Serene Urbanism

A BIOPHILIC THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SUSTAINABLE PLACEMAKING

Phillip James Tabb

ROUTLEDGE

Serene Urbanism

Serenity is becoming alarmingly absent from our daily existence, especially within the urban context. Time is dense and space is tumultuous. The idea of the serene has gained currency in postmodern discussions, and when combined with urbanism conjures questions, even contradictions, as the two ideas seem improbable yet their correspondence seems so inherently desirable. Integrated, these two constructs present design challenges as they manifest in differing ways across the rural–urban transect.

In response, Part I of this book establishes the theoretical framework through different contemporary perspectives, and concludes with a clear explanation of a theory of serene urbanism. The positive characteristics of urbanism and beneficial qualities of the serene are explored and related to sustainability, biophilia, placemaking and environmental design. Both principles and examples are presented as compelling portraits for the proposal of these new urban landscapes. Part II of the work is an in-depth exploration and analysis of serene urban ideas related to the intentional community being created outside of Atlanta, Georgia, USA. "Serenbe" is the name given to this place to commemorate the value and nuance between the serene and urban.

Phillip James Tabb is Professor of Architecture and Liz and Nelson Mitchell Professor of Residential Design at Texas A&M University. He completed a PhD dissertation, "The Solar Village Archetype: A Study of English Village Form Applicable to Energy-integrated Planning Principles for Satellite Settlements in Temperate Climates" in 1990. Among his publications are *Solar Energy Planning* (McGraw-Hill, 1984), *The Greening of Architecture: A Critical History and Survey of Contemporary Sustainable Architecture and Urban Design* (Ashgate, 2014), and *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality* (co-edited with Thomas Barrie and Julio Bermudez, Ashgate, 2015). He received his BS in Architecture from the University of Cincinnati, Master of Architecture from the University of Colorado, and PhD in the Energy and Environment Programme from the Architectural Association in London. He teaches studio design, sustainable architecture, and the theory of placemaking, and is a practicing urban designer and licensed architect.

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This work is dedicated to overcoming placelessness, unsustainability, profaneness, and environmental degradation, by recovery of perennial design patterns of the serene and most vital and healthy qualities of urbanism. It is in gratitude to my students, the residents, and developers of Serenbe Community that this work is mainly dedicated.

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About the author

Phillip James Tabb is Professor of Architecture and Liz and Nelson Mitchell Professor of Residential Design at Texas A&M University, USA. He served as head of the department from 2001–5, and was director of the School of Architecture and Construction Management at Washington State University from 1998–2001. He completed a PhD dissertation, "The Solar Village Archetype: A Study of English Village Form Applicable to Energy-integrated Planning Principles for Satellite Settlements in Temperate Climates" in 1990. Among his publications are *Solar Energy Planning* (McGraw-Hill, 1984), *The Greening of Architecture: A Critical History and Survey of Contemporary Sustainable Architecture and Urban Design* (Ashgate, 2014), and *Architecture, Culture and Spirituality* (co-edited with Thomas Barrie and Julio Bermudez, Ashgate, 2015). In the late 1960s he worked for Walter Netsch at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) in Chicago and was exposed to his field theory method of design. He worked with Keith Critchlow and taught sacred drawing in the Kairos School of Sacred Architecture (1986–7), at Dar al Islam in Abiquiu, New Mexico (1988–9), and at Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado (1996).

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Foreword

Thomas Barrie and Julio Bermudez

The desire to reclaim and recreate our essential relationship with the world through architecture and the built environment has been a consistent theme in Western culture. In *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero describes our impetus to build as the desire for a second, presumably improved, nature:

> We enjoy the fruits of the plains and of the mountains, the rivers and the lakes are ours, we sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilize the soil by irrigation, we confine the rivers and straighten or divert their courses. In fine, by means of our hands we essay to create as it were a second world within the world of nature.[1]

For Cicero, humans "came into existence" to both contemplate and imitate "the world."[2] Roman country villas often aspired to embody these themes, and country retreats such as Pliny the Younger's Laurentian villa were celebrated as cultivated places of retreat from the affairs of the world, as well as settings for individual development, contemplation, and study.[3] Palladio wrote:

> The ancient sages used to retire to such places where being oftentimes visited virtuous friends and relations, having houses, gardens, and suchlike pleasant places, and above all their virtues, they could easily attain to as much happiness as could be attained here below.[4]

The Roman patrician estates served, at least in part, as models for English exurban country houses, which were similarly positioned as settings of retreat from the city and as a reclamation of what were deemed the most valuable components of lives well lived – cultural and spiritual pursuits, and closeness to nature. Early English and North American suburbs reflected the ideals of their aristocratic predecessors by the creation of places that paired shared-values communities with the autonomy promised by their naturalistic surroundings. The desire for the comfort of human society and the transcendence promised by the natural world are long-standing. At its core is the desire for connections: with others, the natural world, and ourselves. In a talk in 1963, Aldo van Eyck stated: "The job of the planner is to provide built homecoming for all, to sustain a feeling of belonging. I would go so far to say that architecture is built homecoming."[5]

What we have lost has been often cited as what we must now gain. Much ink has been spilled regarding the environmental, social, and economic impacts of contemporary Western, and increasingly global, settlement patterns. This much is clear: we

simply cannot continue to build in the manner that we have been doing – but what are dependable alternatives? Many have addressed this question, resulting in a plethora of urbanisms, from everyday urbanism to post-urbanism. The author of this volume points out that serene urbanism is not a new paradigm, but one that synthesizes and interprets a number of established approaches. Its core argument is that the skillful and diverse pairing of urbanism and nature – vibrant social interaction and contemplative spiritual reflection – is the most dependable means to secure a more hopeful and meaningful future.

