

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL  
KEYNOTE ADDRESS / THE PHILADELPHIA SOCIETY FALL REGIONAL MEETING  
CINCINNATI, OHIO / OCTOBER 7, 2011



Good evening. It's an honor and a privilege to be with you tonight, and I want to thank Bill Campbell and The Philadelphia Society for the invitation. I confess that I have found this assignment daunting. To speak of Beauty in our relativistic culture---even in what I imagine to be comparatively sympathetic company---is to practically beg for either heated disagreement or weary indifference. Perhaps only to speak about God would be more quixotic; and so this evening, I will try to do both.

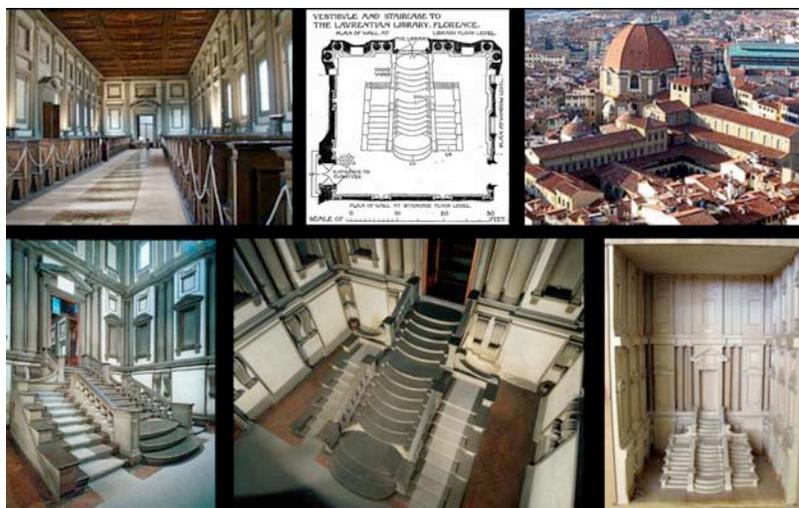
I claim no special expertise in either Beauty or God. I am by trade a full-time teacher and part-time practitioner of urban place-making; and while aesthetic and even religious sensibility are no small parts of urban place-making, they are hardly the stuff of my day-to-day routine, which (alas) is much more about engaging and battling bureaucracies and bureaucratic mindsets than about either contemplation or artistic endeavor. Moreover, *everyone* has an opinion about both Beauty and God.

Nevertheless, though I am not presuming that my own thinking on these subjects is necessarily any more insightful than that of any of you here this evening, neither do I wish to suggest that all our thinking about Beauty and God are simply subjective, or that all opinions about these subjects are of equal merit, or that our speech about these subjects does not refer to something other than ourselves; because these subjects do in fact refer to *something other* than ourselves, something other than ourselves that it is important for us to know. But it is precisely because I am *not* an expert in these subjects that I wish to speak to you personally, because if some of your experience resonates with some of mine, perhaps together we may advance a little bit in our search for an understanding of reality that is both true and shared.

Here then is how I am going to proceed. Since there are probably few things more cognitively dissonant than prosaic discourse about Beauty, I want to say a little bit about what Beauty is, and then show you very briefly two examples of beautiful things---interestingly enough, not American things---the recurring and sustained contemplation of which have enlightened and re-directed my life. Then I want to talk briefly about America the Beautiful, show some images of Beautiful America, and make some concluding remarks. I'm thinking that this will be more than enough for about thirty minutes, and will give us something to think about in anticipation of tomorrow.

