

A Vision of Topeka

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Here's the problem: Topeka wants an image. Great Britain, on the other hand, already has one, and is trying not to lose it. Herein lies a lesson.

In 1988 Prince Charles produced a documentary under the auspices of the BBC which produced a sensation in Great Britain. The film, and the book which followed in 1989, were greeted with tumultuous applause from ordinary citizens and catcalls by the architectural profession—or at least those claimed to speak for the profession.

His work was called “A Vision of Britain.” Charles, a pretty fair artist in his own right, claimed he had been stewing on the subject for years, and finally could not restrain himself any longer. The subject was architecture, and this quote from the introduction gives you a sense of what follows.

“The fashionable architectural theories of the 50s and 60s, so slavishly followed by those who wanted to be considered ‘with it’, have spawned deformed monsters

1/Docking which have come to haunt our towns and cities,

2/K-NEA our villages and our countryside.

3/AAA As a result of 30 years of experimenting with revolutionary building materials

4/Judicial and novel ideas, burning all the rule books

5/Bank and purveying the theory

6/Suites that man is a machine,

7/Office we have ended up with Frankenstein monsters,

8/American Home devoid of character,

9/Apartments alien and largely unloved,

10/Teletech except by the professors who have concocted these horrors in their laboratories—and even they find their creations hard to take after a while.

11/Expocentre The rest of us are constantly obliged to endure the results of their experiments.”

What Charles called “this frenzied attack on long-established principles and values” extended beyond architecture to music, art, and education. In this presentation we will confine ourselves to architecture, because architecture is public art. I can avoid art galleries and concerts which I find tasteless, but an ugly building is a thumb in my eye all the livelong day. I am going to address only commercial architecture. Churches and houses present interesting problems in their own right, but the problems are different. And I should add at the outset that I do not know where to place the blame for the dismal state of our cities. Real architects may well blame draftsmen working at the behest of cheapskate contractors. I don't

know, and it doesn't really matter. Ugly is ugly; I leave it to scholars to assign blame.

Charles quotes the remarkable Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who has endured vitriolic criticism from the modernist architectural establishment because he continued to advocate traditional Islamic architecture. "I say," Fathy writes, "that beautiful architecture is an act of civility toward the person who comes into the building. **12/Mosque** (This modern mosque is his design). It bows to you at every corner, as in a minuet... Every ugly or senseless building is an insult to the man passing in front of it. Every building should be embellishing and adding to its culture... The revealed knowledge of the sage is now replaced by modern analytical science, while the skill of the craftsman's hand has been replaced by the machine." **13/Merchants**

Hold on just a doggone minute. I hear an objection from the back of the room. Aren't we talking about a matter of taste? And if so, who gets to be the judge? My answer is, you do. If you look around America and like what you see in our commercial architecture, then you part company with Bonny Prince Charley. If you think our city will attract visitors from Tokyo or Omaha with its picturesque beauty, then you part company with me. You're going to have to take sides, or abstain. All I'm going to do is clarify the history, and the issues.

"Form follows function" is the rule of modernist architectural design. What this means in theory is that function is what a building is built for, and the form should be the servant of the purpose. This is reasonable enough. But what it means in the hands of lazy or incompetent builders is "design the guts of the place, and to hell with the outside appearance." The Joseph Warren Building in Fleming Place **14/Joseph Warren** is a doctors' office in a colonial-style shopping center. The office is carefully designed and very efficient inside, but the architects faced a dilemma: like many professional buildings, the function demands a wide footprint. John Ward and Mike Wilson did a very fine job, in my opinion.

The slope of the roofline isn't a Williamsburg 12/12, but it's close; because of the width, a 45 degree angle would have made the cupola draw rain. The dormers are fake, but the angled siding **15/Siding** is an authentic touch; so is the taper of the false fireplace and the Flemish bond brickwork **16/ Brickwork**. In contrast, I've never seen anything like this roofline **17/Commerce** in a colonial building, nor this storefront sign **18/Subway**, nor this ridiculously leggy portico **19/Walgreens** resembling a Star Wars battle machine, presently under construction to replace the graceful old Fleming Mansion. Or consider this poor structure at 10th and Fairlawn, **20/Office** where a miscalculation on window placement—only a foot or so—deprives the window to the right of the door of its shutter, which is as apparent as a carbuncle on the tip of your nose. These are examples of lazy or incompetent building design. They just didn't give a damn, even if it wouldn't cost them a dime to do so.

