

The Theology of NIMBY

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The people of Holy Trinity Riverbend Anglican Church in Edmonton, Canada, thought they were doing the right thing. The parish had agreed to lease part of its property to a local non-profit agency to build housing for the homeless. However, the neighbourhood erupted in fury. The response from many residents was “No way, not here. What’s going to happen to my property value? I came here to get away from people like that.” There were threats to disrupt services and threats of violence against church members. The words “No homeless” were sprayed on the church building. Although the church had the legal right to proceed, the bishop eventually decided to withdraw from the project while affirming the church’s ongoing intention to use the land for its mission to end homelessness (Sison 2013).

This story is a classic example of the phenomenon known as NIMBY. “NIMBY, or ‘Not In My Backyard,’ has become a catchphrase for middle- and upper-class resistance to incorporating the disenfranchised into established neighbourhoods” (Brown 2004, 31). Any proposal to locate activities involving marginalized groups will inevitably provoke opposition from neighbouring property owners. The land use planning process feeds this opposition by creating numerous opportunities for determined property owners to obstruct a project, no matter how socially necessary it might be.

At least three motives for such opposition can be identified. Each of them has theological implications, and each can be addressed using concepts drawn from the Bible.

1. Greed

The first motive is an apparently rational concern with declining property values. The empirical evidence suggests that this concern is usually overstated. “This is an issue that has

been studied extensively. In 26 U.S. and Canada studies, 25 studies showed social housing – including housing for people with mental illness – had no impact on property values, and the 26th study was inconclusive. In fact, property values near social housing typically rose faster than property values in other areas” (HomeComing Community Choice Coalition 2005, 27).

However, such an impact has been known to occur (Galster 2003, 177), and when it does, the property owners have a legitimate grievance because, in effect, something they own has been taken away without their consent. Robert Lake analyzes the issue in terms of classical economics:

Out of the land development process is established a land use pattern, a distribution of people and businesses, and a landscape in which consumers have invested and from which producers have profited. The resulting landscape is soon overcome with problems: low-density development; suburban sprawl; inadequate services; socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic segregation; traffic congestion; and environmental pollution. Proliferation of these problems threatens the profitability of subsequent rounds of land investment, inviting intervention by the state through the planning process. When planners, and the state generally, attempt to address these problems, they encounter opposition from consumers who invested in the landscape as it was, in the first round of the land development process. State intervention to maintain the rate of profit in subsequent rounds of capital investment encounters opposition from the consumers who accounted for the profitability of the first round. In correcting the mistakes of the land development process, the state rarely requires the property capitals who invested in the first round to return their profit, but it frequently expects the consumption communities that were created – and that made the investment profitable – to accept substantial change in the nature of the community. When communities object to such changes, we call it NIMBY. (Lake 1993, 89)

In other words, the property owners bargained for certain benefits, paid a fair price accordingly, and then felt that the rules had been changed in the middle of the game.

The problem in classical economic terms is that the benefits of the facility are spread over the whole of society while the cost is being paid disproportionately by the neighbours. “NIMBY is described as opposition against something one believes to be good for society at large: something that one would not like to be without, like railways and rehabilitation centres. This

public good carries some risk but while the benefit is spread over a large population, the cost (or risk) is concentrated to a few – those living in the vicinity of the sited facility” (Hermansson 2007, 25). Therefore the NIMBY response is not entirely irrational. “It is not unreasonable to say that from the risk exposed’s point of view, refusing to cooperate is a rational choice” (Hermansson 2007, 27).

The unfairness becomes more serious when, as is often the case, facilities are concentrated in neighbourhoods that are already disadvantaged. Ethicist H  l  ne Hermansson writes that “a crucial concern is to minimize social costs. A location for a siting may then be decided according to who demands the least compensation. There is a clear danger of exploitation of poor communities in a process like that. Disadvantaged persons may be willing to accept larger risks for less compensation. Investigations have for instance shown that the risk generating activities in the USA are placed in neighbourhoods where people are black or/and poor” (Hermansson 2007, 32).

Hermansson goes on to point out that even within the limits of classical economic theory, NIMBY concerns should not always prevail. “Clearly, in siting situations the ethical questions are salient. And even though I have argued for the NIMBY’s rights not to be unfairly exposed to risks, it should not be misunderstood as saying that NIMBYs should always go free from hosting risky facilities. Such an approach would in fact facilitate unjust distribution. Some communities may not manage to protest although they are not in favour of having the risky activity in their vicinity. Others will have better chances of affecting the decision and will then go free from risks. The central question then is with what justification risk generating activities are sited in places where people protest the least” (Hermansson 2007, 32-33). Thus, in Edmonton’s

privileged Riverbend neighbourhood, NIMBY interests should have given way to the need of the larger community for a solution to the problem of homelessness.