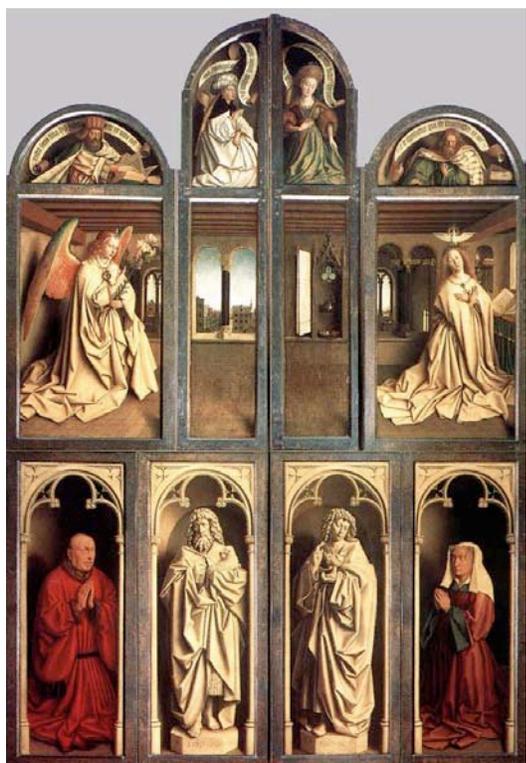
What can one say objectively about beauty in a culture where it is widely taken for granted that beauty is subjective---or, as we say, "in the eye of the beholder?" See if what I say next makes sense, and if it accords with your own experience: Whether in a painting, or a photograph, or a piece of music or sculpture, or in a building or public space, our encounter with something beautiful pleases us---often instantly and arrestingly, but sometimes with growing appreciation. I think most of us share an intuitive understanding that beautiful things are well-made; were they poorly-made, we would not find or understand them to be beautiful. Beautiful things somehow both embody clearly and reveal the essence of the thing they are. In their essence---and even if dynamic in their particulars, as some things are---beautiful things appear to us complete; we do not think of changing them, because we think they could not be altered but for the worse. Beautiful things not only attract us, they make us grateful. Beautiful things in a certain way *judge us*; they change us, they make us want to be better than we are. If I may say:

beautiful things *elevate us*. Nevertheless, within a strictly natural and empirical frame of reference, the apparent completeness of beautiful things is an illusion; for scientists tell us, and I presume truly, that nothing in nature is “complete.” But it is precisely for this reason that metaphysical realist philosophers and theologians and artists insist that beauty is properly understood as *transcendental*. Beauty is not something we experience *apart* from nature, or as something that *contradicts* nature; rather, beauty *supervenes* upon nature. It is for this reason that I would go so far as to say that Beauty may be understood in part as *the presence of God in things, experienced through the senses*. I don’t have time this evening to talk about what I have called elsewhere the “structure” of divine-human encounters. Suffice it to say that the sacred manifests itself to human beings where it wills, often (but not always) as beauty; but perhaps more importantly, our encounter with the sacred prompts *us* to carefully make things as offerings to the sacred in which we also ask the sacred to make itself present. But this is a complex dynamic I can’t pursue here; so instead I will ask you to consider two beautiful things . . .



The first is the vestibule and stair to the Laurentian Library in Florence, by Michelangelo and various assistants. The Library itself is part of a complex of buildings associated with the basilica and monastery of San Lorenzo, and was built over several decades in the 16<sup>th</sup> century according to designs by Michelangelo as interpreted and executed by Bartolomeo Ammanati. I first saw it in 1980 as a student, but only briefly. Even then, it made a powerful impression upon me; and when I returned to Florence in

the spring of 2000 for a more extended stay, I spent several hours on two different occasions in the vestibule, just drawing and looking at the room, and especially the stair. I am not expert in interpreting the mannerist details of the vestibule walls, which are remarkable for Michelangelo's employment of almost 7/8-round engaged columns---necessary, it turns out, because he was building atop existing walls. Rather, it is the stair in relationship to the rest of the room that captivates me as it has captivated countless others. It flows statically (yes, precisely) from the library doorway above, a sculpted mass of proportioned functional redundancy---among other things, three stairs instead of one, treads that turn into low side rails---all of which alerted me when I first saw it to recognize that the essence of ascent and descent, and the stairways on which these occur, is not simply a matter of function. Ascent and descent are also acts fraught with potential and real symbolic import, acts that warrant the loving attention that Michelangelo (and his patrons) paid to the design and making of this stair, a stair (not coincidentally) ascending to a realm of knowledge.