But downtown Topeka isn't colonial Williamsburg, and shouldn't be. Topeka has to find its own soul. Before we launch in that direction, let's look at some historical background.

“Form follows function” is not a law; it is a philosophy. Bad architecture is exquisitely philosophical. Tom Wolfe, the gimlet-eyed social critic who wrote *Bonfire of the Vanities*, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Right Stuff*, and *A Man In Full*, also has given us *From Bauhaus to Our House*, a keen little book which explains how we got we got where we are today. Here are the first three paragraphs:

“O beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, has there ever been another place on earth where so many people of wealth and power have paid for and put up with so much architecture they detested as within thy blessed borders today?

“I doubt it seriously. Every child goes to school in a building that looks like a duplicating-machine replacement-parts distribution warehouse. **21/Lowman** Not even the school commissioners, who commissioned it and approved the plans, can figure out how it happened. The main thing is to try to avoid having to explain it to the parents.

“Every new \$900,000 summer house in the north woods of Michigan or on the shore of Long Island has so many pipe railings, **22/House** ramps, hob-tread metal spiral stairways, **23/Law Office** sheets of industrial plate glass, bands of tungsten-halogen lamps, and white cylindrical shapes, **24/KS History Museum** it looks like an insecticide refinery.”

In the despair and disorder which was Germany after World War I was born the Bauhaus School of architecture, founded by Walter Gropius. Here is a manifesto from that age: “Painters, Architects, Sculptors, you whom the bourgeoisie pays with high rewards for your work—out of vanity, snobbery, and boredom—Hear! To this money there clings the sweat and blood and nervous energy of thousands of poor hounded human beings—Hear! It is an unclean profit...we must be true socialists—we must kindle the highest socialist virtue: the brotherhood of man.”

“Worker housing” became the goal of architecture, and “bourgeois” the sneer that drove the artists and craftsmen out of the profession. Nonbourgeois buildings demanded concrete, steel, and glass. **25/MRI** Colors were *verboten*; “inside and out, they were white or beige with the occasional detail in black or gray.” **26/Security Benefit III**

Pitched roofs and cornices represented the oh-so-bourgeois crowned heads of Europe; so flat roofs were mandated, “this in a continent with enough snow and rain to stop an army. **27/Menningers** There were no eaves on these clean, nonbourgeois boxes with their sheer facades, and so a hallmark of the Bauhaus school became permanently stained beige exterior walls.” **28/Ks Medical Clinic**

Then there was the principle of “expressed structure.” Since walls no longer supported

buildings, that function being assumed by steel and concrete skeletons, it was dishonest to make walls look like a fortress. **29/Amerus** “The inner structure, the machine-made parts, the mechanical rectangles, the modern *soul* of the building must be expressed on the outside of the building, completely free of applied decoration.” **30/Apartment** We must not be hoodwinked by superficial similarities; the French architect Le Corbusier, founder of the Purist variant of the Bauhaus school, frequently made use of *pilotis*, or pilings. **31/Docking** These are *not* columns. Columns are bourgeois.

You see how it goes. When Gropius and his disciple Ludwig Mies van der Rohe arrived in New York City between the wars, they were treated like White Gods surrounded by savages with bones in their noses. Gropius was promptly made head of the school of architecture at Harvard, while Mies was installed as dean of architecture at the Armour Institute in Chicago and commissioned to create a campus of 21 buildings. I have been there; it is now the Illinois Institute of Technology, and it is the most depressing campus I have ever seen, a jungle of cast concrete, metal, and glass: recall the communist architecture of Eastern Europe, or the Shawnee County Health Department, **32/SCHD** or **33/Doorstep** and you’ll be close. Poor Frank Lloyd Wright, who aspired to create a distinctly American style of architecture. He was simply eclipsed by the White Gods.

So much for historical perspective. Prince Charles gave Britain Ten Principles of architectural design, but for the sake of brevity I will omit several and group the others into two: Harmony, and Community.

