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The Ethics of Metropolitan Growth: a Framework

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Abstract Although debates about the shape and future of the built environment are usually cast in economic and political terms, they also have an irreducible ethical component that stands in need of careful examination. This paper is the report of an exploratory study in descriptive ethics carried out in Atlanta, Georgia. Archival sources and semi-structured interviews provide the basis for identifying and sorting the diverse value judgments and value conflicts that come into play in a rapidly growing metropolitan area. The goal of the project is to expand and refine a draft framework for grappling with the ethical complexity of the situations from which individuals and communities make important decisions about their surroundings. The success of the framework is to be measured by its usefulness in informing the judgment of professionals and citizens, and in facilitating a robust normative debate about the built environment.

Introduction

In March 2002, Charles Brewer, an internet millionaire who had recently remade himself as a new-urbanist developer, took a tour of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia, with a reporter from The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC). Alongside a gated subdivision in Cobb county, which lies just to the northwest of the city, Brewer reflected on the difference between the private realm of the suburbs and the public realm of traditional urban neighborhoods. "The private version is inherently inferior," he said. "That's one version of the good life. Just not the version which I share. Let's not try to pretend these choices are morally equal."

In a guest editorial column the following week, Brewer joined with the president and vice-president of his Atlanta-based development firm, Green Street Properties, to clarify:

[The choices we make about our built environment have major environmental and social consequences. This is not like choosing between black shoes and brown shoes. The actions we take can harm the environment and other people. Therefore, it is our moral obligation to consider that as we make our choices.

Of greatest concern to Brewer and company are the destruction of wildlife habitat, the
effects of economic segregation, and the exclusion from civic and economic life of anyone who cannot drive or cannot afford to own a car.2

Reaction from readers and from the editors of the AJC was immediate and intense, if short-lived. One reader was simply sarcastic: “How was I to know that working hard to become financially able to move to a beautiful area of my choice that has a yard and a neighborhood that children can play in was evil?”3 Another reader launched an attack on urban life in general, and urban intellectuals in particular: “There are alternatives to packing too many rats in the city and giving tax monies to corrupt, inefficient governments such as Atlanta’s. Many ruralities make a moral choice to live as independently as possible. It’s not our problem if enlightened urbanites don’t get it.”4 The editors, responding to Brewer’s initial comment, were a bit more restrained: “Forgive Charles Brewer, for he knows not what he says.”5

Perhaps the most interesting reaction was the contention that ethics simply has no place in debates over land use. The editors of the AJC note that there are valid grounds on which planning choices might be criticized, but morality is not one of them: “any policy discussion that begins with charges of immorality against some of the participants is bound to produce more anger than thoughtfulness.”6 Stuart Galishoff, a retired professor of history at Georgia State University, added that using the terms “ethics” and “morality” would be a mistake: “It’s harmful,” he argues; “it probably inflames public tempers.” Likewise, Ronald Utt of the Heritage Foundation found Brewer’s comments to be “patently absurd ... These are shallow, transparent judgments about people you don’t even know about.” Galishoff and Utt agree that decisions about land use should be left to the marketplace, with the explicit recognition that people have different preferences. According to Utt: “Everyone has choices. We’re all different. We all have different choices.”7

The defensiveness of people who have chosen to live in the suburbs, and the worries that invocations of morality will serve only to make people angry, seem to reflect a very narrow conception of ethics. It may be an artifact of the Christian tradition, especially as it has developed in the American South, that questioning the morality of someone’s choices is tantamount to denouncing that person as a sinner, as though the only antonym of “good” is “evil.” As a consequence, the implications of an earlier, much broader conception of ethics may simply be lost on many people, a conception according to which the most crucial ethical question is: What is the best kind of life for a human being? Aristotle’s ethics, for example, is broad enough to encompass every aspect of human conduct, especially in relations with others in the context of the city-state. My own favorite example is that, for Aristotle, wittiness is a virtue characterized by tact and good judgment, while boorishness and buffoonery are the corresponding vices.

This may strike some modern readers as simply incredible: surely, how people behave at a dinner party or when hanging out with friends is not an ethical matter. Nevertheless, Aristotle would insist that how people behave when they are relaxing is as much the concern of ethics as how they behave in any other domain of life, including the battlefield and the marketplace. For Aristotle, the highest good is a life lived in accordance with virtue, in which reason shapes and balances habitual emotional responses to events in the world. With fear, pleasure, or any other emotion, “to feel these feelings at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean amount—and the best amount is of course the mark of virtue.”8 The point is to become a person of good character, where goodness is exhibited in the flourishing of the
human capacity for reason, and where the opposite of “good” is “bad”—not “evil.” As for wittiness, Aristotle notes that “life also includes relaxation, and one form of relaxation is playful conversation,” and standards of good judgment apply here as well. If I tell jokes at the wrong time and for the wrong reason, or if I take offense at everything, I show bad character and, in the end, I do harm to the connections among people that make up the life of the community. The virtue of wittiness provides some of the glue that binds a community together.

However, does ethics in this sense also apply to the choice of where to live? It certainly does from Aristotle’s perspective. Humans are political animals, which for Aristotle means that we can only live and thrive in the context of the polis, or city-state. The polis, not the individual, is the smallest self-sufficient unit of human life: individuals may survive outside the polis, but they are unlikely to thrive there. As a consequence, ethics is a part of politics—the study of that which concerns the polis—and Aristotle describes politics as “the most authoritative of the sciences,” which has as its goal the supreme good for human beings, and which encompasses not only education, strategy, and oratory, but also “domestic economy.”