The second beautiful thing is the Ghent Altarpiece, begun in 1418 by Hubert van Eyck, and completed by his brother Jan van Eyck in 1432. I have been pondering this painting now for some thirty years, though I travelled to Ghent and saw it for the first time only about ten years ago. Since that time I have been back almost every year, graduate urban design students in tow, to spend time with a masterpiece of western painting perhaps unrivalled in its integration of the largest of themes---that theme here being the entire Christian narrative of salvation---and the very smallest of natural and iconographic details. A resident or visitor to Ghent in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century entering the

cathedral of Saint John (now the cathedral of St. Bavo) on a weekday, and proceeding to the side chapel of the Joost Vijdt family, would have encountered this 11-foot-tall by 7.5-foot-wide set of oil-painted

wood panels sitting above the side chapel altar. When closed—i.e., as depicted here---the following scenes are depicted for the viewer:

- at the very top, the Hebrew prophets Zaccariah and Micah and two pagan sybils who foretold the coming of the Jewish messiah;
- in the middle register, an Annunciation Scene, with the angel Gabriel greeting Mary in a room that appears to be overlooking the city of Ghent;
- and in the lower register, in the center, depictions of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist as sculptures---recall that the painting was situated in the Cathedral of St. John---and on the left depictions of the painting's patron Joost Vijdt, and on the right his wife Lysbette Borluut, both in prayer.

[An aside. I tell my urban design students that the formula for beautiful urbanism is quite simple, and consists of three things: 1) a community of good brick and stone masons; 2) a public square in which laws are promulgated and public punishments are executed; and 3) a class of prosperous merchants concerned about their eternal salvation.]

That is what the Ghent Altarpiece looked like during the week, when closed. But on Sundays and feast days in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, it would be opened up to reveal this:



11-feet-high and a full 15-feet-wide, a depiction of the major figures of salvation history in the upper registers; and in the lower register nothing less than a depiction of redeemed humanity united in praise of God, in a heaven depicted as both a New Eden and a New Jerusalem.



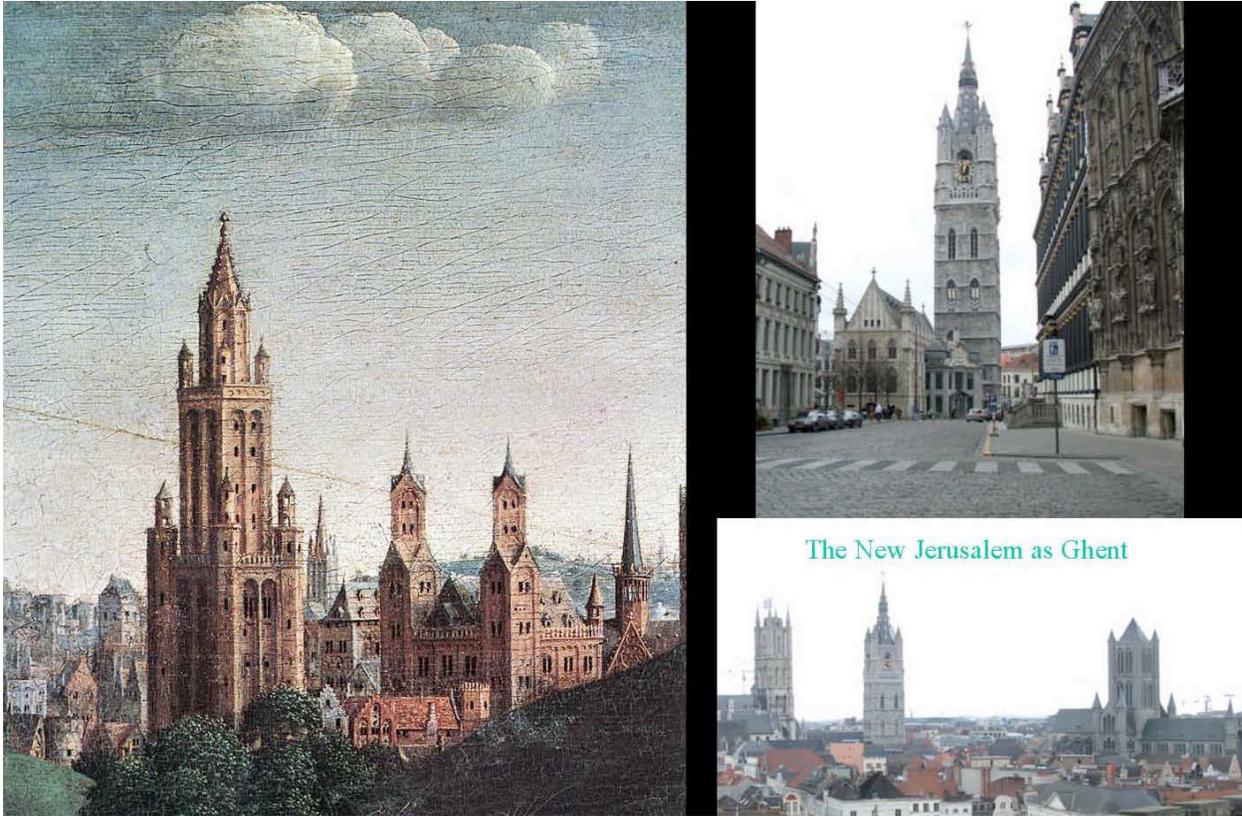
I have long been (and remain) enamored of the lower register of the painting, primarily for its depiction of the sheer variety of peoples and vocations called to the Heavenly communion. These include not only apostles and the martyrs, but also pilgrims, just judges and knights, men and women religious,