But from a Christian point of view, more needs to be said. There is a fundamental theological problem with traditional economic analysis. Its focus is too narrow: “economics today recognizes only one kind of object for study – objects of use. Entities related to production or consumption receive an economic value (price) only when they are paid for and used. But the economic tasks of people and societies include more than simply producing and consuming; they also include care. Care is an authentic element of the oldest definitions of the Greek word *oikonomia*, or ‘economy.’ . . . Economic life consists of more than producing and consuming; it also consists of sustaining and keeping” (Goudzwaard and de Lange 1995, 56). *Oikonomia* was distinguished by Aristotle from *chrematistics* which is “the branch of political economy relating to the manipulation of property and wealth so as to maximize short-term monetary exchange value to the owner” (Daly and Cobb 1989, 138). Modern “economics” is really “chrematistics,” and therefore fails to place a value on care.

On a practical level, the economist Henry George proposed a remedy for the chrematistic failure to acknowledge the true value of land (Daly and Cobb 1989, 256-57). A Georgian land tax would confiscate the economic rent (that is, the unearned portion of the land’s value) and thereby stop land from being traded as a commodity. The value that is due to the owner’s efforts would be unaffected. This would remove the economic incentive for NIMBYism because it is the economic rent that is threatened when neighbouring uses change. The value of land in Riverbend for which the homeowners paid, and which they expect to recoup with a profit, is mainly not its “value-in-use” but the premium that others are willing to pay due to its location. If

this value were kept in the public realm, the selective confiscation that gives rise to the legitimate grievance behind NIMBY would not occur.

The chrematistic view of property is what Brueggemann describes in the Old Testament context as the “royal/urban” view. “This view affirmed that ‘haves’ are entitled to have . . . Possession gives legitimacy, and it is legitimate to so construct social values and social procedures as well as law so that haves may have and legitimately seek more. The right of the have-nots . . . is nil. They must rely upon a generosity and charity upon which they have no claim.” The contrasting view found in the Bible is the “covenantal/prophetic” view. “It holds that the haves and the have-nots are bound in community to each other, that viable life depends upon the legitimate respect, care and maintenance of the have-nots and upon restraint of the haves so that the needs and rights of the disadvantaged take priority over the yearnings of the advantaged” (Brueggemann 1994 , 276-77).

Brueggemann gives a vivid example of this contrast in his exegesis of the book of Isaiah. (Brueggemann 2011, 101-04). Isaiah is reluctantly compelled to condemn the “acquisitive commoditization” that has taken over in Jerusalem. He proclaims: “Woe to you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no room for anyone but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” (Isa. 5:8). The applicability of this text to the contemporary NIMBY situation is almost eerie. Isaiah warns (correctly) that Jerusalem is in for destruction if this behaviour continues.

Similarly in the New Testament, Jesus’ commentary on property division in Luke 12:13-31 “is addressed to those of ‘little faith’ who are blind to the well-being that is given by the provision of God” (Brueggemann 1994 , 283). It is this divine gift that is overlooked by chrematistic economics. Brueggemann sums up: “The Bible is not ideological about property.

It does not affirm or resist capitalist or communist schemes. It rather urges a quite alternative reading of human community that can only be described as covenantal. Property must be managed, valued and distributed so that every person of the community is honored and so that the well-being of each is intimately tied to that of the others” (Brueggemann 1994, 282).

2. Fear

There is a darker, less rational aspect to the NIMBY phenomenon. “Although much community opposition has an economic motivation, there are also noneconomic issues related to prejudices and ethics that can create staunch opposition to assisted housing” (Galster 2003, 12). The phrase “those people” is the telltale sign of prejudice familiar to everyone who has experienced this kind of controversy.

Richard Sennett offers an explanation for this inchoate fear of the other: “what modern researchers have uncovered, particularly in affluent city and suburban areas, is that men frame for themselves a belief in emotional cohesion and shared values with each other that has little to do with their actual social experiences together. The specific contents of this belief is the new puritan ethic” (Sennett 2008, 174). A fictional community solidarity is projected that has little to do with objective reality. Those who are perceived as “other” to this notional community are forcibly excluded. The purpose of this myth is to avoid conflict by preventing residents from having to actually deal with one another. “The image of the community is purified of all that might convey a feeling of difference, let alone conflict, in who ‘we’ are. In this way the myth of community solidarity is a purification ritual” (Sennett 2008, 175).