The pre-eminence of the polis as the place most fit for human thriving is reflected in the work of Aristotle’s teacher, Plato. In the dialogue Phaedrus, Plato has Socrates go outside the walls of Athens for a quiet conversation in the shade of a plane tree. When Phaedrus comments that Socrates seems a stranger to the country, Socrates replies: “I’m a lover of learning, and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.” To the extent that the examined life, the life of the mind, is better than other kinds of life, Plato seems to be saying, the dense and cluttered fabric of the city is the best place to live. In The Republic, Plato has Socrates attempt to define justice by creating an ideal city, with a constitution that would necessarily have a profound effect on the shape of the city itself. In what sort of building, for example, would the communal rearing of children take place, and would there be separate buildings for children of each of the three classes Plato identifies? And if the guardian class would not be allowed to own houses of their own, how and where would they be housed? Since these institutional arrangements are linked directly to the greatest good—the organic unity of the polis—a physical infrastructure that serves and supports these arrangements would itself be good, and one that undermined them would be bad.

Modern readers will no doubt find much to criticize in the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, and the forms and fortunes of cities have changed considerably since the heyday of classical Athens. Nevertheless, their writings at least suggest that how and where we choose to live and, more broadly, how we give form to the landscapes we inhabit, are ethical matters insofar as they impact individual development and social relations. A particular way of building is good to the extent that it makes it easier for people to live well, to be good people, and to participate in community life; it is bad to the extent that it makes these things more difficult by harming individual well-being, fostering injustice, fragmenting communities, or undermining the conditions of its own continuation. This seems to be the sort of ethical judgment Brewer and his colleagues have in mind.

Those who argue that decisions about where to live are simply a matter of preference, to be worked out in the marketplace, also miss the point that their own assertions serve only to demonstrate the inevitability of ethics. Galishoff and Utt both make explicit appeal to an ethical principle—liberty rights—when they assert that people ought to be allowed to live how and where they prefer. Such a claim might not be very controversial in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but it
remains an ethical principle that should be subjected to scrutiny. At the very least, some effort must be made to define the limits of freedom. Brewer and company base their entire argument on the premise that land use decisions can harm people and the environment, and that collective action must be taken to curtail freedom just enough to prevent such harm. Others may disagree with this, arguing that such harms do not matter, or are offset by other benefits, but the point is that they have to argue for such a position, and that the case must be made in terms of what is good and what is bad. One way or another, normative debate is inescapable.

However, the intensity of the brief controversy ignited by Brewer's comments also demonstrates the importance of proceeding carefully and thoughtfully, acknowledging the ethical complexity of particular choices made in particular landscapes, and acknowledging the difficulty of assigning moral responsibility for harmful patterns of development. It is telling, for example, that readers responded so defensively to Brewer's comments, in spite of the fact that he and his colleagues were very careful to avoid blaming individuals. "At an individual level," they write,

we certainly don't accuse anyone of being a bad person or morally inferior based on his or her choice of where to live ... In the Atlanta region, most people have very little to choose from that is not built in the conventional suburban pattern. And even for those who do have a choice, personal reasons including affordability, safety, school quality and proximity to work might easily trump the environmental and social factors we believe favor a more urban, traditional neighborhood.15

It may be that those who react defensively ought to examine their own choices and motives more critically, but the point is well taken that the absence of alternatives does lift at least some responsibility off the shoulders of individuals.

The Study

This paper is the first report of an ongoing investigation into the ethical dimension of debates over metropolitan growth. The goal of the investigation is to analyze the value judgments and value conflicts that run through such debates, and to develop a framework for grappling with the complexity of the situations from which individuals and communities make important decisions. In particular, this paper is the product of an intensive exploratory study conducted in and around Atlanta, Georgia, in the summer of 2003, in which I revised and expanded the framework through a consideration of the language and the tone of particular debates in a particular metropolis, picking out the tacit and explicit value judgments people bring to bear, and looking for points of divergence.

The Atlanta area is a particularly apt place for conducting such a study, and not only because I happen to live here. The Atlanta metropolitan area has been undergoing suburbanization since at least the 1920s, shaped by the then-new technology of the automobile.16 Just after World War II, the city emerged as the unofficial capital of the "New South,"17 serving as a focal point for economic development in the region. Since then, three interstate highways have converged on Atlanta, and the airport on the south side of town was expanded, creating a transportation infrastructure that helped fuel a period of rapid expansion from the 1980s down to the present. The twenty-county metropolitan area is now home to more than 4 million people and, according to a recent projection by the US Census Bureau, the population continues to grow by 502 people
every day, even in the face of a sluggish economy. Between 1982 and 1997, the urbanized area within the region grew from 700,000 acres to 1.3 million acres, which averages out to 110 acres per day. It has often been repeated—but seldom explained or verified—that Atlanta has been the fastest-growing human settlement in history.

I pursued my study of Atlanta along two avenues: archival research and semi-structured interviews. The centerpiece of the archival research was a search of the online archives of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution for calendar year 2002. I chose that year for convenience, but it proved to be particularly interesting for a number of reasons: it was the year of a statewide election for the governorship and for one US Senate seat; the national recession was putting a strain on the region, hurting the job market and cutting into state revenue; a number of key development issues came to a head; and, it was the final year of a four-year drought in the region. Using the search engine of the online archives, the keywords “sprawl” and “suburb” yielded several hundred articles each. I started by scanning the headlines to select only those articles that had direct bearing on some aspect of the debate over metropolitan growth. I then read each of those articles, selecting out passages that touched on value judgments or value conflicts, each of which I summarized in a brief note. Finally, I collected and sorted the notes into categories. I also examined two case studies in closer detail, following these stories through the AJC archives for their entire span, down to the present; one was a proposed highway construction project in the northern suburbs, the other a proposed mixed-use development on a former industrial site just east of downtown Atlanta.

