From Cathedrals to Stadiums: Influences of Urban Design in American History

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Description

A brief history of how urban design and architecture reflects the interests of communities, from cathedrals to train stations, from movie theaters to super sports stadiums.

Keywords


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Transcript

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JACK PERKINS reporting:

There’s a theory among architectural historians and it is this: that if you study the structures throughout history upon which men have lavished their greatest labor and wealth, then you will know something those men and those times.

For example, in pre-reformation Europe, the architectural centerpiece of a town was usually its cathedral. From people who could not afford the money, money was raised to construct grand edifices, temples to men’s belief. They could not be made too grand or too extravagant. Then when, from Europe, people came to these shores, they did not bring with them the means for extravagance, but they still had the belief. And so again, in their small, new towns, their architectural focus was often a church. You can still those churches and feel those times.

But then, it was as though Americans began worshipping new gods, gods of growth and progress. The nation expanded on rails and the train station became the centerpiece of town after town. Graceful, garish, overstated, they were the temples of travel. The train station was a focus not on that which held people together, but on that which helped them move apart.

So in the 30s, having moved as far as reality would reach, Americans began building palaces to fantasy, the movie theaters were the extravagances of architecture in those days. Again, that told us something about ourselves. And what about today? What are the temples, the public works upon which people lavish great effort and wealth? Well, the Astrodome was built in Houston ten years ago, and that was the example. Now, Seattle, a city which has been through deep recession, has raised $40 million to built its own dome stadium. And New York, a city literally verging on bankruptcy, nonetheless is spending 57 million just to facelift its old Yankee Stadium.