When this myth is threatened by the prospective arrival of those who are different, the result is anger and even violence. “We do not expel this black family from our neighbourhood in order to make the neighbourhood a nicer place, although that is what we tell ourselves. What we

are afraid of is that something ‘other’ will come to matter to us, and then we might be hurt by our own exploration of ‘otherness’” (Sennett 2008, 178). Although this phenomenon can occur in any community, it is particularly prevalent in affluent ones. “Material abundance in a community provides the power for enforcing a myth of coherent community. . . . When much less *must* be shared, there is a much smaller fund of experiences on which individuals can draw to assay the character of each other . . . Abundance, in other words, increases the power to create isolation in communal contacts at the same time that it opens up an avenue by which men can easily conceive of their social relatedness in terms of their similarity rather than their need for each other” (Sennett 2008, 179-80).

The urban planning system tends to reinforce this irrational fear of the other while discounting the more realistic fears of those who are being excluded. “Official urban discourses (those produced by City Councils, Departments of Planning, Police Departments, mainstream media) tend to legitimize and privilege the fears of the bourgeoisie, their fears of those Others who might invade or disrupt their homely spaces, their *habitus*. We rarely hear from those folks whom official discourse classifies as Other, about *their* fears: the fear, for example, of being hungry, homeless, jobless, of having no future in the city, of being unable to provide for one’s children, the fear of not being accepted in a strange environment, the fear of police or citizen violence against them” (Sandercock 2003, 124).

David Sibley traces this tendency in urban planning back to nineteenth-century Britain where the working class was associated with physical defilement. The definition of the “other” has shifted since then but the mechanism still operates. “The imagery of defilement, which locates people on the margins or in residual spaces and social categories, is now more likely to

be applied to ‘imperfect people’, . . . a list of ‘others’ including the mentally disabled, the homeless, prostitutes, and some racialized minorities.” (Sibley 1995, 69)

Lois Takahashi, in her research on homelessness and AIDS, draws on explanations of stigma developed by the social sciences. “The classic sociological notion of stigma describes those processes of social relations that lead to and reproduce definitions of outsider and Other, which, in turn, result in processes of stigmatization which define specific groups as being undesirable, dangerous, unsettling, or disturbing” (Takahashi 1998, 51). Her analysis parallels that of Sennett using slightly different terminology. “In general, we can think about stigmatization as comprising systemic and systematic social rejection acting to create and maintain boundaries. Such boundaries help to define ‘us’ by constructing individuals and groups which are ‘abnormal’” (Takahashi 1998, 52). She identifies three “dimensions” common to the way stigmatized groups are perceived: non-productivity, dangerousness, and personal culpability. All three are largely rooted in prejudice and misinformation rather than objective truth (Takahashi 1998, 57-62).

The stigmatization of individuals extends to the facilities that serve them: “the embodiment of stigma results in facilities and their immediate vicinities also being defined as non-productive, dangerous, and evoking lack of personal responsibility” (Takahashi 1998, 76). The result is that “wider society holds claim to the desired spaces of home and community, relegating homelessness and HIV/AIDS to lesser valued places. Community becomes synonymous with homogeneity, while difference is equated with danger and deviance” (Takahashi 1998, 79).

This phenomenon is prophetically addressed and challenged by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Both the Old and New Testaments prominently feature stories such as Ruth, Jonah, the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) in which

the fear of the other is overcome and the foreigner is vindicated. Brueggemann identifies “exclusionary antineighborliness” as the evil specifically condemned in the book of Jeremiah (Brueggemann 2011, 105-08). Jeremiah is an outsider in Jerusalem himself, and he clearly sees that the city’s elite are neglecting the Law’s call for hospitality and generosity to “the alien, the orphan, and the widow.” God asked Jeremiah, “Shall I not punish?” and to this day “the question keeps sounding: shall I not punish? And we answer tentatively to acknowledge that the city is in jeopardy.”

The good news is that because the fear of the outsider is irrational, it often melts away once the outsider becomes the neighbour. The key is persistence on the part of those advocating for change.