While the AJC proved to be a good starting point, it is somewhat limited for my purposes: the editorial standards of a local newspaper are not necessarily compatible with my particular interest in ethics. This is not necessarily a fault, since the purpose of a regional newspaper is to publish stories that are likely to be of interest to residents of the region, in terms that a wide range of readers can understand. It does mean, however, that in-depth analysis is rare, and that presentation of complex issues is sometimes unsophisticated. To overcome this limitation, I supplemented this search with other archival materials, especially two public opinion surveys conducted by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the federally designated planning authority for the ten counties at the core of the region.

More importantly, I conducted nineteen semi-structured interviews with professionals, academics, and community leaders from around the region. In each interview, I asked a series of simple, open-ended questions about current trends in the Atlanta region, conflicts and problems that have arisen, the various and divergent interests of those involved, some of the terms commonly used in discussing metropolitan growth, and even the brief flap over Charles Brewer’s comments. I audiotaped the interviews and transcribed them for analysis. Of particular interest was the respondents’ use of language in describing Atlanta and its prospects, language that often reveals sharply divergent perspectives on key ethical issues.

The interviews also have limitations as a research tool, at least as I structured them. The pool of interviewees was small, and it was not a representative sample of the population of the Atlanta region. In selecting potential interviewees, I sought individuals in prominent positions whose professional and/or civic activities involve them directly in growth-related issues in the metropolitan area. Further research might usefully include a more broad-based survey, to incorporate the perspectives of citizens who are not in positions of influence or authority. For the present study, however, my aim was to assemble a pool of specialists representing diverse perspectives in the public and private
sectors, at different levels of government, from different parts of the region, and from various racial and ethnic groups.

This last point, racial and ethnic diversity, has turned out to be the most serious limitation on this study: the response rate was, by far, highest among white males—a fact that in itself suggests an interesting line of investigation. I did speak with some African-Americans, but not with anyone from the growing Asian and Hispanic communities in the region. To correct this imbalance in the short term I have turned once more to print sources, but in any further empirical research I would have to find ways of making inroads into minority communities.

More broadly, this project runs up against a further limitation to the extent that it is an exercise in descriptive ethics. The goal of this project has been to identify and classify the values people in fact bring to bear on important decisions about the built environment, and the ways in which those values in fact come into conflict with one another. This should be distinguished from normative ethics, which takes up the task of determining what in principle we ought to value, and how conflicts ought to be resolved in principle. In the end, normative ethics is more interesting for the purposes of guiding individual choices and collective policy decisions. The most I can hope to do with this current project, then, is to set the table for what I hope can be a robust and constructive normative debate about the future of the built environment in the Atlanta region and elsewhere, by identifying the full range of important questions that are open for discussion.

Ethics by Proxy

Debates over land use and metropolitan growth are most often couched in terms of economics, politics, and individual self-interest, and many people seem to be satisfied that this is an exhaustive list of factors to be taken into account when making decisions. The truth of the matter is that such debates are shot through with all sorts of value judgments and value conflicts. This may not be obvious at first because the ethical content of the debate is often disguised by the use of what I have come to call “comfortably vague terms,” or CVTs for short. These are catch-phrases or buzzwords that embody a host of value judgments, but which are subject to conflicting, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations.

Some CVTs elicit nearly universal acclamation, including “green space,” “progress,” and “family.” By far the most important of the positive CVTs, however, is “quality of life.” The problem with this expression is that the term “quality” is by itself nearly empty of determinate content, so that it can be given any of a number of divergent meanings. For some, quality of life is nearly synonymous with economic prosperity, while for others it must also include a range of non-economic values, including a rich community life and access to some kind of natural refuge. While nearly everyone would agree that human health is an important component of quality of life, there are likely to be sharp disagreements over the conditions that are most conducive to health, and over the balance between health and other considerations. The same applies to “green space,” which everyone favors, but which can include anything from a five-acre suburban lawn and trees lining a parking lot to a wild area that has been preserved from any possibility of development. Green space can be valued as a resource for human use, as habitat for other living things, or (less often) for its own sake. At least one interviewee rejected the term “green space” altogether, insisting on the greater specificity of terms such as “park” or “town square.”
Among vague terms that are generally judged positively, “smart growth” is a special case. Few people disagree with the idea of “smart growth” as such, but only to the extent that no one would want to be perceived as advocating “dumb growth.” At first, this feature made the term appealing as a marketing tool for proponents of various growth management strategies, but the term has been applied to so many different strategies by people with such a wide array of divergent interests, that it’s vagueness has become transparent. Many of those I interviewed for this project commented on this, noting that “smart growth” is “a worn-out phrase,” and that it “means whatever the speaker says it means.” This is not to say that “smart growth” is any more vague than “quality of life” or “green space” it may be that, as a manufactured term that did not rise organically from ordinary language, the vagueness of “smart growth” is easier to spot.