At the core of this book is the development of the theory of serene urbanism and demonstration project of Serenbe, a planned community near Atlanta, Georgia. It is where the author demonstrates the interrelationship of *episteme* and *praxis*: a mature knowledge base applied to ethical practice. In this context, the major contributions of this book are not its argumentation, theoretical constructs, or precedent analyses, nor its heartfelt aspirations for a soulful, ethical, healthy, and "serene" urbanism. However illuminating and valuable these points may be, they are clearly in support of the placemaking principles and built form of Serenbe. After all, propositions of new urban models abound, but it is quite rare to find actual examples that test such speculations – and this is exactly what Phillip James Tabb offers us here. As the master plan architect of Serenbe, he cogently describes the process of creating an American urban arcadia. As a result, the reader is presented with a seasoned and realistic (in the best sense of the term) set of tested urban strategies, elements, concepts, and organizations.

Equally remarkable are the intentions of this placemaking and community-building experiment to go beyond delivering a "sustainable," "functional," and "livable" built environment. Indeed, the ultimate goal of Serenbe is nothing less than materializing the spiritual dimensions of community and nature. On the one hand, it is truly refreshing and timely to see an urban designer and community recognize and respond to the transcendental needs of human dwelling – something that is hardly discussed, much less pursued, in the scholarly and professional work in architecture and urban planning.[6] On the other hand, many will point at the extraordinary difficulty in succeeding at this, while others will question the right of a designer and even a small community to represent the needs of a contemporary multiethnic, multireligious, and diverse society.[7]

The validity of the author's claims are evidenced by Serenbe itself, and having been there, we can attest to the impossible-to-define *genius loci* that is embedded in its natural surroundings, and its authenticity of community that is hard to come by in present-day exurban developments. That said, this book provides what a visit cannot: the rationale and models utilized that promise more broad-based applications. No one will claim that Serenbe is the cure for all our ills, or "the" solution to the unprecedented urban growth of humanity that must be undertaken in the following decades. Yet Serenbe does offer a compelling model of how to respond sensibly to the challenges of twenty-first-century civilization, and thus is worthy of our attention and consideration. This book offers us an invaluable resource to do just that.

Notes

1 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum, II, 152*, in *Cicero: De Natura Deorum, Academica*, trans. Harris Rackham, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1951, p. 271.
2 Ibid., p. 159.

3 Archer, John, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690–2000*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2005, pp. 35–6.
4 Fishman, Robert, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, Basic Books, New York, 1987, p. 46.
5 van Eyck, Aldo, "How to Humanize Vast Plurality," in Ligtelijin, Vincent and Strauven, Francis (eds) *Aldo van Eyck: Collected Articles and Other Writings, 1947–1998*, Sun Publishers, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 442.
6 Crosbie, Michael J., "The Sacred Becomes Profane," in Barrie, Thomas, Bermudez, Julio and Tabb, Phillip (eds) *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality*, Ashgate, London, 2015, pp. 59–69.
7 Britton, Karla, *Constructing the Ineffable: Contemporary Sacred Architecture*, Yale University, New Haven, CT, 2011.

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Part I

Theoretical framework for serene urbanism

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1 Introduction

> On the sidewalks everyone holding either a giant coffee or a cell phone, as though a law had been declared against public displays of empty-handedness.[1]

Serenity is becoming alarmingly absent from our daily existence, especially within the urban context. Time is dense and space is tumultuous. The modern world that surrounds us is complicated, contradictory and bewildering. It is complex in its overwhelming response to a world population of more than 7 billion people, the complicated infrastructures, political and economic systems, religious differences and conflicts, and inheritance of a built environment largely constructed and maintained by climate-changing, fossil-fuel energy sources. It is contradictory because many of the built works and technologies no longer support the solutions to the housing of a contemporary culture; rather, they are the cause of many of the problems that are a consequence of it. It is perplexing because of the enormity of the problems, and the time and resources necessary to actually overcome them.

The contemporary environment has evolved to sustain and better the human condition, yet it has come with unintended consequences. We continue to use our renewable resources at an unprecedented rate, global population is ever-increasing, the natural environment is shrinking and suffers from deforestation, neglect, species extinction, and the effects of global warming, and we continue to remain vulnerable to disease. In response, the concept of serene urbanism is designed to provide an alternative approach for future urban designs that is applicable to both new and existing contexts, and large and small settings. For certain, there is a need for more reflective, engaging, and insightful approaches to creating and sustaining habitation.

The contemporary condition

Contemporary culture is a complex global phenomenon that has left in its wake a trace in both time and space, and while not necessarily unique to our time, arguably it is one that defines it. Temporal density is a modern human condition where experiences, data, inputs, and information are processed within a shorter and increasingly compressed interval of time.[2] In other words, time becomes dense, filled with a throng of thoughts, emotions, considerations, and multitasking activities. Contemporary lifestyles, particularly within urban areas, demand a great deal of attention from which to navigate everyday functions that seem to accumulate more and more undertakings to think about and do. Over-attention to these complexities tends to create greater separation from direct experience and quality of presence in the places that we inhabit.