

Saving Soulless Downtowns

by [John Henry](#) (March 2025)

As I started writing this article, MS Copilot interfered and wanted to write a draft for me using AI of course. Well, this overreach of technology at the expense of human thinking and production, with its clumsiness and errors, is the root of our post-modern malaise. And it extends not only into writing, but art and architecture, where it tends to flatten emotion at least.

I believe that mind to paper creation is superior to any machine generated product.

I have been thinking about urban design of late and can only point to one or two exemplary spaces in my area of Central Florida.

What, you may ask, is exemplary?

Have you ever walked the alleys of Venice and then opened into a public square?

Have you been in Provence and walked the streets of Aix?

Have you enjoyed the walking experience around the Trevi fountain, the Pantheon, the areas close to the ancient Roman Forum?

Have you walked the older quarters of any European and American city center?



Aix en Provence, above

And have you walked through the concrete, steel and glass tunnels of New York or Chicago?

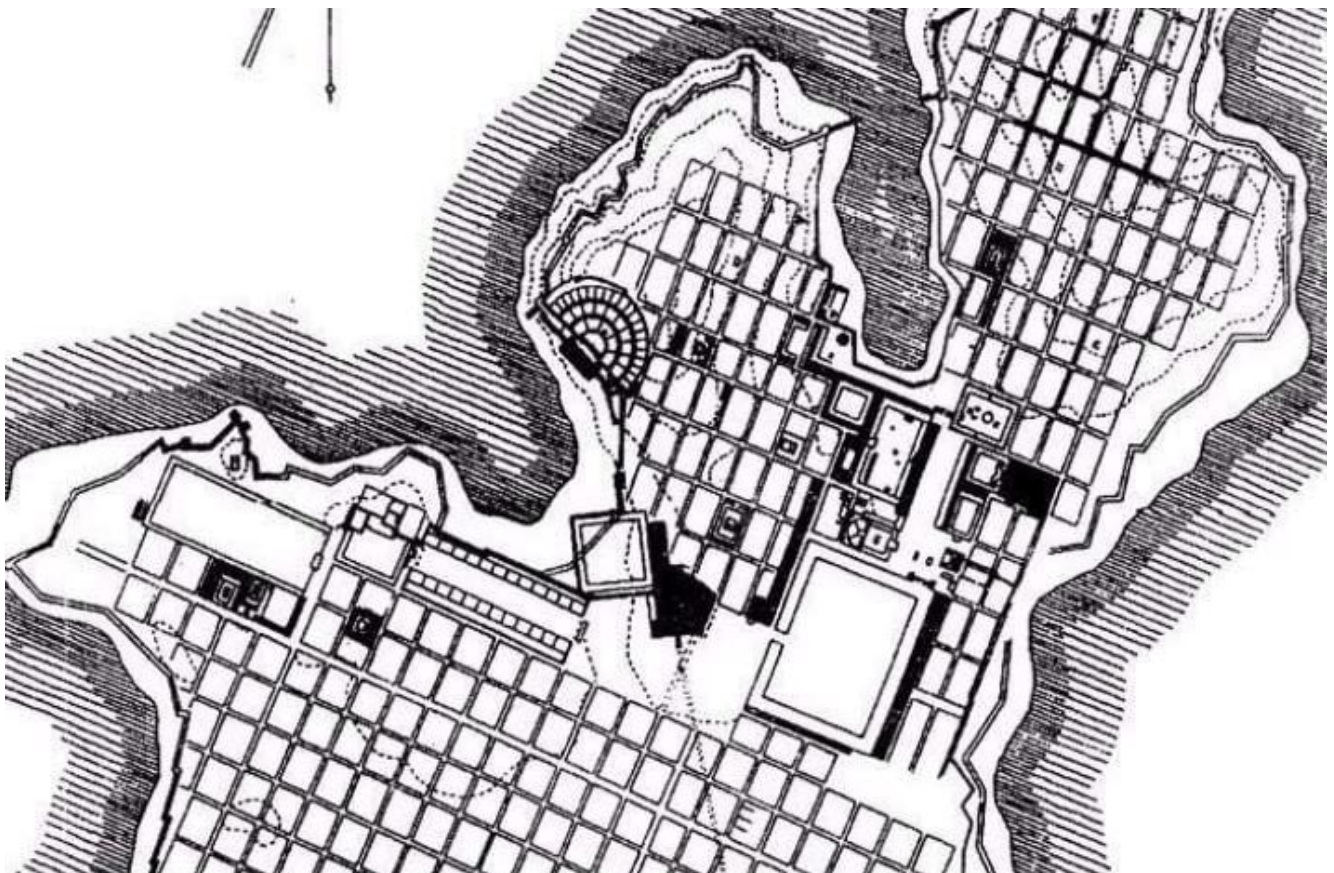


Which do you prefer and why?

In which of these locales would you stay longer to shop, dine, converse?

In my case I have lived in Central Florida for over 35 years. I have been to all the major cities in the state. And I prefer three streets in Winter Park to all the rest. And the park...

Like the Roman set up for a colonial city, which started on virgin soil close to a natural resource usually, two major roads intersect. These are the north-south and east-west, or cardo and decumanus. The Romans built the forum, market, temples and administrative buildings on and around this intersection. All the remaining streets were built in a grid pattern. A variation of this colonial system of city planning is evident in most Spanish, Italian, and Greek 'new towns'.



ancient Miletus

I don't believe the founders of Winter Park had even considered the historical aspect but two streets form the anchor of this town of 30,000 inhabitants. Park Avenue and Morse Blvd constitute the main axis, running north/south and east/west. A small grid to the west incorporates several more blocks and eastward the grid breaks up as it winds around a series of scenic lakes.



