In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah (29:7) we read that the prophet instructed his fellow Jews, living in exile in Babylon, to seek the shalom of the city, for in its shalom they would find their shalom. The prophet does not instruct his individual hearers to seek their own shalom; he assumes that they already do that. He instructs them to seek the shalom of the city, for their individual shalom is inseparable from the shalom of the city.

I submit that in those few words, seek the shalom of the city, we have the grand charter for Christians practicing architecture -- indeed, for anyone practicing architecture. More than any of the other arts, architecture determines whether the city and its inhabitants will experience shalom. The art of architecture aims – or should aim – at the shalom of the city and its inhabitants.

Jeremiah’s dictum suggests that the order of our discussion should be that we first discuss the contribution architecture can make to the shalom of the city as a whole, and that we then discuss the contribution architecture can make to the shalom of its individual inhabitants. But our discussion will flow much more naturally if we reverse the order and start with the contribution architecture can make to the shalom of the individual residents of the city.

Let me begin my discussion with some comments about shalom. The concept of shalom that Jeremiah employed, when he instructed his fellow Jews to seek the shalom of the city, is

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1 The entire passage reads: “Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its shalom you will find your shalom.”
employed at many other points in the Old Testament, and then again in the New Testament, where the Hebrew term *shalom* is translated with the Greek term *eirenê*. In English translations of the Bible both terms are usually translated as *peace*. But our word “peace” is much too weak as a translation. Shalom does indeed require that human beings live at peace with each other. But shalom goes beyond peace, beyond the absence of hostility. Shalom consists of flourishing in all dimensions of our existence. Seek the flourishing of the city; for only if the city flourishes will we flourish individually.

Shalom, in the first place, is flourishing in our relation to God. When the prophets speak of shalom they foresee a day when human beings will no longer flee God down the corridors of time, a day when they will no longer turn in those corridors to defy their divine pursuer. The prophets foresee a day when humankind flourishes in its love and service of God. In the words of the prophet Isaiah,

> The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” (Isa. 2:2-3)

Second, shalom is flourishing in our relations with each other. Shalom is absent when society is a collection of individuals each out to make his own way in the world. So too shalom is absent where there is injustice, where people are wronged. Shalom is absent even if those who are wronged do not mind being wronged, even if they feel content with their lot in life. Shalom would not have been present in the United States before emancipation *even if* all the slaves had been content in their state of slavery. Shalom would not have been present in South Africa
before the revolution *even if* all the so-called blacks and coloreds had been happy. Shalom goes beyond experience; one can be wronged even if one does not know that one is or doesn’t mind it. We flourish in our relations to each other only when we no longer wrong and oppress one another.

The prophet Isaiah declares that there will be shalom, and dwelling in shalom, when “justice dwells in the wilderness/ and righteousness abides in the fruitful field” (Isa. 32:16-18). In shalom, he says,

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love and fidelity meet,
  justice and peace embrace;
fidelity reaches up from earth
  and justice leans down from heaven.  (Psalm 85).
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Third, shalom is flourishing in our relation to our physical surroundings. Shalom is present when we, bodily creatures and not disembodied souls, flourish in our relation to the earth and its creatures and flourish in our physical labor and its results. In speaking of shalom, Isaiah foresees a day when the Lord will prepare

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a banquet of rich fare for all the people,
a banquet of wines well matured and richest fare,
well matured wines strained clear. (Isa. 25:6)
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This, in brief, is what Christian scripture means by “shalom.” Shalom is the presupposed background to the second love command that Jesus enunciated, love your neighbor as yourself. To love one’s neighbors as oneself is to seek the shalom of one’s neighbors as one seeks the shalom of oneself. It is to seek their flourishing as one seeks one’s own flourishing.

A great deal more could be said about the content of shalom, the content of human flourishing, than the little I have said here. But I will assume that for our purposes today enough has been said, and will move on to some remarks about architecture.
II

Architecture, as I see it, is the art of enclosing places, a place being an area on the face of the earth. Our English word “enclosure” is ambiguous. It can mean either a place that is enclosed or that which does the enclosing. I will be using it in the latter sense, as that which does the enclosing. Architecture is the art of enclosure. The size and configuration of the place enclosed is now often called the *footprint* of the enclosure.

