



Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith

Eric O. Jacobsen , Eugene H. Peterson (forward)

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Christians often talk about claiming our cities for Christ and the need to address urban concerns. But according to Eric Jacobsen, this discussion has remained far too abstract. *Sidewalks in the Kingdom* challenges Christians to gain an informed vision for the physical layout and structure of the city.

Jacobsen emphasizes the need to preserve the nourishing characteristics of traditional city life, including shared public spaces, thriving neighborhoods, and a well-supported local economy. He explains how urban settings create unexpected and natural opportunities to initiate friendship and share faith in Christ.

Helpful features include a glossary, a bibliography, and a description of New Urbanism. Pastors, city-dwellers, and those interested in urban ministry and development will be encouraged by *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*.

Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith Details

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Author : Eric O. Jacobsen , Eugene H. Peterson (forward)

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From Reader Review Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith for online ebook

Drick says

This book, written by a Presbyterian pastor in Missoula, MT looks at the impact of place, buildings, sidewalks and other physical dimensions of communities and their impact on relationship in a community. As a pastor then he also suggests some theological implications of structure. This book introduced me to New Urbanism, a movement within urban studies and architecture that calls people back to more community-minded structures in cities and towns. It is a very anti-suburb, anti-car perspective tht challenges much of what we take for granted. He tends to be a bit preachy and elitist, but its worth looking at.

Jeremy Kozdon says

An examination of the interaction of faith and our built environment. Challenged a lot of notions of about what I value in where I live and what I ought to value. Certainly will (and has) effected where I do and want to live.

Erik says

A wonderful book introducing Christians to New Urbanism and explaining the need to build and encourage communities at the civic level. I especially liked sections about the importance of having to deal with strangers as individuals and as a community, and the dangers of the a la carte socializing that comes with reclusive and car-based lifestyles. The marginalization of non-driving people in car-centric areas was also striking.

It's hard for me to negatively criticize a book that I agreed with at almost every turn, but while I agree with the conclusions, the argumentation that backs them up often suffers from conflating large terms with imperfect examples. And the dislike of suburban sprawl, while I agree with it, isn't likely to convince those who are inclined to disagree, but rather to polarize them and turn them away from the book's ideas entirely.

scott says

Two of my main interests are city planning and Christianity. Jacobson demonstrates how these two issues are intimately linked. He shows how the built environment is not just made up of buildings, roads and shopping malls, but that together they can create places of community or places of isolation.

Matt says

Interesting conversation starter about the role of Christians in building better cities.

* - Reserved for nonfiction. Worth a read if you're interested in the subject. Check out from library.

** - Good. May be inconsistent and flawed, but overall worth a read if you're in the mood for that genre. Check out from library.

*** - Very good. Recommended as a book that is either wonderfully written, informative, challenging, beautiful... but not all of the above. Check out from library or buy on Kindle.

**** - Great. Go out and read.

***** - Classic. MUST READ and should be on your bookshelf

Elizabeth says

Jacobsen encourages Christians to embrace the stewardship of the city as many have already embraced stewardship of other natural and intangible resources. He presents the ideas of new urbanism, civic responsibility, and third places in a Christian context - and in doing so makes faith and city life less incongruous.

G.M. Burrow says

I don't agree with everything Jacobsen says, I don't like his tone or his prose, and if I have to read one more thing about perfect little Missoula, I'm going to be more than a little miffed. Plus, this book has about twice the word-count it needs; you could basically wash it hot and let it shrink. Why did this have to crown Senior Traditio? Phooey!

James Stewart says

The urban sprawl that blights the USian landscape has had more impact than merely the growth of ugly landscapes. It has broken apart communities, led to less healthy lifestyles, and increased ghettoization. Jacobsen's book sets out to introduce Christian groups into the new urbanist agenda, calling for walkable neighborhoods, more community-focussed building practices, and support of local business where real relationships can be borne. While this may well be a good primer, anyone who has read any other new urbanist material or who is looking for a thorough theological account may be disappointed. Jacobsen sets up false dichotomies (community-building is apparently not a part of evangelism for him) and doesn't dig into the environmental arguments which should be so central for Christians (and indeed, for anyone who cares about the future of the planet and its people). He also talks of how he believes he's the only Christian member of the Congress for New Urbanism, but without recognising that perhaps he's the only one who goes out of his way to advertise himself as such. It's good to see Christians publicly engaging with the vital issues of urban planning, but it would be good to see more serious engagement with urban theology.