Harmony: I just asked you to picture the architecture of communism; now think of a Cotswold village, or a medieval German market town, or a Cape Cod fishing village, or a Brittany farmstead, or a Swiss alpine village, or a Sioux village, or a community of Navaho cliff dwellers. Or Paris, or Old Budapest. It does not matter if you have actually seen such places in the flesh; in fact, one of the striking features of these examples is that if you know such a place only by pictures in a social studies text or a travel brochure, and then actually go there, you will immediately recognize that the pictures did not mislead you. At some time in your life you have exclaimed, “It’s pretty as a picture.” You did not mean that the picture was superior to the real thing, but rather that the picture perfectly captured the image, the *essence*, of the place.

We read that in the Governor’s budget she has proposed \$2 million for a study to discover why strangers cannot fix in *their* minds an image of Kansas. Topeka, I need hardly add, has a similar image problem. Topeka, and Kansas, will not find their image until they find their architectural essence. That is the subject of this presentation: what is the *essential* Topeka?

By *harmony* I mean that the man-made contributions to our environment are a congenial match. The buildings *fit* the place. That Old World towns, or for that matter native villages or pioneer communities anywhere, naturally seem to do so is mostly an accident rather than a self-

consciously superior aesthetic-- a function of the building materials locally available to our ancestors. They made their dwellings from what they had. Cotswold stone, half-timbered stucco, the mixture of lime and seashells called *tabby* in the coastal towns of southeastern America, clapboards, bricks, sod, thatch, shingles, logs, buffalo hides, clay tiles, marble, mud, slate, woven branches-- the list of building materials is long, but *tightly restricted* within a given locale. And it is that restriction of choice which produces the distinctive local flavor which we consider charming.

The first problem of modern building is that the choice of materials is limited only by how much we are willing to pay for transportation. Hence the “international style” of commercial architecture, which makes downtown Singapore look just like downtown Atlanta, and housing suburbs in Toronto indistinguishable from Maui. Modern architects should be free to harmonically push the boundaries in the spirit of Frank Lloyd Wright; but they are not “starting from zero,” in the words of the Bauhausers-- entertaining with each new commission the opportunity to narcissistically impress their ids on the local environment, as Michael Graves did to the Topeka Public Library. **34/TPL** When I heard the praise of his work by our City Poo-Bahs, I could not help thinking to myself, “The White Gods have arrived.”

But let me damn Mr. Graves with faint praise. I am making a plea for harmony. And this is what he chose to harmonize with: the agriculture building at the old Fairgrounds, **35/Ag Building** or one of the numerous grain elevators in the area: **36/Elevator** If we take a panoramic view of the library site, this is what we see: **37-43/Neighborhood** In all fairness, how is an internationally renowned architect supposed to harmonize with *that*? The alternative is to ignore the neighborhood and design in the local vernacular, as an inspiration for architects in the future, in which the library would have displayed echoes of these old churches nearby, constructed of native limestone: **44-45/Churches** this one being the home congregation of the most famous Topekan, Charles Sheldon, and therefore one of the most famous churches in the world.

The first problem is that limestone is expensive, whereas brick, metal, concrete block, fiberglass, and Dryvit is cheap. The second problem is also practical. How are we to rebottle the genie of individual rights to bad taste?

To start with, we must preserve what remains of our local architectural history. Every sizable community in America seems to have experienced its own *Eureka!* in this regard, usually as a result of a real or threatened loss: the Alamo in San Antonio, the Owens-Thomas House in Savannah, Old Frasier Hall in Lawrence. Historic Topeka is heroically active in this regard, having been instrumental in saving the Ross Row Houses, **46/RRH** the Union Pacific Depot, now renamed the Great Overland Station **47/UPD** the Ritchie House, **48/Ritchie** and many other structures.

Here's the difficult part: with regard to *new* structures, at least in some definable district which represents the historical soul and architectural image of the town, there must be in place an architectural review board with the vision and courage to impose its will of structural harmony on local developers and builders. An image of Topeka must come from an understanding of our roots, and a self-conscious insistence that new construction harmonize with our distinctive setting.

