

Authentic Urbanism and the Neighborhood Church

Written by Craig Lewis

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“119. For the temple of the principal church, parish, or monastery, there shall be assigned specific lots; the first after the streets and plazas have been laid out, and these shall be a complete block so as to avoid having other buildings nearby, unless it were for practical or ornamental reasons.” – The Law of the Indies, 1573 by order of King Phillip II of Spain

From our earliest beginnings as a country, we have always reserved the most important and prominent spaces for our civic buildings. The Law of the Indies, as the first specific set of rules governing the settlement of a new town in the new world by Spanish colonists, decreed that there were to be three things that should happen before any other: the identification of the highest and best location for the main plaza; the establishment of streets that were to radiate out from the plaza in ordinal directions; and the reservation of the first lots for the establishment of churches (or more specifically – the Catholic Church). Numerous towns in the southeast and southwest United States were established according to these principles, including Santa Fe, NM, Fernandina, FL, Albuquerque, NM, and Tuscon, AZ. Beaufort and Bluffton, as well, have a rich heritage of churches embedded into their urban fabric.

This practice of regarding the primacy of public spaces and buildings of a city continued throughout much of the early years in American urban development. The New England town square was the puritanical form of the Spanish plaza and was often flanked by a protestant church. Cathedrals continued to be constructed in prime locations with views from the waterfronts to greet arriving visitors or on hilltops so as to be seen by the entire village or city. In urban neighborhoods throughout the country, churches were constructed to serve the various ethnic immigrant populations that would settle in particular area, becoming their spiritual, social and educational (through parochial schools) anchors. Together with other parks or plazas, churches formed the essential public realm of many a neighborhood throughout the county.

The church's slide from architectural pre-eminence in neighborhoods and in cities occurred over a long period. Rather than a single cause, it is more likely that a series of gradual shifts, primarily demographic and economic, slowly aggregated to conspire against what was once the norm. These shifts also impacted the construction of other public buildings as well.

The last consideration of the importance of the public realm came during the City Beautiful movement

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