Other CVTs elicit almost universal condemnation. “Sprawl,” for example, is usually used in the pejorative. While at least one interviewee held out for “sprawl” as a purely descriptive term for a particular pattern of low-density development, nearly everyone else acknowledged that “sprawl” is a negative term, though some were displeased with current use of the term. In my search of the AJC archives, I discovered several instances in which “sprawl” was used to designate not a pattern of development, but one of the negative consequences of such a pattern to be ranged alongside congestion and air pollution. In this usage, it seems almost to be an aesthetic judgment: it is not just that sprawl is ugly, but that “sprawl” is synonymous with “ugliness.”

Still other CVTs are almost universally divisive, taken as either extremely positive or extremely negative. “Density” is one of these. While it can be used as a purely descriptive term referring to the number of people or dwelling units per unit area, “density” nevertheless carries a great deal of cultural baggage. For some, density is an evil to be avoided, a sign of creeping urbanization and the problems of crowding, crime, and decay they see as coming with it. For others, carefully planned high-density development is the necessary and inevitable antidote to sprawl, the solution to problems of mobility and air quality, and a precondition for a rich and vibrant community life. Several interviewees pointed out a further ambiguity in the term, since the scale on which density is measured is relative: one house per acre seems like high density for residents of rural areas outside Atlanta, even though it would be low density to nearly everyone else.

The relativity of the term “density” suggests that part of the ambivalence of CVTs can be accounted for by deeper schisms within American culture. There is a long-standing cultural rift, for example, between the city and the country. Some people valorize the industry, education, and cultural ferment of the dense and diverse fabric of the city, while others valorize the artisanship, independence, and tranquility of life in the open countryside. For those whose thinking is shaped by the urban framework, density is wholly good, and sprawl is bad because it saps the vitality of the city without giving anything in return. For those whose thinking is shaped by the rural framework, density is wholly bad, and sprawl is bad because it threatens the rural character of the landscapes they value.

Suburbs, as both drivers and products of sprawl, seem to occupy an unstable middle ground between the city and the country. From the point of view of those living in the city of Atlanta, the I-285 loop, known locally as the Perimeter, is the boundary of the civilized world, and the suburbs beyond it may as well be open farmland. From the point of view of those living in rural areas on the fringes of the metropolitan area, those same suburbs are nothing less than the advancing edge of the city. It is difficult
to say how suburbanites are to think of themselves in terms of the city-country axis. Many of them presumably moved from the suburbs to get away from urban problems and to claim a small (and diminishing) piece of the country, and many fear that creeping urbanization will destroy the suburban or semi-rural character of their communities. At the same time, suburbs were once entirely dependent on the city economic and cultural opportunities, and many suburban residents still look to the city for many of the resources that enrich their lives. Perhaps those who occupy the middle landscape between the city and the country must simply struggle with divided loyalties.

Other cultural rifts complicate the picture. Race and class are still important factors in shaping attitudes toward the built environment, even though there is considerable debate as to which is more important. My search of the AJC archives yielded surprisingly little about the role of race, and many of those I interviewed insisted that economic and social status weigh more heavily on individual decisions about where to live. The argument is that people choose to live in neighborhoods with stable property values, with people who make about the same amount of money and who can be expected to behave predictably and respectably, and it does not matter what the color of their skin happens to be. I take this with a grain of salt, however. Leaders and residents of the Atlanta region have long projected an image of racial harmony and reasonable accommodation even in the face of serious and persistent problems. Although the situation has improved since the 1960s, the lingering effects of legalized segregation can still be seen in residential patterns and the distribution of educational opportunities, and it is an open secret that racial prejudice still shapes the attitudes of many white suburbanites toward high-density development and mass transit.

More to the point, however, the history of relations between whites and blacks in the South has led to significant cultural differences that might persist even in the absence of prejudice and discrimination. One interviewee noted, for example, that while white Southerners have a strong tradition of property rights and home rule at the county level, black Southerners have no such tradition and have relied more on intervention from the federal government to address and correct social and economic inequity. Consequently, the two groups have very different attitudes about the legitimacy of government intervention in the processes that shape the built environment. Another interviewee described a focus-group study of attitudes toward various kinds of development: while some white respondents favored dense, pedestrian-oriented communities close to the urban core, all of the black respondents favored low-density suburban development, apparently because they associate high density with public housing projects and with the concentration of poverty in the city.

Another important cultural rift in the Atlanta region is that between native-born Georgians and newcomers to the region, especially Northerners. This rift has its origins in the sectional strife that led to the Civil War and, in some respects, it is the city/country division writ large: the genteel, agrarian Old South was convinced of the superiority of its way of life over the urban, industrialized North, and vice-versa. After defeat and reconstruction, and through a continuing struggle to remake the South and reintegrate it into the national economy, the North-South split remains as a complex and contradictory phenomenon. In my research, I have encountered both disdain for and resentment of Northerners who have moved to the region, in spite of the fact that the economic growth of Atlanta since 1900 is the product of a deliberate campaign to attract Northern investment and Northern labor. From the interviews, I gathered that many native-born Georgians, black and white, even those who live in the rapidly urbanizing Atlanta region, distance themselves from the urbanism of the North, and
blame newcomers for the problems of growth and traffic congestion about which newcomers complain so loudly. On the other side of the rift, newcomers bring with them expectations and aspirations shaped by their experiences elsewhere. They may be more tolerant of density, for example, or of government regulation than are their native-born counterparts. Also, many Northern immigrants bring with them stereotypes of Southern backwardness that serve only to widen the rift and deepen the resentment felt by native-born Georgians.