Let's consider the soul of Topeka. The earliest settlers built their homes out of logs and sod, and in harmony with those materials, today we find scattered berm houses **49/Berm** and log cabins. **50/Log** But these are practical only for homes, and possible because of waterproofed poured concrete below grade and insect and fungus resistant stains above. You and I would not care to live in a drafty, damp haven for bugs, and neither did our ancestors. This is the remains of a dugout in our woods which dates from the 1800s. **51/Dugout** Very quickly these crude structures were supplanted by wood frame, brick, and native limestone. Among the first overland arrivals were a brick kiln and a sawmill. But if we were to ask for an indigenous Topeka wall, this would be it. **52/Wall** Or this, **53/Wall** or this, **54/Wall** or this, **55/Wall** or this Washburn building **56/Carnegie** or this old Santa Fe warehouse, **57/Santa Fe Warehouse** or this Potawatomie mission **58/Indian Mission**. Or these humble houses on 8th St. **59/Houses**

I trust you get my point. Do you want to see the bowels of Topeka's historic district? Here it is: **60/US-24 Cut** This is a cut from the US-24/K-4 interchange, and it shows what our pioneer ancestors had to work with. This is the soul of historic Topeka: wood, limestone, and clay for bricks. Brown, gray, red, and yellow. If you don't like that color scheme, you're not going to like the historic district of Topeka—if we ever get one. We do not get to choose an architectural image for Topeka; that has been done, and we can choose only to harmonize or rebel.

I want to remind you of where we've been, and to what we could return. Here is the first Shawnee County courthouse, built in 1880, **61/Courthouse 1** the second, built in 1910, **62/Courthouse2** and the present structure. **63/Courthouse 3**

Here is the first **public library** on the present Statehouse grounds, **64/Library 1** and the current library. **65/Library 2**

Here is the first Christ's hospital, from the 1880's **66/Stormont 1** the second, now Stormont-Vail, from 1950 **67/Stormont 2** and the present hospital. **68/Stormont 3**

Here is the first Capitol Federal, **69/Cap Fed 1** and the present main bank. **70/Cap Fed 2**

Here is the first Security Benefit, **71/SBL 1** the second, **72/SBL 2** and the present one. **73/SBL 3**

Here is the 1888 Shawnee County jail, **74/Jail 1** And the present one. **75/Jail 2**

I hope these progressions make my point. With each new incarnation appearing after World War II we suffer a wrenching separation from our historic architectural roots, which are anchored in the geography of Topeka. Most of these modern buildings could have been built in any industrialized city on earth. There is nothing of local flavor about them. Rather, they reflect the spirit of the architectural age, and they date pretty quickly. I'm not trained as a historian, so I have difficulty placing the construction date of older Topeka buildings within half a century. But modern buildings are very easy to place—not by locale, but by decade; witness a quick tour of our hospital district.

Here we have nice examples of the 50s, **76/Office** the 60s, **77/Nursing home** the 70s, **78/St. Francis** the 80s, **79/Office** the 90s, **80/O'Neill** and Tomorrowland. **813/GI Office**

Now here are two places distinctive not for their time, but for their place; and it's not Topeka. Instead, we'll throw in an old Aspen ski condo **82/Cotton** and a taste of Hilton Head. **83/Lincoln Center**

Good building designers seek to harmonize the old with the new, maintaining sensitivity to the locale; arrogant designers want to express themselves. Again, to borrow the Bauhaus mantra, it is as if they are "starting from zero." How about this for arrogance: here's the Petro addition to old Nichols gymnasium, meekly peeking up in the rear: **84/Petro** Or this Security Benefit addition, on the left, to the beautiful old granite original: **85/SBL** And what on earth could the Meningers architects have been thinking by imposing these cheap white boxes on the gracious colonial campus? **86/Cottages** Or the worst example of all, the addition to Dyche Hall **87/Dyche** in Lawrence, home of the Natural History Museum. Notice how the building designer chose to honor the Romanesque limestone of the original building: these suffice for columns, and these for arches.