When I say that architecture is the art of enclosing places, I mean to include not only constructing an enclosure but also carving out an enclosure. Among the most amazing examples of this latter form of architecture is the ancient city of Petra in present-day Jordan.

Constructed enclosures have both an inside and an outside; and most of them have an impact on the natural environment. Some have a ceiling or roof, some do not. And they vary enormously in the degree of their porosity to things entering from outside: daylight, weather, noise, smells, insects, animals, human intruders, and so forth. Two lines of trees enclosing a lane are close to the ultimate in porosity. An igloo, so I assume – I’ve never been in one – is the ultimate in non-porosity.

We enclose places on the face of the earth for the sake of activities to be performed within those places; we judge that enclosing the place, and doing so in a particular way, will enable, and perhaps enhance and fit, those activities. The activities might be relatively passive. Sometimes we enclose a place because we want to protect something located there from the elements – some plant, some rock, some artifact of historical significance. Sometimes we enclose a place because we want to prevent animals from escaping, sometimes because we want to store things there. These are things we do, not things done to us. But compared to playing basketball, for example, they are, as I described them, relatively passive.
The place that is enclosed existed before it was enclosed. But when a place is enclosed, then the enclosure brings something else into existence, namely, a bounded interior space – or in case the enclosure contains a number of interior rooms and passageways, a number of bounded interior spaces. Space as such has no bounds, and is obviously not created by us. But by enclosing a place, we bring into existence one or more bounded interior spaces. The enclosure does not create the place; the place was there already. What the enclosure creates is one or more bounded interior spaces.

The porosity of the enclosure to daylight determines how natural light plays within the bounded interior spaces and how it falls on the inside of the enclosure. From time immemorial, one sort and another of artificial light within the enclosure does the same.

These, I would say, are the fundamental elements of architecture: the enclosure of a place, this enclosure usually having both an inside and an outside; one or more bounded interior spaces created by the enclosure and by its interior rooms and passageways; and light playing within those bounded interior spaces and falling on the interior walls – and, of course, on the outside of the enclosure.

III

A few paragraphs back I said that we enclose places on the face of the earth for the sake of activities to be performed within those places, and that we do so because we judge that enclosing the place, and doing so in a particular way, will enable, and perhaps enhance and fit, those activities. If I am right about this, then the practice of the art of architecture begins by identifying the activities to be performed within a proposed enclosure and goes on from there to ask what sort of enclosure would enable, and preferably also enhance and fit, those activities. Of course the answers to these questions that the architect arrives at must fit within the parameter of
the construction materials and skills that are available. If the building designed cannot be built, because the requisite materials or skills are unavailable, then there is no enclosure, only a design for an enclosure.

Let me explain what I mean by those three little words, “enable,” “enhance,” and “fit.” What I mean by “enable” is easy to explain. Assume that a determination has been made as to the activities that the enclosure is for. A design for the enclosure, to be acceptable, must make it possible to perform those activities within the enclosure and to do so without undue difficulty. That’s what I mean by “enable.”

What I mean by “enhance” is also easy to explain. It may be that two enclosures of different designs would both enable performance of the desired activities, but that performance of those activities within one of them is better, in some way, than within the other. What’s better about the performance can take many different forms. Perhaps one enclosure allows flying insects to enter and distract us whereas the other keeps them out. Perhaps one enclosure allows so much noise to enter from outside that we cannot hold the conversations we desire whereas the other muffles the noise. Perhaps one enclosure has so much echo that we cannot understand what speakers are saying whereas we have no difficulty understanding speakers in the other. In each of these examples, the second member of the pair enhances the activity in a way that the first does not.