Worth Avenue Courtyard

When visiting Rome a few years ago, I stumbled upon several alleys from the main streets that opened into courtyards, some private and some public. This was duplicated on Worth Avenue in Palm Beach in the 30's and replicated in Winter Park. The most charming of these courtyards is about 20 yards south and on the east side of Park Ave. The small alley between the commercial two to three story buildings on Park leads to a courtyard centered by a simple fountain.

It is a charming intimate outdoor dining area now, under umbrellas with a brick walk. I am drawn to this area at least three or four times a week.

<https://www.newenglishreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Improve-Ugly-Modern-Buildings-with-Earth-Materials.mp4>





I was examining the many textures, patterns and colors of the 'man-made' materials: brick, ironwork, marble, ceramics, and the small flower beds trimming it out.

And I realized that these natural materials, earth materials, with their different composition and geometries, their different feel and look, etc. were what was missing in our modern downtowns which are invariably constructed of concrete, glass and steel.

Brick is elemental, fashioned from clay. Ironwork is forged and worked by hand, ceramics are clay fired with hand painted motifs, and so on. The marble table tops are cool and smooth to the touch.

We can feel the irregularities of the brick as we walk over them; we can then see how the same material is used for walls, then for roof tiles! The lanterns are decoratively crafted by hand, with their floral bases, also similar to the brackets supporting the wrought iron balconies.

We have the sense of touch, smell and visual stimuli that are sorely absent or drowned out by blaring autos also spewing exhaust. In this quaint courtyard you could smell the flowers.

These same features are repeated in pre-industrial towns, squares, and city centers around the world.



What happened?

We have neglected the human element: the sense of scale, olfactory, visual, sensual and acoustical components of a sentient being. These have been blunted in all ways in our modern cities. Especially the highly trafficked boulevards and yawning canyons of mirror glass and chrome steel reflecting our plight as we walk by. As fast as possible.

I remember as a child walking to school in Izmir Turkey, letting my hand skim across stone walls and brick veneers. The sidewalks were built of multipatterned geometric ceramic tiles. I could smell the waft of freshly baked bread, of the horse carriage, of the corn boiling in the street vendor's cart.

This morning, I envisioned a do-over or cosmetic fix at least, that would screen the ugliness of Modern architecture. It would be controversial and impinge on property rights. It would throw a cog into zoning laws. And it would infuriate the

modernists everywhere.

The idea is simply to extend about a two-foot section all the way around the ground floor of the modern behemoths and construct a brick and stone—even wood—façade over the mirror glass, steel and concrete, in a classical style employing arches, columns, aedicules, moldings, etc. leaving just enough to see through for the shops and entryways.

<https://www.newenglishreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Beautify-Modern-Buildings.mp4>

Here is a rough take at a portion of a modern building:

Oh my. This would create an artistic war and you know who would be on which side of things.

In fact, it even reeks of Trump's EO that was swept away when Biden got into office. Trump wanted all Federal buildings to be of a 'traditional style'. New and remodeled.

I don't want to say that this inspired my thinking, because it didn't.

I just believe that too much havoc and visual blight has been foisted on the simple man on the street by eager developers, academicians who bought the Bauhaus Kool-Aid, and the architects who were trained to crank out the stuff.



Of course now, with deconstruction architecture and AI interloping, buildings will look weirder and out of this world, intended to shock and awe rather than be stewards of a human user whose DNA is not wired to respond to plastics, synthetics, AI hallucinations, and unidentifiable screeds by self-serving prima donna architects.

This idea can be made more palatable if first the entire first or second story of a modern building is covered in vinyl with a photo or rendering of the exact design being planned. Then the citizen can look at what will be proposed before construction commences, and 'start a conversation'...

Back to the Romans... they copied Greek temples but added arches made of brick and enclosed the temples to gain livable area. This evolution was quickened by the Renaissance architects, who saw the whole matter as a box of tools with repeatable blocks and details that could be manipulated. Deftly and magnificently did they do that.

The idea of a facade (French derivation of Latin: *faciatta*) literally means face. Renaissance architects started burying columns into walls and flattened them into pilasters, after the Roman example.



Neo Classicists pulled the columns back out but when you had a limited footprint and could not afford to put on a front porch extending from the main façade wall, you created pilasters that actually had no supporting function (see above). The walls were sufficient to enclose the structure, so the game was then to see how you could beautify the façade with classical architectural tropes or clichés. Thus: 'façade-citecture.'



In Winter Park, the Barnett bank was a sore sight compared to the rather organic development of its brethren buildings. For years it was a huge out of scale glass box. About 20 years later a great sum of money was spent converting it into a more

'traditional' design employing classical tropes. See below:



Back to latin: the word manufacture (a term recently misinterpreted by Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill. as being sexist) simply means 'hands' -manu, and 'made by' -factum.

I believe traditional architecture should be made by hand, built and fashioned by hand. It should first be designed by hand as well. Not by computers, AI, or modern machines. See below a suggested remodel of a traditional structure in Romania, with a modern high rise added:



A true remodel of a traditional structure in Romania, with a modern high rise added.

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John Henry is based in Orlando, Florida. He holds a Bachelor of Environmental Design and Master of Architecture from Texas A&M University. He spent his early childhood through high school in Greece and Turkey, traveling in Europe—impressed by the ruins of Greek and Roman cities and temples, old irregular Medieval streets, and classical urban palaces and country villas. His Modernist formal education was a basis for functional, technically proficient, yet beautiful buildings. His website is [Commercial Web Residential Web](#). John has been a regular contributor to NER and has written about his profession and other topics such as history, music, technology, and politics.

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