A Ghetto’s Alleyways Become Streets of Art: Prague’s Art Nouveau Town

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The largest ghetto in Europe was once in a corner of the Old City in Prague. In the mid-nineteenth century Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, known as an “enlightened despot,” abolished the Jewish ghetto and renamed it Josefov, a district that was later incorporated into the City of Prague. After the ghetto was opened, however, poverty spread, and an increase in infectious diseases and rising death rate led to further redevelopment.

Art Nouveau styles popular in Europe at the time were incorporated into the new architectural designs. In addition, classical European and Slavic ethnic styles were intermixed with Celtic patterns, giving birth to an Art Nouveau Town unique to Prague.

Looking at cities today, we see that a narrow focus on economy and efficiency has led to towns with high crime rates. People in huge, cold, expressionless housing complexes live in Block ‘X’, Flat ‘Y’—as if now part of some code. This is the result of the relentless pursuit of economy and efficiency since the Industrial Revolution, as capitalists throughout the world have constructed factories and high-rise buildings with those sole criteria. We might view it as “Cartesianism” in architecture.

How, we might ask, should cities evolve in the future?

Cities are in essence “living” and therefore organic entities. Just as people have different faces and different tastes in fashion, cities cannot be constructed according to a single theory.

In this study of the Art Nouveau Town in Prague, I found that the city was somehow able to modernize its medieval lanes and alleyways and thereby preserve its artistic “small-street” character. This “small-street” character reflects both change and attachment. Having gone through many changes while still winning the affection of the people, Prague’s Art Nouveau Town has not lost its aura. Herein lies a hint for how we might envision cities of the future.