What I mean by “fit” will take just a bit longer to explain. I develop the idea at some length in my book, *Art in Action*; here my explanation will be brief. Let me invite you to play a brief game of ping/pong. Take the two words, “ping” and “pong.” I will now mention pairs of things; and I want you to tell me which member of each pair fits better with “ping” and which fits better with “pong.”
light object/ heavy object
large object / small object
fast/ slow
ice cream/ warm pea soup
elm tree/ fir tree
matron/ pretty girl
cello sound/ trumpet sound
Beethoven’s symphonies/ Mozart’s symphonies
Rembrandt’s paintings/ Matisse’s paintings

Let me explain what I think is going on here. Within reality there are quality-continua, or modalities, as I shall call them, these often being specified by antonyms. There’s the modality of fast/slow, the modality of big/small, the modality of loud/soft, the modality of sharp/dull, and so forth. We make comparisons within such modalities: a speed of 30 miles per hour is more like a speed of 20 miles per hour than it is like a speed of 80 miles per hour. But I submit that we also can and do make comparisons across modalities, and that that is what you were doing when you told me which member of a pair that I mentioned fit better with “ping” and which fit better with “pong.”

Fast fits better with sharp than it does with dull, that is to say, it’s more similar to sharp than it is to dull; slow fits better with dull than with sharp. A jagged line fits better with restlessness, a horizontal undulating line fits better with restfulness. Soft beige fits better with tranquility, hot pink, with agitation. And so forth. What I mean by “fittingness” is cross-modal similarity – keeping in mind that similarity always comes in degrees.
Now for the application to our topic. By virtue of being bounded in the particular way in which it is, an interior space has a size and a shape. That size and shape give it a character – an *expressive character*, one might call it. Some bounded interior spaces are cozy, some are majestic; some are intimate, some are soaring. And by virtue of their expressive character, some bounded interior spaces fit better certain activities than they do other activities, and fit better certain understandings of those activities than they do other understandings. The same thing goes for the enclosure itself, both inside and out, and for the way light plays within the bounded interior spaces and the way it falls on the walls. These too have an expressive character; and by virtue of that expressive character, these too fit better certain activities and understandings of those activities than they do others.

We can put it like this: a building says something about what is done within it and how that is understood. It’s no accident that art museums have tended to be imposing in their expressive character; that says something about how those who designed and built them understood what was to go on inside.

**IV**

Recall my thesis that the practice of architecture begins by identifying the activities to be performed within a proposed enclosure and how those are understood; then, taking into account the available construction materials and skills and the environmental impact, it goes on to ask what sort of enclosure would enable, and preferably also enhance and fit, those activities.

The activities to be performed within the proposed enclosure do not exist in the abstract; they are a form of life – a form of domestic life, a form of academic life, a form of recreational life, whatever. The practice of the art of architecture begins by identifying a form of life. The
architect then designs an enclosure that will enable, and preferably also enhance and fit, that form of life. We can say of such a design that it *gives expression* to that form of life.

And now for a crucial point in my overall argument: once the enclosure is built, then it, along with the bounded interior spaces and the way light plays within those spaces and falls on the walls, turn around, as it were, to shape the form of life of those who act within that enclosure. As the old apothegm has it: we shape buildings and then those buildings shape us.

Obviously other things than architecture shape our forms of life – our aims and beliefs, for example. Indeed, some writers talk as if our forms of life are shaped by nothing other than our aims and beliefs. What I want to emphasize here is that they are in fact also shaped by those ever-so-physical things that are the enclosures we build. Those enclosures force us to do some things that we might or might not want to do, and prevent us from doing other things that we might want to do; they encourage us to do some things by making it easy to do them, and discourage us from doing other things by making it difficult.

The practice of architecture begins by designing an enclosure that gives expression to a form of life and it concludes by building an enclosure that shapes a form of life. If all goes well in the process from design to built enclosure, these two forms of life will be the same: the form of life that the built enclosure shapes will be the same as that to which the design gives expression. Or very nearly the same. A variety of different designs can give expression to the same form of life. By virtue of the architect’s choosing one of those design-options, the form of life that the building shapes will have somewhat more specificity than the form of life to which it gives expression. In what follows I will neglect this qualification, and say that the form of life that the building shapes is the same as the form of life that the design gives expression to – assuming, of course, that the building that is built conforms to the design.
Architecture, by expressing and shaping our forms of life, engages the way we live. It does so far more profoundly than any of the other arts. Typically a painter paints what she wants to paint; when her work is finished, she brings it to a gallery and lets the gallery sell it to whoever first pays the stated price. Her painting does not express the form of life of the person who eventually hangs it on his wall. And though it may well enhance his life, rarely will it shape his form of life to the extent that the house in which the painting hangs shapes his form of life.