On the other hand, if we look for commendable examples of harmonious building materials, the most striking to me is the new bus terminal. **88/Terminal 89/Terminal** Is this delightful structure, with its striking reminder of the old library and courthouse, really made of limestone? I haven't asked, and I can't tell. But its use of stone and arches pays homage to this building just around the corner. **90/Building**

Modern life must have its transportation hubs and parking garages. But isn't this **91/Kansas Ave. Garage** a respectful attempt to blend the new with the old, assuming we can't put all of the parking underground? In contrast, this is not; **92/Garage** nor this: **93/Garage**

They are dull; they are crude; they are, ultimately, the lazy way out. A town which wants an image would forbid them. It must forbid them.

Here was an opportunity recently lost. For its new athletic campus, USD 501 did a lovely job of landscape architecture, preserving the gently rolling topography of the land and most of the old trees. The facilities themselves are absolutely first class. But when it came time to choose a style of building architecture, I am ashamed to see the result. What we got was cinder block nouveau-- here, on the natatorium. **94/ Natatorium** This is a close up **95/Natatorium** which illustrates something I find particularly offensive. The blocks don't overlay each other, so the wall looks phony because it is obviously sacrificing strength for style-- and what a dull style it is!

I'm going to pause to briefly reemphasize something I alluded to earlier. Some of you, I know, are thinking: but I *like* some of those buildings. And I might agree with you on particulars. But that misses the point. Very few of you, if you could afford to hire an interior decorator for your home, would freely mix Danish Modern, French Regency, Arts and Crafts, and Shaker furniture. If you did, we would call you *eclectic*, and rather bizarrely eclectic at that.

96/ Downtown in 1883

If you want to have an image for your city, you had better hire an exterior designer. *Either* you can create an image (preferably one based on historical and geographical reality, or you end up with another EPCOT), *or* you can be eclectic. *You must choose.* Now I must warn you: eclecticism is the path of least resistance. An image takes discipline, and discipline requires saying *no* to some things, and saying no will make people angry. This is America, remember. But you still must choose. Remember, too, that harmony does not imply uniformity. This is what Topeka looked like in 1883; these are the cards we are dealt by our geography and our great-great grandparents. But if I consider this new addition to the landscape, **97/Office** or this one **98/Washburn Alumni** I don't get architectural whiplash. They have modern elements; but in scale, choice of materials, and overall shape there is a deference to the past, a kind of respectful genuflection.

And please, please, please: can't we agree to hide the massive generators **99/Tallgrass** and rooftop HVAC units **100/Cappers** **101/Old Santa Fe** and screen the utilities on the naked arses **102/Gage Center** of commercial structures? This is clearly a case of indecent exposure.

Community: The second principle, community, may be even more important. This is not because we are Topekans, but Americans-- and our national character of industriousness and individualism has a flip side familiar to every family physician and counselor in this country: as a society, we are fragmenting from the centrifugal force of our national compulsions. We need

to work less, eat less, exercise more, and reestablish a connection with our neighbors. This is the role of community.

Community has two parts: that which encloses us, and that which connects us. A single family enclosure is the choice for many, but we need to pay more attention to the design of commercial apartment buildings, which create their own small community. I would class the following examples of too many in Topeka as dull, lazy, soulless, and ultimately inhumane places to live:

103/High-rise apartments

104/Apartments

And these as enclosures which invite a sense of community:

105/Apartments

106/Apartments

Where I grew up, Prairie Village, every house had access to a sidewalk as a requirement of development approval. In Topeka there was apparently no such requirement. Sidewalks and parks invite us to stroll in our neighborhoods for exercise, fellowship, and recreation, and good things follow accidentally and naturally. In this regard, a largely unheralded virtue of Topeka and Shawnee County is the extensive trail plan devised by Bill Ripahn and his staff.

107/Map

In the last couple of weeks we have seen a flurry of publicity regarding the portion of the trail around Lake Shawnee, but the plan is far more ambitious than that. Let me make a bold generalization: a community with a soul that conjures an image, both to outsiders and insiders, must be accessible by non-motorized means. A new generation of urban architects is making precisely this point. I am not saying that automobiles, buses, and motorcycles must be forbidden; only that they *could* be, and life *could* go on.