There is another rift that should be included here, or rather a fine-grained network of rifts. People have a tendency to identify with the neighborhood in which they live, and will seek to protect it against any perceived threat to its quality or stability. Some interviewees even suggested that people are simply averse to any change at all in their immediate environment. In any case, disagreements over land use decisions in the United States often come down to conflicts of neighborhood against neighborhood, or neighborhood against developer, or neighborhood against city, or simply us against them. In part, this is a matter of scale: it is easy to see changes taking place in my neighborhood, but more difficult to see or care about the broader dynamics of the county or the region in which my neighborhood is embedded and on which it is dependent. Any proposed change in transportation policy or zoning requirements is likely to be evaluated, first and foremost, by its impact on this neighborhood and the value of this house, regardless of the benefits or costs of the change to other neighborhoods or to the region as a whole.

As they intertwine, these cultural rifts give rise to a complex tangle of value judgments, but these judgments are seldom teased apart and made explicit in the public forum. Instead, they come to the surface only through a series of proxy battles that are fought in neighborhoods, in zoning board hearings, in meetings of the county commission or city council, on the floor of the state legislature, in the courts, and elsewhere. A proxy battle is a conflict over a concrete problem or decision that stands in the place of much broader debate over basic values. Common flashpoints include apartment complexes, commercial centers, and transit lines. Instead of careful analysis and reasoned argument, proxy battles often take the form of angry protests, bumper-sticker slogans, grandstanding in public meetings, obstructionist lawsuits, and even blatant grabs for political power. Such conflicts sometimes create revealing and unlikely alliances among different cultural groups who perceive that their interests overlap in this one instance, though perhaps not in others.

Among the most heated proxy battles are those that arise whenever there is a proposal to build an apartment complex in or near a neighborhood of single-family homes. Aside from the developer who stands to make money on the deal, proponents of apartments might tout a number of possible benefits. Apartments can provide decent, affordable housing for young professionals, teachers, firefighters, and other service providers, as well as for the growing population of elderly residents who are no longer willing or able to maintain a detached house. Further, a mix of housing types in a neighborhood, catering to people across a range of income levels, increases the diversity of the neighborhood and, some argue, can help to reduce class conflict. If commercial development is mixed in with apartments, the higher density and activity could translate into greater vitality in the neighborhood, and even the possibility of reduced dependence on the automobile.

Local residents might well agree that diversity and vitality are valuable in general, but they nonetheless rise up in angry protest, outraged at the threat to their quality of life and the character of their community. Some of their concerns are economic.
Renters are perceived as having less of a stake in maintaining the appearance and value of their dwellings than homeowners, which might have an impact on property values in the entire neighborhood. Also, apartment dwellers might include children who would contribute to school overcrowding while their parents do not pay their share of property taxes. The ferocity of the typical reaction seems to go far beyond simple economics, however. An apartment complex may be perceived as the vanguard of creeping urbanism, threatening the tranquility and beauty of the community, along with the safety of local residents. An underlying assumption here is that apartments will attract “undesirable elements” who will bring gang activity, vandalism, and other crime to the area—an assumption with a distinct racial component.

Ethically speaking, proxy battles are muddled and endlessly vexing. Important values are at stake on all sides—including economic prosperity, stability, aesthetic quality, safety, freedom, and mobility, but also diversity, equity, and environmental quality—that are seldom separated out and stated explicitly. Rather, this complex array of values seems to be compressed together into a single intuition, a gut reaction that may be evoked simply by uttering a single word: apartment, or transit, or density, or strip mall. Worse still, individual citizens may find themselves torn between tacit values that conflict with one another: many who support high, wide, and handsome notions like diversity and equity may see themselves as having to balance those against the more immediate concerns of economic stability, health, and safety. There is a pressing need, then, to make explicit the full array of values that are at stake in decisions about the built environment, and to identify cross-relations and contradictions among those values. If the judgment of citizens and their political leaders is informed by stereotypes or other faulty assumptions, then the need for careful analysis is all the more pressing. Otherwise, the prospects for good judgment and good policy are very dim indeed.

The Framework

The possibility of a framework for grappling with the complexity of the built environment began to emerge from the literature of environmental ethics in the 1990s. The traditional goal of environmental ethics has been to establish ethical principles to govern the relationship between humans and the natural environment, with an emphasis on those parts of the environment previously unaltered by human activities. A prevalent line of argument has held that nature has intrinsic value, or value that is independent of any value it might have for human use. What, then, can be said of the built environment except that it is a departure from, or a degradation of, the ways of nature? Some environmental ethicists have responded both by finessing the definition of naturalness to encompass all of the conditions of human thriving and by applying other relevant ethical considerations to the built environment, such as aesthetics, justice, and sustainability.

My own approach to the problem has been to set aside the presumption that naturalness as such must be a primary consideration. Instead, I have worked to multiply the number of ethically relevant considerations as much as possible. Initially, I arranged these considerations under four broad headings: origins, human thriving, justice, and sustainability. My research in and around Atlanta has served two important functions in revising and improving this framework: raising issues that would not otherwise have occurred to me, and spurring me to reorganize the framework to correct inadequacies that only became obvious in applying the framework to the details of a particular region. For example, I began to notice in my research that the term “community” has a number of distinct uses, some focused on community life within neighborhoods, some on a
Table 1. The framework

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broader sense of community between neighborhoods and across the region. As a consequence, I opted to include “community” as a subheading under two different headings in the framework, “Well-being” and “Justice.” More broadly, I discarded the “Origins” heading, which concerned the processes by which a given built environment came to be as it is, and integrated parts of it into two new headings: “Legitimacy” and “Limits.” The resulting framework consists of an extensive and diverse list of ethical issues, grouped under five main headings (see Table 1).