Many supportive housing providers can tell heart-warming stories of former opponents who have befriended tenants, greet staff warmly on the street, and go out to public meetings to voice their support for more supportive housing. Studies also show that the people who live close to supportive housing are the most likely to support it. For example, an American study compared the attitudes of people living near group homes for adults with mental illness to those living in neighbourhoods without a group home. The study found that only 10% of group home neighbours were dissatisfied with its presence (although more were dissatisfied with the process of the group home being established.) Only 3% of group home neighbours were concerned about “distressing incidents,” compared to 63% who did not live in a neighbourhood with a group home. In fact, neighbours in contact with group homes were less worried about property values, home sales, neighbourhood crime, resident safety and children’s safety, than those who had no direct experience with group homes. (HomeComing Community Choice Coalition 2005, 15)

3. Hope

Mingled with the greed and fear of NIMBY in many cases is another motivation, a justifiable concern with the integrity of the local community. “NIMBY should not be universally dismissed as a phenomenon based purely on unfounded fears and stereotypes. In some cases, it may be a legitimate public reaction to badly designed and implemented housing

policies. Context matters” (Galster 2003, 202). In fact, “both privileged and disadvantaged communities have begun to (re)define NIMBY strategies as collective social mobilization, arguing that such efforts demand and expand local autonomy from institutions and structures deemed to be marginalizing and oppressive” (Takahashi 1998, 195).

People have a legitimate interest in the physical configuration of their community. “There could be many legitimate reasons for opposing a housing proposal: concerns about height, density, design, parking, access or other characteristics of the proposed building or site plan. You may not agree with these concerns, but they are not discriminatory. It is only discrimination if the opposition is based on the characteristics of the people who will be housed” (HomeComing Community Choice Coalition 2005, 9).

The structure of the planning approval process may appear to ignore these legitimate grievances and in the process create new ones. Takahashi notes that “community opposition may be characterized as marginalization or oppression through procedure. That is, as communities are called upon to become hosts for human services, their notification that siting is being considered or proposed is often seen and characterized by these residents as their effective exclusion from the facility siting process, and, moreover, as having had a decision forced upon them without their participation or approval” (Takahashi 1998, 202). This perception may be valid in that the land use planning process narrowly circumscribes the kind of concern that is considered legitimate.

For both institutions and the public, the modernist traditions governing land use control “risk” to human health and property values. . . . Because there are few other legally accepted claims to make against capitalist development, risk frames the democratic dialogue surrounding land management and social change, even for land use changes that have nothing to do with toxics or hazards, such as homeless shelters, AIDS hospices, or even simply low-income housing . . . Risk assessment, even if it is good science well conducted, well explained, and well communicated among groups does not alone legitimate what are (or should be)

democratic decisions about neighborhoods . . . Where communities see public institutions and professionals as potential sell-outs, public managers may see what we call “NIMBY,” the famous Not In My Backyard syndrome where people put their own concerns ahead of public interests, or even the interests of their neighbors. Whatever the risks really are, these two positions create a shaky basis for attempts at collaboration with any community; neither side has much reason to accept the other’s knowledge or equity claims. (Schweitzer and Kim 2009, 48)

In contrast, Leonie Sandercock proposes an approach to urban planning that fully accommodates human concerns:

The human spirit at the heart of planning engages every day in a dance of faith and hope, engages in a struggle to moderate greed with generosity, to conjoin private ambition with civic ambition, to care for others as much as or more than we care about ourselves, to think as much or more about future generations as we do about our own, to thoughtfully weigh the importance of memory alongside the need for change, to greet a newcomer in the street rather than ignoring her, or worse, insulting him, or telling them to go back where they came from (Sandercock 2006, 66).

Concern for the well-being of one’s neighbourhood is a good thing, provided it is not accompanied by a lack of concern for everyone else. Bryan Norton and Bruce Hannon “see place-centeredness not as a failure of rationality, but as an expression of their commitment to one’s own home and community. Our challenge is to accept these expressions of place preference and to integrate them into a larger, regional, and global community” (Norton and Hannon 1997, 229).

Coming from a legal perspective, Benjamin Davy reaches a similar conclusion. “‘Orthodox’ criteria . . . require a development to be profitable, functional, safe and legal. These criteria derive from the ideology of environmental efficiency. On the level of international law, the ideology of environmental efficiency has been confronted by an ideology of environmental compassion. . . . Compassion is a feeling of sympathy for another’s misfortune. Environmental compassion does not neglect the local pain which can be caused by global pains, but speaks to the victims of unfair burdens” (Davy 1997, 348). Based on “a compassionate examination of the

‘orthodox’ criteria,” he argues for social arrangements that are “not designed to dominate, exclude, or marginalize” and are based on the criteria of reciprocity, sustainability, trust, and consensus (Davy 1997, 354-55).

Norton and Hannon introduce “sense of place” as a hermeneutic for discerning which expressions of NIMBY are legitimate.