David says

I was open to the argument of the book and pleased to be made to think about city planning and the role of the city in Christian theology but I was ultimately left unpersuaded by much of the argumentation.

Tamara Murphy says

from Ekklesia Project's description:

"...Sidewalks in the Kingdom challenges Christians to gain a practical, informed vision for the city that includes a broad understanding of the needs and rewards of a vital urban community. Building on the principles of New Urbanism, Jacobsen emphasizes the need to preserve the nourishing characteristics of traditional city life, such as shared public spaces, mixed-use neighborhoods, a well-supported local economy, and aesthetic diversity and beauty."

During all the time I spent reading this book I couldn't tell if it was already outdated or not. Especially after reading Rod Dreher's plea to return to our small town roots. Then it dawned on me: both perspectives -- New Urbanism and the new anti-urban ideology of ruralism are dreaming of the same end goal -- places stewarded at their best for the common good of its community.

Occasionally I got a tad bit annoyed with Jacobsen's use of Scripture for propositional arguments for city planning (e.g, a list of Bible verses that include the word "walk" to commend the practice of walking versus driving). Mostly, though, I appreciated his gracious, intelligent and humble tone. For the fact, alone, that he interviews and excerpts a book written by his own mayor in Missoula, Montana, he earned my trust.

Jacobsen also provided me with the best rationale yet for a renewed love for the urban without jettisoning the rural. His point is that we can help a city prosper whether we live in it or live outside it, but work for it (eg., farmers in the rural space outside a city produce crops that feed the city). In the author's argument, it's suburban living that is most problematic. (I made the unfortunate choice to bring up this argument at a lovely brunch where I was a guest, not realizing what the other viewpoints might be about living in the suburbs.)

"An urban dweller supports the city by direct participation in its life and its rhythms. And a rural dweller supports the city by enjoying the culture that is produced in the city, by providing food and other resources for the city, and by being a careful steward of the wilderness that surrounds the city. What is most problematic with regard to the city is suburbanization which can drain the life out of the vital center of the city and doesn't support the city with any rural amenities. The suburban model seems destined for failure, because it does not take seriously the redemptive possibilities within the city." (p. 43)

While reading On Writing Well, I think I found the perfect description of the sort of "suburb" the author is

railing against. This is from John McPhee's *Coming Into the Country*, a book about Alaska, the section devoted to the quest for a possible new state capital:

"Almost all Americans would recognize Anchorage, because Anchorage is that part of any city where the city has burst its seams and extruded Colonel Sanders. Anchorage is sometimes excused in the name of pioneering. Build now, civilize later. But Anchorage is not a frontier town. It is virtually unrelated to its environment. It has come in on the wind, an American spore. A large cookie cutter brought down on El Paso could lift something like Anchorage into the air. Anchorage is the northern rim of Trenton, the center of Oxnard, the ocean-blind precincts of Daytona Beach. It is condensed, instant Albuquerque."

Maybe most importantly, Jacobsen's book instructs the reader in a basic glossary of terms for good urban planning: mixed-use, LULU, critical mass, density, human scale.

Carla says

I loved this book because it merged two major aspects of my life: christianity and urban planning. It really makes you think about how our cities shape our lives and how our faith should influence not only how we live but where we choose to live. It can be pretty convicting at times, noting how Americans have basically created false gods out of the notions of individualism and freedom as opposed to living among one another and loving each other as Christ loved us.

A little warning, the author is extremely anti-suburban and pretty preachy about it. His tone is sometimes distracting from the points that he's trying to make. So if you're not used to this point of view, it can be pretty shocking. You might want to start with *Suburban Nation* first. I definitely didn't agree with all of his arguments, but it does make you think. And, as somebody currently living in a city, it makes me think about how I should be seizing opportunities and really becoming part of the community.

