allow for large parking lots, they have made it difficult for the care-less youth, elderly, and poor to reach them. And as churches have sequestered themselves geographically, their communities have sequestered the church from daily life.

Would a return to the public square cause an immediate restoration of the Church's cultural prestige? Not likely, but it would be a start. Unfortunately, many congregations are deeply invested in their current locations and a return to the public square would tax their finances as well as the good will of the congregation. How can a suburban church continue to minister to its parishioners and maintain its current facilities, while repositioning itself as a

truly civic institution?

This question was recently explored in two architectural studies, one by Grenfell Architecture, PLLC, and the other by Daniel DeGreve. Grenfell Architecture began with the recognition that hundreds of suburban churches and schools burden the Catholic Church in America today with large, under-utilized lots and aesthetically unsatisfying, liturgically problematic, programmatically obsolete architecture. These properties are increasingly costly to operate and maintain at a time when parish finances are already stretched. In response to these inadequacies, Grenfell Architecture explored how a church property in a typical first ring suburb, such as in Northern Virginia might be rebuilt over time to both create a sustainable community and generate revenue to fund the construction of better buildings. With four blocks of new housing and commercial space proposed, as well as a new school and rectory, the parish could gain a valuable source of revenue while establishing a civic character for their church, now commanding its hilltop square.

Grenfell Architecture understood that for a plan like this to be practical,





New Street Grid and parking



The five site plans show several phases of the proposal for an urban neighborhood for St. John the Beloved Parish Church, McClean, VA. Above is the finished neighborhood.



Commercial core and new residential



New school and finish residential row



New church and square, and complete school



Complete commercial core

it needed to address two concerns: the financial burden must be gradual, and the development must not interfere with the continuous operation of the church and school. By phasing their plan, they reduced the initial capital requirement, allowing the project to use revenue from the first phase to fund subsequent development. Ultimately, the project could pay for itself, including the cost of the new school and church, thus saving the congregation from a lengthy fundraising campaign. The first step is to create a block structure with an appropriately scaled street grid that connects to adjacent existing streets, responds to the site, and furnishes on-street parking. Combined with new parking at the block interiors, the on-street spaces will be able to handle all the current parking needs, leaving the existing buildings intact and freeing the former parking lots to be the initial development sites. Church and school can seamlessly transition to the new facilities when they are finally built, and the old buildings can be demolished.

Daniel DeGreve's project investigated how churches could use their property to become the seedbeds of traditional neighborhoods in suburbia. The study, "Generating an Urban Pattern in Suburbia: The *Ecclēsia Parochialis*," began as a graduate thesis at the University of Notre Dame, and ultimately won a first place prize in the design

competition at the 2010 *Living Presence* Symposium at Catholic University of America. Like Grenfell Architecture's church masterplan, DeGreve began with an existing suburban church campus and explored the level of development that the site could easily accommodate—quite a lot, as it turns out. DeGreve designed a vibrant neighborhood with church, school, shops, offices, houses, greens, plazas, and community gardens.

Where the project is most provocative is in the way it explicitly engages the surrounding land by extending the urbanity of the site into the neighboring suburban sprawl. By creating one side of the beautiful perimeter streets, DeGreve leads neighboring land owners by example, encouraging them to participate in the good work he has begun. This invitation is not an appeal to philanthropy; it is an argument built on sound business principles. By demonstrating how a successful project boasts a significant increase in yield per acre, the church gives the other land owners a good real estate comparable for appraisers, bankers, and developers, and allows them to share in the added value of the project.

In many ways, this new interest in churches as the anchor of the neighborhood is a return to the historic role of the Church as a founder of cities. From European monasteries to California missions, churches often have nurtured