V

How does the architect select that form of life to which the building that he designs gives expression? He might do so by inviting those who will use the building to describe for him the activities that they want the building for. My guess—in I am not myself an architect, so I cannot speak from experience—my guess is that seldom are their ideas on the form of life for which they want the building sufficiently clear and complete for the architect to be able to proceed. Of course they have some idea. They know, for example, that they want the building for their domestic activities and not for their merchandising activities. But their ideas about domestic activities are vague and sketchy.

They may nonetheless have firm ideas as to what sort of building they want. If it is a house they are having designed, they may tell the architect that it has to include a large high-ceilinged “great room.” In discussing this with them, the architect may discover that the reason they want such a room is that their well-to-do neighbors all have such a room. When pressed on what their neighbors do in these cavernous “great rooms,” they may admit that they don’t know; they have never seen anybody doing anything in any of them. No matter; they want such a room.

What the architect tries to do at this point is assist his clients in clarifying and fleshing out their ideas on what activities they want the building for. Suppose that he succeeds in this
endeavor; his clients eventually give sufficient delineation to their preferred form of life for the architect to produce a design that gives expression to that preferred form of life. Suppose, further, that the design is built. In such a case, not only is the form of life to which the design gives expression identical with the form of life that the building shapes; that form of life is in turn identical with the form of life preferred by those who use the building. Three identical forms of life: the form of life to which the design gives expression, the form of life that the building shapes, and the form of life preferred by those who use the building.

By no means is it always the case, however, that the form of life that the design expresses and that the building shapes is identical with the form of life preferred by those who use the building. There are various causes of such discrepancy. Perhaps the architect is working for a developer and never talks to those who will be using the buildings he designs; he may have no idea who those people are. He and the developer determine, on their own, the form of life that the design will express and that the building will shape. Some who then use the building may find that the design expresses, and the building shapes, their preferred form of life. Others may experience a serious misfit between the form of life that the design expresses and the building shapes, and their own preferred form of life. Or perhaps the architect and the developer give little thought to the form of life that they want the design to express and the building to shape; instead they select a design for economic or stylistic reasons. Users will have to adapt; tough luck.

More common than either of these sources of misfit is that the building was designed and built decades ago, even centuries ago, for a form of life that is now outmoded. We who now use this old building have to adapt our form of life to it, perhaps after remodeling it a bit. Of course it sometimes happens that after using it for a while, we come to like the form of life that this old
building expresses and shapes; we come to like it better than the form of life that we initially preferred.

Recall now the point of our discussion thus far. We wanted to know how architecture can contribute to the shalom of those who dwell within the city. The answer to our question is now right before us: it is by virtue of the fact that architecture shapes the forms of life of those who use the enclosures it designs and builds, and by virtue of the fact that the enclosure has an environmental impact, that architecture can contribute to their shalom. Architecture does not do this automatically, however. Rather than enhancing the shalom of those who will be using its buildings, architecture may diminish their shalom. Recognizing this fact, that architecture does not automatically enhance the shalom of those who will be using the enclosures it designs and builds, recognizing that it may instead diminish their shalom, the response of the responsible architect is to seek the shalom of those for whom he designs and builds.

What this implies is that architecture is a profoundly moral enterprise, more so than any other art. It’s a moral issue as to whether one’s shaping of someone’s form of life enhances the shalom of that person or diminishes her shalom. So too it’s a moral issue whether the environmental impact of the enclosure is for good or ill. Unfortunately, I don’t have time on this occasion to develop this part of the argument farther.

I dare say that a good many architects will feel uneasy at this suggestion, that their profession is a moral enterprise in the way indicated; they think of themselves as simply designing buildings that clients like sufficiently to be willing to pay. But given that architecture does in fact shape our forms of life, and given that the way one shapes someone’s form of life may either enhance or diminish her shalom, it just follows that architecture carries moral import.

VI
It’s time to bring the city into the picture. Seek the shalom of the city, said Jeremiah, for in its shalom, you will find your shalom. If the urban community as a whole is not flourishing, individual members of the community are not truly flourishing.