Concerns about human well-being in the context of the built environment can be summarized in the question: What makes a good place to live? For all the disagreement over the details, my research in Atlanta suggests that there is a general consensus that a good place to live is one that offers an array of opportunities for individual fulfillment, for the successful rearing of children, and for establishment of some kind of community life. Economic opportunity has its place here, but with the implication that it is just one factor among many: far from being a sufficient condition for a good life, economic prosperity is at most a necessary condition.

More broadly, people often tie their well-being closely to the aesthetic character of their immediate surroundings, what is sometimes called a sense of place. Old rural
villages, and newer buildings that imitate them, may be valued for their charm and quaintness, suburban neighborhoods for their pastoral tranquility, and urban neighborhoods for their vibrancy. Of course, there may be disagreement over such judgments: old rural villages may be denigrated as backward and oppressive, their imitations as crass and phony, suburban neighborhoods as sterile and monotonous, and urban neighborhoods as raucous and dangerous. A sense of security is also an important aesthetic consideration, whether or not it corresponds to actual security.

While individuals value their own well-being and may have obligations to themselves and to their families, there are also broader obligations that ought to be taken into account. The minimum requirement of justice is that people ought not to harm one another. How to define "harm," and how far to go beyond this minimum requirement in creating a just society, are matters of some dispute. In the ethics of the built environment, concrete issues of justice include distribution of the opportunity to attain the values that make up a high quality of life—from clean air and water to homeownership and mobility to education and employment—as well as the distribution of the economic, social, and environmental costs of acting on these opportunities. In other words, the key questions to ask about any given place are: Who gets to live here? and, Who pays the price to make it possible? Matters of justice arise in relationships among individuals, among groups of individuals, between citizens and the political jurisdictions that collect taxes and provide services, and among political jurisdictions at various scales. For many, justice should also extend to other generations and to other species.

Perhaps the most pressing matter of justice in the Atlanta region is a pattern that has typified the process of suburbanization in the United States: exclusion. Exclusionary zoning and the shortage of affordable housing are persistent problems in the Atlanta region, and "affordable housing" here includes housing for many people who are considered middle class. Much of this exclusion can be accounted for in terms of socio-economic status, but race remains an important factor as well. While legalized racial segregation faded in the 1960s, de facto racial segregation persists in the Atlanta region. The black middle class remains strong, and many inner-ring suburbs are becoming more diverse, but there is a pronounced dividing line that runs from west to east through the metropolitan area: whites have tended to move north, taking much of the impetus for development with them, while blacks have tended to move south and west, where economic development continues to lag. The result of all forms of exclusion and segregation is often a spatial mismatch between affordable housing and access to the various opportunities of civic life, including employment, education, and culture.

Even if a pattern of development fosters ways of living that are good and just, the question still remains: How long can the dynamics of this place last? This is the concern of sustainability. It may seem that this is not an ethical matter in the strict sense, but I would argue that it is certainly a relevant consideration in ethical decision making. If a pattern of development sets up a dynamic that could undermine the continuation of a good and just way of living in the short term, then it is clearly a good idea to understand that dynamic and do something to change it. Indeed, it might even be argued that we have an indirect obligation to make the built environment sustainable, if only as a matter of fairness to future generations. To the extent that we have obligations to future generations, we may also be obligated to change patterns of development and ways of living that would undermine our descendents' opportunity to live a good and just life.

The idea of ecological sustainability is familiar enough, and the meaning of economic sustainability is not hard to grasp as an extension of this: in effect, households and municipalities alike may find that they can no longer afford to continue on their
present course. Cultural sustainability, which concerns the continuity of cultural values and patterns over time, is less likely to be familiar. The choice of where and how to live is complex, informed by a host of cultural images and ideals. In some cases, however, it seems that the very act of reaching for an ideal pushes it further out of reach. The paradigm case is the family that moves to the suburbs to get away from the city into a tranquil, pastoral landscape, only to find that the landscape becomes less tranquil and less pastoral with each passing year. More residents arrive, followed by commerce and industry, and with them come traffic congestion, noise, and light pollution. As one interviewee put it, "the feathers come with the chicken." As growth moves on to other areas, it leaves behind abandoned buildings, underpopulated schools, and the first inklings of urban decay. In this respect, at least, suburbanization as currently practiced is a self-defeating project, and so may be characterized as culturally unsustainable.

Questions of legitimacy stand at the cusp between ethics and politics: Who makes the decisions that shape this place? How? Ethics and politics are intertwined here at least to the extent that both involve decisions that are best made on the basis of principles, including the principles of justice and individual rights. The crux of the matter is the relationship between individual liberty and the legitimate role of government in constraining and directing individual choices in the service of justice and sustainability. Some argue that we should leave as many decisions as possible to individuals acting in the marketplace, leaving to government only the task of establishing and enforcing the ground rules of market interactions. As it happens, however, governments at all levels have played a much more significant role in shaping the landscape, making some ways of building and ways of living easier than others, supporting some forms of transportation while neglecting others, and enforcing the strict separation of uses that now defines American metropolitan areas. Who should decide whether and how to change any of these policies, and on what authority?