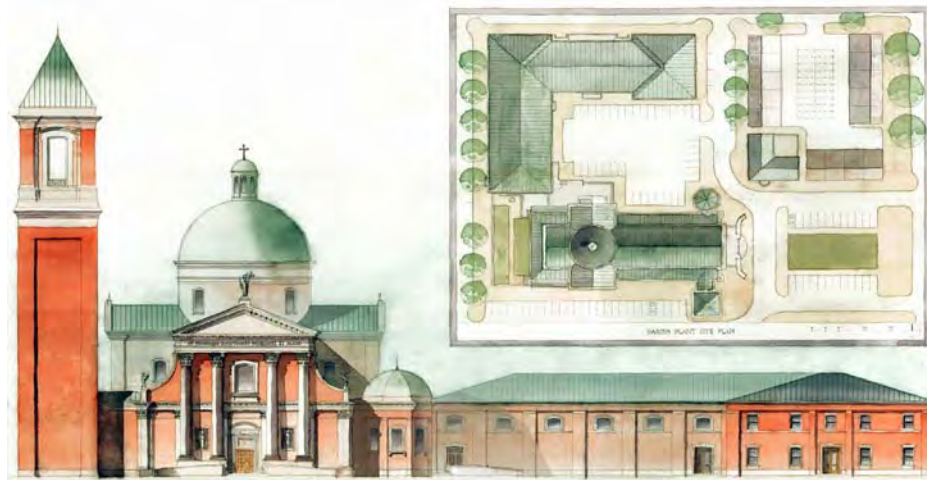


Photo: © Daniel P. DeGreve

*The East Elevation of DeGreve's parish church and school, and the immediate site plan*



Photo: © Daniel P. DeGreve

*The North Elevation of the church and school*

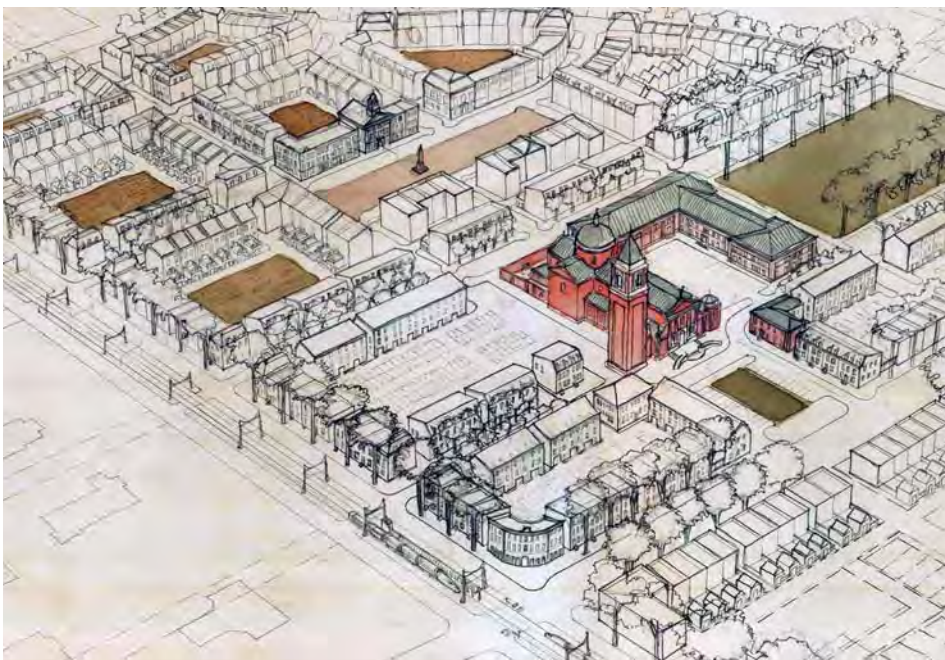


Photo: © Daniel P. DeGreve

*An aerial drawing of Daniel DeGreve's thesis proposal: "Generating an Urban Pattern in Suburbia: The Ecclesia Parochialis." The nucleus of the neighborhood is the church.*

civilization under their protective mantle. Instead of finding this a distraction from their spiritual vocation, these churches recognized that the dual emphases on corporal and spiritual works of mercy were complementary. Western civilization grew out of the foundation of security and education provided by the Church.

If we take time to observe the streets and buildings of the modern American landscape, what do they tell us about the importance of our faith? Do our churches stand proud, engaged in the public as well as private lives of the people, or do they cower between Jiffy Lubes and AutoZones? The built environment suffers from a soullessness similar to that which enervates our society, and our churches are in a unique position to restore both. Though congregations have long been fighting the spiritual battles, it is time for a renewed infusion of the Church into society by reasserting the church building on to the public square.

The work of Grenfell Architecture and Daniel DeGreve stands as an overture by architects towards reinventing suburban churches as community centers. Though other architects need to expand and refine these ideas, it is the churches themselves—congregations, pastors, and bishops—that must embrace this vision for their property if it is ever to become a reality. With the confluence of the recession-fueled demand for rental housing and the financial distress of many churches and dioceses, the opportunity has never been better for ecclesiastical sprawl repair. And as churches reconnect with the physical centers of society, they position themselves to restore their connection with society's spiritual center.



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