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### Sacredness in the City

There are three basic elements to a superior urban experience, declares Author Joel Kotkin: economic power, personal security and sacredness.

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hen I was a kid in Chicago, my dad used to take us for rides along the Lake Michigan shore line, from Hyde Park on the South Side, past Soldier Field and the great lakeside museums in Grant Park, around the twists and turns east of Michigan Avenue, and then down by the Near North beaches crowded with bathers in the summertime. Every once in a while, he would gesture toward the lake itself and utter what he considered a timeless truth. "You can't find a city anywhere with a lakefront as magnificent as this."

I didn't have any standards of comparison at the time, but I couldn't help wondering if I was mostly just listening to one man's exuberant but eccentric personal chauvinism.

Years later, I noticed that quite a few other residents of my father's city felt the same way he did. A much more famous one, the newspaper columnist Jack Mabley, wrote something even more hyperbolic. "You ride the length of Chicago's magnificent shore line," Mabley proclaimed in the *Daily News*, "and think that other cities, corruption or no, should have been able to produce something as beautiful."



The more I thought about Mabley's assertion, the sillier it seemed. Cities don't "produce" shorelines the way they produce convention centers. Nature produces them. The best that civic leaders can do is try to avoid messing them up.

But there's another way to look at this issue: For urbanites in the generation of my father and Jack Mabley, there was a bigger-than-life

quality to aspects of the physical environment that surrounded them. Something capable of inspiring awe within them virtually anytime they glanced upon it. Something — one might even venture to say — that possessed a touch of the sacred.

I admit to feeling a little tentative about bringing up ideas like that. Joel Kotkin, on the other hand, delivers them with utter confidence. In his new book, "The City: A Global History," Kotkin declares simply and forcefully that there are three basic elements to a superior urban experience. One is economic power. A second is personal security. And the third is sacredness — which he relates to a capacity for awe on the part of the citizens. "Cities can thrive," Kotkin warns, "only by occupying a sacred place."

**J**oel Kotkin, who at age 52 has already had careers as a newspaper and magazine writer, TV newscaster, urban history professor and city-planning consultant, is an unusual writer and thinker. And "The City: A Global History" is, by almost any standard, an unusual book. In fewer than 200 pages, it sets out to identify the central qualities of urban greatness all over the world, from the priestly settlements in Mesopotamia in the third millennium before Christ to the boroughs of New York in the 21st century. It almost seems at first like a fool's errand. And yet, to a remarkable degree, it succeeds. The book is taut, elegant, informative and lots of fun to read. When I got to the end, I wished it had been longer. There is one maddening quality, though: When it comes to Kotkin's most sweeping and ambitious assertions, you can't always be sure what he means.

Sometimes you know exactly what he's talking about. When he suggests that a city forfeits its greatness if it can't keep its citizens safe on the streets, he is referring to the sort of thing that happened to New York in the 1960s and '70s. In Kotkin's view, Mexico City, no matter how big and monumental it might become, will never join the honor roll of urban greatness until violent crime declines far below the level that exists today. One might argue over the definition of just how safe is "safe," but the relevance of the standard is perfectly plain.

Economic power is trickier, but not impossibly so. When Kotkin talks about greatness here, he doesn't just mean an active commercial life — every large city has that. He means a dominant position in vital transactions and decisions that cover the entire globe, or at least an important segment of it, for a sustained period of time. Rome and Constantinople had that at various points in their history. Damascus and then Baghdad had it in the Islamic hegemony of the late first millenium A.D. Venice was an economic superpower for several centuries; Amsterdam was one in the 17th century. London laid claim to economic centrality and greatness in the 18th and 19th. For most of those years, Kotkin says, London was the "world capital of capitalism."

So far, so good. It's the third of Kotkin's fundamental criteria — the element of sacredness — that is both intriguing and frustratingly hard

to pin down. Traditional religious experience is part of it for him — “In writing this book,” he told me recently, “I was amazed by how much religion was at the center of the urban experience” — but just as clearly he has something else in mind as well: a feeling on the part of city-dwellers that they inhabit a physical environment bigger than themselves, grander than everyday life, imposing enough to make the ordinary resident wonder how it all could have gotten there in the first place.

At the peak of its greatness, Kotkin believes, London had this quality, not because of its churches or civic piety but because the vastness and perceived rectitude of the British Empire gave Londoners a feeling that they were part of something indisputably worthy of respect. The Italian city-states of the Renaissance had it, for a time, until they lost their vision and degenerated into squabbling little principalities.

**B**ut the difficult question underlying Kotkin’s theory isn’t what gave cities a sacred quality in earlier periods of civilization. It’s what could give a city — even by the broadest of definitions — a quality of sacredness today.

Monumental urban architecture has, at some times and places, performed a similar function. Kotkin feels this way about the first generation of skyscrapers that went up in New York, Chicago and a few other American cities in the early years of the 20th century. “As inspirers of awe,” he writes, “they represented the commercial city’s answer to the great spired cathedrals of Europe, the elegant mosques of the Islamic world, and the imperial complexes of East Asia.”

The spirituality of skyscrapers isn’t much of an issue in American cities these days — indeed, most of them aren’t building many tall buildings at all — but there is an obvious relevance in the ongoing debate about what to do with the land in lower Manhattan once occupied by the World Trade Center. Not surprisingly, Kotkin believes it is crucial that the city and its planners take advantage of a rare opportunity to create spirituality in the heart of a doggedly secular 21st-century city. “We should create a sacred space on that ground,” he insists. “We need to celebrate that New York endured this and survived.”

Is there any contemporary city in the world that comes close to meeting all of Kotkin’s criteria for greatness? Actually, yes — there is one: Singapore. It is a trading power, it is among the safest urban communities in the world (thanks to a policing system marked by authoritarian strictness) and it has somehow managed, in Kotkin’s view, to grow and develop under Confucian precepts that provide an underlying appreciation of the sacred. In Singapore, Kotkin says, there is a “sense of moral order and collective will” not apparent in many other parts of the developing world. Or, he might have added, the rest of the world, either.

**I**n the end, Kotkin offers no blueprints for re-establishing urban greatness on the American continent. Certainly emulating Singapore is not a strategy many cities would want to try. What he does do is catalog the mistakes he thinks quite a few of them are making as they try to create urban revival: He believes that gentrification, the attempt to repopulate a downtown with cadres of singles, childless couples and empty nesters, will never return a city to greatness. Meaningful renewal requires a large influx of families, he says, and gentrification isn't familistic.

That's his main argument against the New Urbanists, who might seem to be his natural allies in a drive for 21st-century urban revival. In Kotkin's view, the New Urbanists talk endlessly about design questions and ignore the issues of morality and spirituality that are the true ingredients of urban greatness. "They don't talk of public virtue," he complains. "There's no moral, familial ethic to them." You can't just "design" a city back to greatness.

As stimulating as I find Joel Kotkin, this is where I take issue with him. Moral renewal in an urban environment is a precious commodity, but it seems to me almost impossible to create by conscious public decision, at least in the short run. The Emperor Augustus tried it in Rome in the first century A.D., and at the end of his life proclaimed the experiment a failure. Making cities look good, by designing impressive buildings or pristine parks or pedestrian-friendly streets, is a more modest task but one much better suited to human limitation. And it can produce surprising results. On occasion, it can even impel ordinary middle-aged men to lean out their car windows, point to a lakefront, and proclaim that they are in the presence of something magnificent.

*Jack Pardue illustration*

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