and righteous pagans who earnestly sought truth and goodness through reason, each saved by the blood of the Lamb shed for all into the common sacramental cup. But I have also admired the lower register for its depiction of Paradise as both

a City and a Garden, which has always suggested to me that in Paradise the tensions between the goodness of human belonging and the goodness of human freedom have been overcome without losing the genuine goodness of each---that in the providence of God, through the sacrifice of Himself for all mankind, our human tendencies to injure ourselves both by over-ordered tyrannical governance and by anarchic individual pursuits are resolved. And I have





always loved the sacramental sensibility on display in the Van Eyck's depiction of the skyline of New Jerusalem, which bears a striking (and touching) resemblance to the skyline of Ghent, both then and now.



As much as I continue to love the lower register for both its narrative and its painterly skill, it is the sophistication of the upper register that has captivated me in recent years. I will mention only in passing the fabulous and knowing ambiguity of the identity of the central figure represented as God

Almighty: Is it Christ? Is it God the Father? Or is it both? Indeed, is it intended as a depiction of the Trinity Itself? The Van Eycks' juxtaposition of both theologically and iconographically correct details in unprecedented ways suggests that their purpose in depicting the central figure as they have is less an exercise in depicting ambiguity as it is an exercise in depicting---as best as artists can---not only a mystery but The Mystery.

But set that issue aside. Look instead at the unbelievable detail of the brocade on the robe of the angelic organist---or even the organ itself.



Or, ponder the figures of John the Baptist on the right, Mary on the left, and God Almighty in the center:



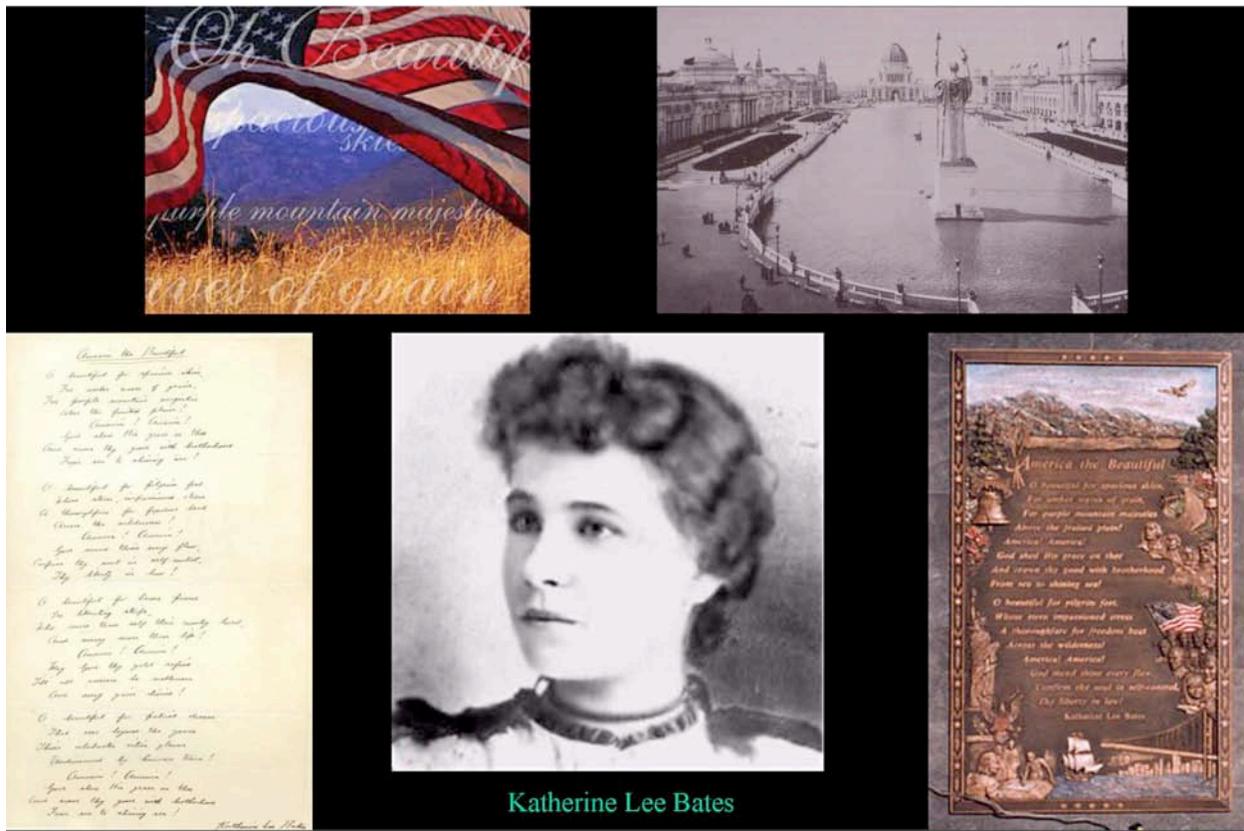
Look at John's camel-hairshirt underneath his be-jeweled robe; and at Mary's crown, and the details of her own more elaborate robe;



and look at God Almighty's crystal scepter; and the details of his three-tiered tiara; and the details of the tapestry at his back; and even the details of his fingernails---imagine: God's fingernails!---which, alas, you cannot really see at this scale.



The Ghent Altarpiece’s combination of artistic skill and narrative sophistication is stunning, in person literally breath-taking; and its origins and appearance in northern Europe at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century seems itself a bit of a mystery. Jan van Eyck lived long and was known widely. But of his older brother Hubert, thought chiefly responsible for most of the altarpiece, almost nothing is known but for the Ghent Altarpiece itself.



Katherine Lee Bates

At this point, let us shift gears and look west. The theme of our conference is “America the Beautiful.” It has been my great pleasure over the last several days to revisit the lyrics to “America the Beautiful,” and is my privilege as the keynote speaker to have the first opportunity to briefly ponder aloud that most lovely eponymous hymn. “America the Beautiful” was first a poem, the idea for which occurred to its author, Wellesley College English professor Katherine Lee Bates, at the age of thirty-three, in the summer of 1893 at the summit of Pike’s Peak near Colorado Springs, Colorado, where she was teaching a summer course at Colorado College. Having been powerfully impressed by her train ride across the

American mid-west—including a stop in Chicago at the dazzling White City of the Columbian Exposition, and a ride through the wheat fields of Kansas---the poem was originally entitled “Pike’s Peak,” but was published for the first time in 1895 in a church publication called *The Congregationalist* under the title “America.” It was not set to Samuel Ward’s now familiar tune until 1910, at which time it was published as “America the Beautiful.”

For good reason “America the Beautiful” has been included in every modern Protestant and Catholic hymnal I have ever seen; and any acquainted only with its first verse know much, but miss a lot. Though suffused with orthodox Christian themes, “America the Beautiful” is arguably the least sectarian of hymns; rare even are the non-Christians who take offense at it, indeed who do not embrace it warmly. And why would they not embrace it? Bates’ poem glories in the grandeur of nature that belongs to every human being apart from creed---majestic mountains, fruited plains, shining seas---and in human achievement that is the patrimony of all Americans and would-be Americans: a thoroughfare for freedom beaten across the wilderness, waves of grain, gleaming cities. Yet with this national beauty and national abundance come costs and obligations, as well as promise of even greater things to come if we but remain steadfast in our national vocation: our gold refined and our flaws mended by God’s grace; our souls confirmed in self-control; our liberty confirmed in law; our success measured with nobleness; our good crowned with brotherhood.