Perhaps the most pressing issue of governance in the Atlanta metropolitan area is the extreme fragmentation of political authority. The constitution of the State of Georgia provides for very strong home rule, meaning that counties and cities have the right to make decisions regarding land use within their respective jurisdictions. In practice, this means that dozens of local jurisdictions compete for economic development and tax revenue, and many of those jurisdictions either do not plan for growth or do so in ways that may be self-defeating. The Atlanta metropolitan area has taken the first steps toward regional coordination of land use and transportation planning with the creation of the ARC and, under a mandate from the federal government, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA). There is now also a Metro North Georgia Water Planning District that is responsible for coordinating water policy across the region. There is considerable debate about the legitimacy of these regional authorities, however, especially on the questions of whether they are truly representative of the people of the region and whether they have enough—or too much—power to make decisions for the entire region.

Finally, the whole enterprise of making ethically sound decisions about the built environment runs up against crucial limits. The key question here is: How much does ethics matter in shaping places? It is relatively easy to articulate a grand vision of the city of the future, one that is radically different from what we have today; it is not nearly so easy to get there from here. Whatever high principles we may invoke, however artfully we may strike the theoretical balance between individual well-being and the demands of justice, the real world is likely to resist, to complicate, and ultimately perhaps to frustrate our attempts to put theory into practice. Complex systems can take on a momentum of
Table 2. Analysis of a comfortably vague term

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green space ...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Well-being</td>
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<td>2. Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Sustainability</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Limits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

their own, making it very difficult to change their course and difficult to predict the consequences of any changes we might introduce.29 This is not an excuse for quietism or fatalism, however; it is simply a recognition that there may be limits to what we can hope for from ethics, and also limits to individual responsibility for choices made within the constraints of the system as it currently exists.

Using the Framework

It is important to remember that the framework is not a scorecard: it is not intended to generate a set of final judgments about a region or its residents. Rather, it is a collection of ethically relevant issues about which there should be vigorous disagreement and debate. In the end, the test of the framework will be whether it can in practice clarify what is at stake in conflicts that arise from metropolitan growth and, as a consequence, open the way for better decision making.

One use of the framework is to pick apart the comfortably vague terms in which debate over the built environment is usually couched. When people say they value green space, for example, they may in fact be appealing to any of a host of different value judgments, singly or in combination (see Table 2). Those who value green space primarily for the recreational opportunities it affords might be content with a tennis court or ball field, while those who value beautiful vistas and ecosystem services might insist on a permanently protected nature preserve. Still others might value green space as a setting for family life, and so would turn their attention to cultivating large, suburban back yards or pushing for construction of a local playground.

While there may be strong disagreement over the meaning and form of green space, there is likely to be still stronger disagreement over questions of access and governance: Should the provision of green space be a matter for the public realm or the private
Table 3. Analysis of a proxy battle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An Apartment Complex ...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Well-Being</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>... can be architecturally interesting. ... is ugly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... provides affordable housing. ... brings crime to neighborhood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>... contributes to density/walkability. ... brings pollution and noise to neighborhood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>... can accommodate transit. ... increases traffic congestion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>... increases vitality of neighborhood. ... undermines home ownership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>... increases diversity of community. ... reduces property values in neighborhood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>... contributes to school overcrowding.</td>
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<tr>
<th>2. Justice</th>
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<tr>
<td>... reduces exclusion by race and class. ... violates rights of current residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... provides housing for elderly. ... attracts “undesirable elements” (“them”).</td>
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<tr>
<td>... disrupts less natural habitat than houses.</td>
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<th>3. Sustainability</th>
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<tr>
<td>... makes relatively efficient use of land. ... increases demand on municipal services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... makes relatively efficient use of energy. ... contributes to school overcrowding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... threatens suburban character of area.</td>
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<th>4. Legitimacy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... may be part of a regional solution to ... may have been foisted on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regional problems. community by “outsiders,” such as</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

realm, and who should be allowed to make use of it? Some may value green space only to the extent that it is available exclusively to people of the same social standing, and so might favor its inclusion in the private realm of a gated subdivision, for example, or a private country club, or even a five-acre residential lot. Others might insist that green space should exist in the public realm: it should be owned and maintained by public agencies in the interest of the common good, and it should be available to everyone.

A second use for the framework is in the analysis of proxy battles, to the end of bringing to light the diverse and sometimes contradictory value judgments that are at stake on each side. A rough schematic of the battle over an apartment complex, for example, gives a sense of the hidden complexity of the debate (see Table 3). More critically, it also suggests that there are almost certainly faulty assumptions on both sides: proponents may have too rosy a view of the vibrancy and diversity apartments might bring to a neighborhood, while opponents seem too willing to assume the worst about those who might come to live in the complex, sometimes appealing to stereotypes of race and class. By making such assumptions explicit, the framework can serve to focus any subsequent normative debate on the question of whether, where, and how to build apartment complexes: claims that are shown to be ill-founded may be set aside so that
More carefully attention can then be given to the questions that remain. It is beyond the scope of this study to predict which claims will stand up to critical scrutiny.

More constructively, the framework may help to point the way out of the usual impasse and toward a solution at least marginally acceptable to both sides. For example, opponents of apartments might be willing to accept a new complex if they themselves are included in the planning process (legitimacy), if some arrangements are made to handle the increased burden on municipal services (economic sustainability), if standards are set for the conduct—though not necessarily the race or class—of those who rent the apartments (justice and well-being), and if the architecture of the complex fits in with its surroundings (well-being). On the other hand, proponents of apartment complexes might be more flexible in a particular case if there is some broader, regional structures in place for addressing problems of exclusion and the lack of affordable housing. There may also be substantial common ground between the two sides on matters of aesthetic quality, the importance of community life, and the demands of justice, however much the two sides may differ in the weight they put on each of these relative to other values.