Try this test for yourself: think of the Country Club Plaza, or the Riverwalk in San Antonio, or City Centre of Oxford and Cambridge, or San Francisco, or any village in Europe, or the French Quarter of New Orleans, or Old Town of Wichita. I have led walking tours of Manhattan Island with high school students, and once jogged from Notting Hill past Embassy Row, Buckingham Palace, Kensington Gardens, Westminster, Big Ben, 10 Downing Street, the Horse Guards, and back, without once waiting to cross a busy street in a city choked with vehicular traffic—all because of the marvelous system of parks, greenways, and underpasses which make London a community. In contrast, consider Los Angeles, or Atlanta, or Houston.

Bill Ripahn's group is about to change all that. The Shunga Trail has done a great job of tying together southeast and southwest Topeka, and in the next few years there will be an explosion of new pedestrian and bicycle routes. Before long it will be possible for someone living on the Calhoun Bluffs to ride to North Topeka along the Kaw Reserve or Soldier Creek Trail, across the new Topeka Boulevard bridge or Kansas Avenue bridge, and thence

downtown; to the Capitol, or the Brown v. Board National Park via the Freedom Trail, or all the way to Cedar Crest or the coming Menninger State Park, or the new River Hill development, on the Oregon Trail; or to the Shunga Trail via Washburn Lane, and thence to Deer Creek and Lake Shawnee, or all the way back to the Bluffs. We could some day experience a 50 mile round trip bicycle tour of Shawnee County encompassing all of the historic sites without ever riding the same route twice.

But for a city to have a soul, it must have a center. The center of Topeka has two poles: the Capitol, and the River that wooed the pioneers of 1854. Wisely, our city and state leaders have recognized that fact, and are involved in reconstruction of the shabby corridor between those poles, as advertised by this lonely streetlamp.

108/Corridor

The most difficult and expensive project, but one which is absolutely essential, is the development of the Riverfront into an attractive and accessible combination of parks and businesses. Here's what we are facing, in case you don't frequent this district: **109, 110, 111, 112, 113/Overland Station, 114/Storefront** On a positive note, look at this lovely job of preserving a storefront as an entrance into a patio in the same area.

Automobile intrusion must be minimized; the sightscape across the Kaw to the north must be cleaned up; the new Topeka Boulevard bridge must include access to North Topeka, preferably slung beneath the new roadway nearer the river at dike level, and intended solely for pedestrian and bicycle traffic; and construction must be governed by an architectural review board which is committed to employing native materials and is sensitive to historical architectural style.

115 Revitalizing the Riverfront Obviously, in this the sesquicentennial of Topeka, there is interest in such a project. The mayor has repeatedly pledged his support, as has the Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Topeka, Inc. Senator Jackson proposes a casino on the North Topeka Riverbank. The latest of many consultants envisions a dam on the Kansas River, and elevating life on the south bank to dike level. I hope everyone realizes how difficult this will be without a city manager; every small step will become a political football for the fiefdoms represented by the city council. Remember, this is the group which recently declared the butt-ugly Ramada Inn **116/Ramada** where we now sit, an historic landmark. As my patient and very funny guy Larry Frieze wrote in *Hers Kansas* this past Sunday, he was under the impression this meant that it should be (a) historic and (b) a landmark. Larry says he has socks older than the Ramada.

So the creation of a image-worthy city center will probably require the designation of an architectural czar, or board of czars, with the guts and authority to resist the philistines. David Thurbon of the Topeka Planning Department faxed me the relevant portions of our code, which allows planners to mandate that site plans address "promotion of architectural compatibility," "blight prevention" and "conservation of historic and landmark properties." But planning is a

very political process. It will take the full commitment of the mayor, city council, and state architect to undo the damage of the last 75 years

Robert Frost once wrote, “Locality gives art.” This is the locality which forms Topeka, like it or not: **117/Old House 118/Old Building**. Skillful architects can make something of old stone relics like these, and a work of art becomes an integrated whole with its community. An old downtown can become a community, with loft apartments, intimate restaurants, and a sense of history, style, and class. But if you take the potential historic district between the Capitol and North Topeka and throw in one of these, **119/Tudor 120/Dollar 121/Gage Dental 122/Kansas Dental**, and the magic is gone for another half-century. The West Ridge Malls of the world cannot serve as the soul of a town like Topeka, or anywhere. Everyone knows that. We can do better, and we should. Our vision of Topeka should not be cast in concrete. **123/Water Tower**