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Thoreau's escapism is not a good model for urban America

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Realistically, the case for linkage probably should be kept closed.

Not that a fair approach to the scandalously high poverty level in Hartford isn't needed. Not that the idea of linking downtown development with neighborhood improvement isn't a fair proposal. Not that the Democratic majority on the City Council, which walked away from the proposal after having endorsed it during the campaign, shouldn't be held accountable.

Rather, the case for linkage probably should be kept closed because the concept appears to lack the kind of broad-based support that would allow it to be translated into an effective policy in the capital region.

A glimpse at the writings of Henry David Thoreau, the Concord sage, who still is a kind of patron saint of American values, brings the situation into focus.

Thoreau says he left "civilization" for his retreat to "nature" at Walden Pond to gain a vantage point from which better to criticize what he saw as the decadence of the urban society of his time. The legacy of Thoreau, however, was vulnerable to distortion. Thoreau's example became a model for individual escape to the wilds, away from not only the perceived evils of urban civilization, but from any consistent sense of social solidarity.

Advertising, popular films, mass circulation novels and television often focus on romantic individual escape to the life of purity and vitality in nature.

Sadly, our cities have come to be shaped by the same escapist values. Masses of middle- and upper-middle-class people fled from the perceived dirt and evils of the city, to what they thought was the purity and the goodness of a life closer to nature in the suburbs. Meanwhile, the city, where houses had been built with front porches so that neighbors could talk to one another, and where the scale of neighborhoods was small enough so that people could interact, was left to itself to decay.

By a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, it was to become a wasteland of poverty and violence. Because human and economic resources were drained from urban life, what else could have happened to the city?

When those who fled the city have returned, they have tended to choose a kind of detachment within the city itself. They build skywalks and live in fortresslike condominiums, with elevated, isolated porches.

The city today is often little more, as far as they are concerned, than the home of the abandoned elderly, the homeless mentally ill, the impoverished children, and the alienated unemployed. Maybe the legacy of Thoreau was never the right legacy. The biblical and Greek sources of our civilization, in any case, give us an entirely different picture of meaningful human life.

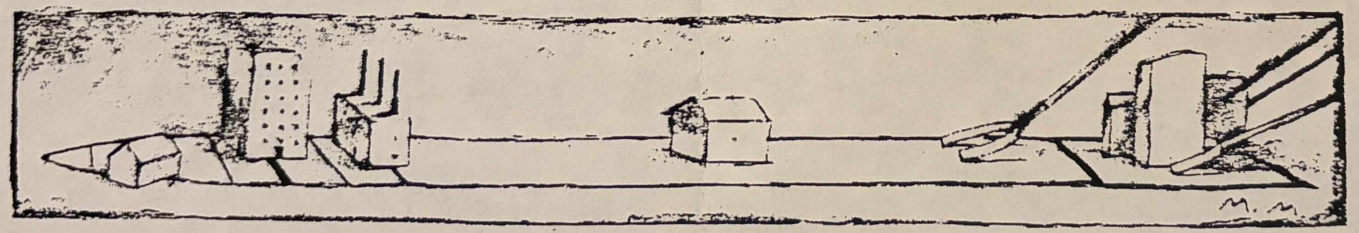
Human fulfillment, according to the Bible, is not to be found alone, in nature, in the garden with Adam and Eve. That's the image of where things began and where things went wrong.

The goal of human life, according to the Bible, is life in a transformed city, the city of God. This is a vision of communal and social solidarity that includes all nations and all conditions of human life.

When Aristotle affirmed that the human creature is "a political animal," he was envisioning a similar (albeit more elitist) vision of human fulfillment, in the polis, the city.

But the Bible and the Greeks are little read these days, and even less understood. Few of these esthetically inclined citizens, who may generously support the arts in the city, seem willing to learn how commitment to the beautiful was, for the Greeks, inseparable from dedication to the true and the good in the city itself.

What hope is there for the idea of linkage in a society in which the pacesetters have sought to escape from the perceived evils of the city to be alone with the idealized beauties and vitalities of nature? Is there anyone these days who believes that human fulfillment can best be found when people link their lives to the well-being of the city?



Matt Mahurin / Los Angeles Times

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