It’s hard for most Americans to take this claim seriously. Most Americans believe it is entirely possible for wealthy individuals to flourish in small gated compounds within a city even though much of the rest of the urban community is living in misery and squalor. That’s not how Jeremiah sees things. If the shalom of the urban community is impaired, the shalom of individual members of the community is impaired. We have seen how architecture can contribute to the shalom of individual members of the urban community; our project now is to see how it can contribute to the shalom of the community as a whole.

My attention thus far has focused on architects designing and building individual enclosures to enable, enhance, and fit the activities to be performed within those enclosures – domestic activities, religious activities, merchandizing activities, recreational activities, whatever. I have said that in doing this, the architect both gives expression to a certain form of life and shapes that form of life.

What must now be noted is that the enclosure, unless it’s out in the country somewhere, is part of an urban array of enclosures with more or less space around them and with paths of various sorts among them – streets, sidewalks, alleys, and the like. The exteriors of that array of built enclosures, along with rows of trees and so forth, serve to enclose the places between and among them; call that enclosure, the urban enclosure. And just as an enclosure which is a single building creates a bounded interior space, to also an urban enclosure creates a highly complex bounded urban space. These bounded urban spaces have expressive qualities which make them more fitting to certain activities than to others; some urban spaces, for example, are monumental
in their character; some are intimate. So too the urban enclosure itself has expressive qualities. It’s also worth noting that just as building enclosures vary in what I called *porosity*, so also urban enclosures vary in porosity. The urban enclosure of midtown Manhattan has a good deal less porosity than does the urban enclosure of central London.

And now for the important point. The house in which I live shapes my domestic form of life; the stores I patronize shape my purchasing form of life; the building of the church of which I am a member shapes my liturgical life; and so forth, for all the other buildings that I enter. All of them together, along with that part of the urban enclosure of the city that I travel through, shapes my form of life as a whole – not just my domestic life, not just my purchasing life, not just my liturgical life, but my life as a whole. This total urban complex enables certain activities on my part and prevents others, encourages some and discourages others, encourages me to perform a certain activity in one way and discourages me from performing it in another way. My form of life as a whole is shaped by my city, inescapably so; there’s nothing I can do to prevent that.

And what is true for me is true, of course, for all the other inhabitants of my city: our city shapes the entire form of life of each of us who dwells therein.

To forestall misunderstanding, let me repeat a point made earlier: my city is by no means the only thing that shapes my form of life as a whole. My “ideas” do so as well – my aims, my beliefs, my estimations of worth, my attachments, and so forth. But here the point to be emphasized is that, contrary to what is often assumed, not only do my ideas shape my form of life as a whole but the physical city in which I live does so as well – its built enclosures and its urban enclosures, its bounded interior spaces and its bounded urban spaces. And it is because the architecture of the city shapes the form of life as a whole of each and every one of us who lives therein, that architecture can enhance the shalom of each and every one of us.
Another point made earlier bears repeating here. The architecture of the city does not automatically enhance the shalom as a whole of each and every one of us. It may enhance certain aspects of our lives and diminish other aspects. Or it may enhance the shalom of some people and diminish that of others. Indeed, it may enhance the shalom of some at the cost of diminishing that of others. Recognizing that this is the case, it becomes the responsibility of the architectural profession as a whole, when it designs and builds, to keep in mind the impact of what it builds on the flourishing of all the members of the urban community, not just the impact on its clients.

Jeremiah’s words suggest something more. They suggest that in addition to the shalom of those who dwell in the city, there is the shalom of the city itself. They suggest that an urban community as a whole may flourish or fail to flourish. They suggest that in addition to the individual good of those who dwell in the city, there is such a thing as the common good of the urban community, and that this good may be enhanced or diminished.

This seems to me correct. Not only do the individual members of an urban community have their individual projects, the urban community as a whole has common projects; and these too may flourish or fail to flourish. My own city of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has experienced serious unemployment in recent years; that has had a devastating impact on its public school system – this, of course, being a project of the urban community as a whole.