On a side note, I love when books you read cite other books/authors you have recently read. On the same page, this book referenced Ray Oldenburg and Robert Putnam, and that just made me happy.

Courtney Carlson says

The author emphasizes that the physical layout of a city is in itself significant, and, if carefully planned, can tend toward the propagation of Christian values like community, relationship, care for the less fortunate, etc. He is immensely practical in his ideas, but as far as how to implement them... that's where it gets sticky. Also, while much of his critique of suburbia may be justified, he's a bit narrow in his unreserved praise of city life and seems to have no experience of other settings and no room to admit that there may be a variety of favorable settings and locations in which to live a godly life that promotes Christian ideals. While public spaces are great and necessary ("sitting in the gates"), there is nothing inherently sinful, wrongly individualistic, or selfish (as he seems to suggest) about sitting under your own vine and fig tree.

Kyle says

If you care at all about urban space please read this book.

I read this on a recommendation from a friend and I'm glad I did as it theologially articulated many views, suspicions, and beliefs I have been formulating but unable to voice. In short, Jacobson argues that God cares about cities and the ways cities have been organized don't make sense practically or theologially. Jacobson presents a compelling case for the importance of cities, public space, and mixed-use zoning.

My wife and I purposefully made a downward mobile choice to live within walking distance of work and amenities. This meant selling our home and becoming renters. But this represented our values as a family. So, in this regard I think he's preaching to the choir.

Still, it's an excellent resource to have for thoughtful Christians and churches in urban areas or rural citizens seeking to read and impassioned cry for the value of the urban.

Krista says

Absolutely amazing book. When I picked it up I thought there was no way he could make it work--linking Christian theology with the tenets of the New Urbanism movement re. sustainability, walkable cities, etc.--but it was quite well done. He stumbled a little at the end in his conclusions, but still quite an interesting book.

Michael Taft says

Sidewalks in the Kingdom snuck up on me. Growing up in a fairly intentional urban church, the book has created for itself quite the loyal following among church leaders. Before diving in, I just figured it talked about how to be a Christian in the city: "How do I treat that homeless man with responsible love?" or "How do we model our churches to be inviting to the diversity of the city?" You know, the kind of topics When Helping Hurts hits on, because that's what the city is about, isn't it? Poor people and immigrants! Now rather than contradicting those other very valid topics, Jacobsen takes a very different angle on what the city means to Christians. While it is easy to see the biblical foundations of caring for the poor and the extended community of the church, Jacobsen recognizes the biblical importance of tangible place and its important to God. He then takes the unexpected but very logical step of tying God's concern for tangible space and his people to urban planning. If Christians are called to include God in every sphere of their lives, then shouldn't some of the most influential uses of design take this into account also? Now, what is perhaps most interesting is that working for the God's city does not mean placing a cross or a

church on every street corner. The intended goal is not to fill the city's design with religious images and allusions, but rather fill it with spaces that facilitate rich and diverse community, an intrinsic aspect of Christian life. Jacobsen describes the kind of society and ministry to which the Bible calls Christians, one that has very deep insights and advantages even in secular culture, and then applies urban planning techniques which promote such characteristics.

The techniques which Jacobsen offers up are surprisingly tangible and applicable. None are absolutes, but rather best practices; they don't always fix an obvious problem, but they develop healthier characteristics and catalysts. One of these simple concepts he focuses on is the simple activity of walking. To maintain a healthier local economy and promote relationship building between neighbors, it is important for walking to be practical and desirable. The car, however, has morphed our transportation values into prioritizing convenience, efficiency, and power. When we walk our neighborhoods, we naturally desire to invest more in them socially, economically, and even politically. With scientific studies to back him, he breaks down factors that get people out of cars and onto their sidewalks: a travel radius of a quarter mile, the spacing between each building being no more than one sixth of their height, or even the condition of sidewalks or speed of the street.

Believing that we are intentionally placed in our cities in order to better them, Jacobsen takes a hard look at how Christians are to treat and develop the city in light of their divine mandate. What follows is a basic and applicable outline of how to create healthy communities through the simple act of changes how streets are shaped and laid out.