Some of the disagreement over the importance of a given value may arise because of the scale at which the value operates. For an individual faced with a decision about where and how to live, some ethically relevant factors are immediate and tangible while others are remote and abstract: health and security of self and family loom large in the moral imagination of most people, while matters of justice may lie just beyond the horizon of everyday concerns, and matters of ecological sustainability, at least, operate on a scale wide enough and slow enough to be all but imperceptible. This suggests a third, more theoretical use of the framework, contributing to what Bryan Norton has called a “phenomenology of the moral space in which individuals formulate and pursue personal and environmental values.” For normative inquiry and debate, the important point here is that the three levels are intertwined: decisions made within the horizon of everyday concern can have spill-over effects on the broader and more remote levels of justice and sustainability, and the resulting changes in those broader social and ecological processes constrain and may even begin to undermine the everyday choices of individuals.

To those who already see decisions in terms of justice and sustainability, it may seem that people who focus exclusively on what lies within the near horizon of everyday concern are myopic, ignorant, or simply apathetic. Whatever truth may lie behind this appearance, and however urgent the risks posed by spill-over effects may be, advocates for a more robust normative debate about metropolitan growth should avoid the arrogance implicit in such judgments. Individuals and communities are faced with complex choices that often involve painful trade-offs among legitimate and deeply-held values, so it is understandable that many give in to the temptation to ignore any complications that lie just over the near horizon, choosing instead to focus on the somewhat more manageable trade-offs involved in sustaining a home and family. The framework I have offered can serve as a useful tool in expanding and informing the moral imagination of individual citizens, but it also provides grounds for humility and mutual understanding: however we may disagree among ourselves, we are all basically in the same ethical predicament.

Finally, I should note that the framework itself is open to further critique and revision, especially as it is adapted for use in other regions in the United States and around the world. The next step will be to apply the framework to actual cases, in Atlanta and elsewhere, to determine whether and to what extent it helps to clarify what
is at stake in decisions about the built environment, perhaps using a more formal empirical methodology. It may turn out that this particular framework is generally inadequate, or that there are other frameworks that are better suited to places other than American metropolitan areas. No matter. What does matter is the overarching goal of creating a general and versatile tool for examining and informing the ethical dimension of public debate about the built environment. To that end, I offer this framework as a first draft.31

Acknowledgments

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Notes

6. “Morality Not a matter of ZIP code.”
13. In the classical period, the city of Athens was as physically squalid as it was culturally and politically rich: the quality of private space was much less important than the public realm in which citizens could interact—the agora and the theater, for example. See Lewis Mumford, The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects (New York: Harcourt, 1961), 165–68.
17. The “New South” refers to southeastern United States as reconceived by many of its leaders in an effort to overcome the legacy of slavery, civil war, and the limitations of a one-crop agricultural economy. It became, in the words of one scholar, “the symbol that expressed [the] passage from one kind of civilization to another”—though a symbol with “a blurred and ambiguous meaning.” Paul M. Galston, The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 4.


21. The highway construction project is the proposed Northern Arc, a remnant of a proposal first introduced in the 1970s to build a 200-mile Outer Perimeter encircling the region. The Arc, which would have connected I-85 and I-75 in the northern suburbs, became a campaign issue in 2002, and is seen as having contributed to the defeat of incumbent Governor Roy Barnes. The development project is a proposed mixed-use development featuring major discount retailers ("big box" stores) on a former industrial site along Moreland Avenue, in the historically black neighborhood of Edgewood, just south of a hip urbanist enclave known as Little Five Points and the affluent, predominantly white neighborhood of Inman Park.

22. The executive summaries of these surveys are: Atlanta Regional Commission, VISION 2020: A Shared Vision for the Atlanta Region (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta Regional Commission, 1993), and Atlanta Regional Commission, Platforms for Progress: Atlanta Regional Goals for Today... Indicators for Tomorrow (Atlanta, Georgia: Atlanta Regional Commission, 2003). I also examined the complete data set for Platforms for Progress survey, which was the first statistically significant survey of its kind in the region, with a margin of error, 3.9 percent (Richard Clark, Report on the Public Opinion Research for the Atlanta Regional Commission's "Platforms for Progress" Project (Athens, Georgia: Carl Vinson Institute for Government, University of Georgia, 2002).

23. The study was guided in part by the ethnographic theory of Clifford Geertz, who appropriated from Gilbert Ryle the notion of "thick description." For Geertz, understanding a cultural framework is a matter of picking through "piled-up structures of inference and implication." See Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6–10.

24. For example, Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson and Angel O. Torres (eds), Sprawl City: Race, Politics, and Planning in Atlanta (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000).


26. In the Vision 2020 survey conducted by the ARC in the early 1990s, 71 percent of those who returned the questionnaire supported diversity in general, as embodied in the statement: "Exposure to other cultural traditions through festivals, cultural centers, entertainment, the arts, language instruction and education would make my life more interesting and richer." 94 percent agreed with the statement: "I would like to see more livable neighborhoods where residents have a sense of shared community (local shopping and services, sidewalks, schools, parks, a feeling of safety, people out and about)." Atlanta Regional Commission, VISION 2020, 5, 29.

27. 78 percent of respondents to the Vision 2020 survey agreed with the statement: "I believe that affordable housing for a range of income levels should be made available." Atlanta Regional Commission, VISION 2020, 9. Given the typical response to apartment buildings, it would be interesting to know how many in the region would agree with the statement: "I would be willing to have affordable housing in my neighborhood."


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