The example just given shows that architecture is by no means the only thing that determines whether an urban community as a whole will flourish. What the architecture of the city does do, however, is contribute to determining that. And if that is the case, then it becomes the responsibility of the architectural profession to keep in mind the impact of what it builds on the flourishing of the urban community as a whole, not just on individual members thereof.
VII

The title of our conference is “Christ and Architecture.” Many different topics would fit under this rubric. One could, for example, develop a theology of architecture. That is what the British theologian, David Brown, does in his book *God and Enchantment of Place.* That is not what I have done. Instead I have used this occasion to work out what I regard as the vision that should guide Christians engaged in the practice of architecture.

I have never undertaken a survey of university architectural problems around the country; my guess, however, is that the goal of most of them is to teach their students how to come up with technologically and aesthetically successful designs and how to run a successful architectural practice. A successful architectural practice is one that makes money – and ideally also some renown. Producing designs for wealthy clients, and for large projects such as shopping malls, football stadia, and concert halls, will make one a lot more money and give one a lot more renown than producing designs for lower-class housing. Hence it is that the architecture of our cities is shaped, in good measure, by the preferences of the wealthy and the powerful.

In his fascinating book, *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic*, Dell Upton argues that urban architectural projects in early nineteenth century America were “directed toward the twin goals of civilization and urbanity.” They were aimed at channeling “citizens into the proper kinds of interaction, at once civilized and urbane” (3). Urbanity he describes as “concerned with the individual as a member of an immediate community of neighbors and associates” (1-2). Civilization he describes as concerned with the political character of the community as a whole, specifically, its character as a republican polity.

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Let me quote his description of republicanism. “At its core was a notion of political sovereignty vested in the people as a whole, understood as a collection of free individuals who were in some fundamental way essentially the same, therefore comparable, whatever their contingent differences in status or condition. Order in such a body politic arose from within, from the character of the citizens, rather than being imposed by a higher authority” (1). Upton argues that the grid layout was thought to be one way of giving expression to these ideas of urbanity and civilization.

I submit that no one would think of our present-day American cities as giving expression to these ideas of urbanity and civilization. Our present-day cities are not built for republican citizens; they are built for consumers.

An architectural program in a Christian college will of course teach its students how to create designs that are aesthetically and technologically excellent; and it will of course teach them how to run an architectural practice that is sufficiently successful financially to stay afloat. But that instruction will be set within the context of teaching its students that the overarching goal of the architectural profession should be to seek the shalom of the city and of those who dwell therein and visit, this shalom to be understood as including the relation of the enclosure to its natural environment. It will go beyond that abstract statement to teach its student how to implement that vision. It will do so by looking at different understandings of the shalom of the city, along the way making critical judgment about those different understandings. It will look both at those understandings that are expressed in actual cities from the past and the present, and at those understandings that are formulated explicitly in writing. Such explorations will be inescapably philosophical in character – philosophical and religious. Architecture, if rightly practiced, is a philosophical art.
As it explores different visions of the shalom of the city, the architectural program will also explore how those visions have been expressed architecturally and whether those expressions were successful; Upton thinks that the attempt to express the republican vision was by and large a failure. Here an indispensable book seems to me to be Jane Jacobs’ book from decades ago, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. More or less taking for granted that vibrant sub-communities are essential to the shalom of the city as a whole, Jacobs delves into which architectural arrangements support vibrant sub-communities and which are destructive. She comes to a number of surprising conclusions, among them, that grassy open places – parks and squares – are more destructive than supportive.

Let me be clear: an architectural program in a Christian college or university will not only explore different understandings of the shalom of the city, both implicit and explicit, but will render a judgment on these different understandings; it will engage in social criticism. My own view is that it will render a negative judgment on our consumption-driven society and on our willingness to tolerate astonishing inequities in wealth and political power. Having made that negative judgment, it will then discuss with its students how they can responsibly design and build in such a society. It will seek to disabuse students of any illusions they may have that they can transform society. What it will do instead is show them how they can create architectural pockets of dissent -- urban enclosures and building enclosures about which one says, here something different is going on. Here the inhabitants can flourish, insofar as that is possible in our contemporary cities. Here they are not forced to live and travel amidst aesthetic squalor; here there is some beauty. Here they are treated with dignity. Here there is some semblance of justice.
Seek the shalom of the city and its inhabitants. That, so I suggest, is the grand charter for Christians practicing architecture. It is a truly noble calling.