And here I am going to begin an automated slide show; but before I do, I want to advise you about what you will be seeing. I remarked earlier that Beauty is not my only concern as a professor of traditional architecture and urban design. Nevertheless, it is *a* concern; and even though I spend much more of my time in the United States than in Italy or Belgium---happily so, I would add---America is not without its own beauties; and as a professor of urban design, it is my happy duty to take my students to beautiful American places so that they can see first hand what beautiful urban places look like, the better for them to learn---so I hope---what it takes to make beautiful places today. But this has implications not only for urbanism, but also for the American landscape; and as part of their education, my urban design

students learn of an idea that is known in my discipline as a Rural-to-Urban Transect. I won't bore you with any of the technical diagrams urban designers create in order to convey the idea of a Rural-to-Urban Transect; I will merely characterize it as a diagram describing the real world fact that human beings are a certain kind of animal, and traditional towns and cities are how the human animal occupies the landscape in a variety of densities that is both good for human beings and that constitutes good human stewardship of the landscape. (I will also add that Katherine Lee Bates' poem, to the extent that it is about the physical environment, is a paean to what I mean by America's rural-to-urban transect.) The images that follow have all been taken by me, and are all of places in the United States. I have arranged them in a gradient from rural-to-urban, moving from "spacious skies" to natural to agricultural landscapes, and from small towns to big city neighborhoods to high-density urban centers. Everything you see however fits in the Rural-to-Urban Transect for which contemporary traditional architects and urbanists (including New Urbanists) are advocates; and I will run the slides without comment, for about seven minutes.

### **[SLIDE SHOW (part II)]**

Twice in the late-70s I attended Harvard University graduation ceremonies: first in 1976 for my own graduation from the Divinity School, on which occasion the commencement speaker was Daniel Patrick Moynihan, fresh from his fiery eloquence on the floor of the United Nations to which he was at that time America's pugnacious ambassador. The second, in 1978, was even more memorable, because that was the occasion of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's famous Harvard Address. But I also recall a memorable phrase uttered on that occasion. Conferring degrees upon the graduating members of the Law School, Harvard President Derek Bok charged them as future legislators and judges with the task of making "those wise constraints that make men free"---and that this charge to make "wise constraints that make men free" provoked audible laughter from the audience! I instantly and intuitively understood this as a sign of institutional and cultural decadence; but the phrase itself is memorable and, indeed, I have never forgotten it. I have been reminded of it just this week in America the Beautiful---"confirm thy soul

in self control, thy liberty in law”---and poignantly, because issues of good and bad law are crucial to the contemporary practice of urban design.

The beauty of America’s landscape, towns and cities is today in jeopardy because of a more than sixty-year old legal regime that mandates suburban sprawl development and consumes the American landscape, a legal regime that effectively prohibits development in the form of traditional towns and city neighborhoods. There are many reasons for this state of affairs; and I’m quite certain differing opinions in this very room about its merits. I suspect we will hear more about these issues in at least one of tomorrow’s sessions; and happily for me, that is not my concern tonight. But I do want to leave you with a couple of thoughts in anticipation of tomorrow’s discussions. I would like to suggest that debate in America today about the good life is in part a debate over whether the best life for human beings is fundamentally nomadic, or whether it is place-based. The American beauty-across-a-transect I have shown you tonight---whether on farms or in small towns or in city neighborhoods---is place-based. In contrast, post-1950 sprawl dissolves the place-based life, both the life in and of the landscape and the life in and of the town and city neighborhood.

Those of us who regard ourselves as conservatives have different assessments of sprawl, what to do about it, and how and whether to fight it. But it is conservative wisdom as old as Aristotle to recognize that the best life for individuals at any moment in history is the life of moral and intellectual excellence lived in community with others. And it is conservative wisdom as recent as T.S. Eliot that “there is no life that is not lived in community, and no community not lived in praise of God.” May God bless us all as we pursue our deliberations this weekend, and bless us each and everyone in our individual and communal vocations. Thank you very much . . .