What, then, are we to make of the NIMBY syndrome and the local sentiments associated with it? While we cannot deny that NIMBY sentiments can express themselves in overly selfish and shortsighted ways, we have nevertheless argued that a successful approach to sustainability must be built upon these sentiments which express a local “sense of place.” . . .

Using our theory as a guide, we are able to draw two general distinctions that help us to separate legitimate exercise of local power from cases where local obstructionism results in environmental policies that undermine the overall public good and local community values.

(1) It is important to distinguish economic NIMBYism from true, *place-oriented* NIMBYism. . . . If the NIMBY sentiment is accompanied by an active search for, and articulation of, positive, local sense-of-place values, then we regard it as headed in the right direction. (Norton and Hannon 1997, 243)

Norton and Hannon’s second distinction is based on whether the sense of place is exclusively local. They identify two categories:

“NIMBY A: You may not do x in my backyard; therefore, do x in someone else’s backyard.

NIMBY B: You may not do x in my backyard; furthermore, if you cannot find some other community that democratically chooses to accept x, then x will cease” (Norton and Hannon 1997, 244).

NIMBY B exhibits a “fuller sense of place.” It focuses not on transferring the problem to someone else, but on questioning whether the proposed use is desirable or necessary at all. Some uses are not, even if they are motivated by good intentions. “If NIMBYism represents opposition not to societal goals but to the interests of capital, then as an expression of place-specific

interests, NIMBYism reflects the role of place in the mobilization and empowerment of community resistance against the interests of capital. . . . The facility siting strategy concentrates costs on host communities, as compared to the alternative strategy of restructuring production so as to produce less waste, which in the short run concentrates costs on capital. Locating homeless shelters similarly concentrates costs on host communities, relative to an alternative strategy that seeks to alleviate joblessness and reduce the incidence of poverty through capital restructuring” (Lake 1993, 88).

The theme of “sense of place” has been current in theology as well as the social sciences. Wendell Berry’s writings feature this theme prominently. “A culture capable of preserving land and people can be made only within a relatively stable and enduring relationship between a local people and its place. Community cultures made in this way would necessarily differ, and sometimes radically so, from one place to another, because places differ. This is the true and necessary pluralism. . . . And if these cultures are of any value and worthy of any respect, they will not be elective – not determined by mere wishes – but will be formed in response to local nature and local needs” (Berry 1992, 171)

Sallie McFague is another theologian who is interested in this theme. She finds hope in a “turn to space and place” in which traditional Christianity’s quasi-Gnostic withdrawal from the material world is giving place to a recovery of the truth that we are bodies that are placed in space (McFague 2008, 124). The Church of England in its *Faithful Cities* report aligns itself with political communitarianism which “proposes two distinct arguments: first, that community is valuable and that the question is how to get and sustain it; and, second, that people are fundamentally related to each other spatially, in everyday encounters, in shared interests and in their attachments” (Dinham 2008, 2169).

Brueggemann draws a distinction between a sense of place and a sense of space. “‘Space’ means an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority. . . . But ‘place’ is a very different matter. Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations” (Brueggemann 1977, 5). This hermeneutic clarifies the kind of situation where NIMBY may be justified: “If utility for production and consumption is not a norm for landedness, then we are given some new pause about urban development and ‘progress’ which claims the right to relocate and reassign people, to move them from storied place to history-less space” (Brueggemann 1977, 195).

In the Bible “the land possessed or the land promised is by definition a communal concern. It will not do to make the individual person the unit of decision-making because in both testaments the land possessed or promised concerns the whole people. Radical decisions in obedience are of course the stuff of biblical faith, but now it cannot be radical decisions in a private world without brothers and sisters, without pasts and futures, without turf to be managed and cherished as a partner in the decisions. The unit of decision-making is the community and that always with reference to the land” (Brueggemann 1977, 186).

Berry elaborates on the definition of community. “By community, I mean the commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place and wishing to continue to do so. To put it another way, community is a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature . . . Lacking the interest of or in such a community, private life becomes merely a sort of reserve in which individuals defend their ‘right’ to act as they please and attempt to limit or destroy the ‘rights’ of other individuals to act as they please” (Berry 1992, 120).

Unlike the modernist view, Berry's more expansive definition of community leaves room for hospitality. The commonwealth is locally focused, but being based on interdependence, it is not exclusionary. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh apply this concept to the issue of homelessness. They call for "worldview-sensitive housing" that "is committed to hospitality. This means that such housing is developed in the context of broader concerns for the common good, civility, and neighbourliness" (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 2008, 140). There is still room for hope that the people of Holy Trinity Riverbend will be able to come up with such a solution.

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