

Sorin Fellows Final Reflection

This summer, with the support of the Sorin Fellows Program, I carried out an independent research project on how Cincinnati is experienced at the pedestrian scale and what those conditions mean for the human person. I completed seven dedicated field studies through Downtown, Over-the-Rhine, the West End, Walnut Hills, Price Hill, Mount Adams, Mount Auburn, Corryville, and Camp Washington, with additional observation in eastern Newport and Bellevue. My work combined walking, photography, field observation, route and place documentation, conversations with civic leaders and staff, and volunteer service. I spoke with Council Member Mark Jeffreys and worked with Joshua Pines and members of Cincinnati's Innovation Team, including learning from efforts to provide free public water in heat-prone areas and reporting observations from the field. I also interned with the Diocese of Covington and other Thomas More students in planning youth and student-leadership retreats. At the center of the project was a question closely connected to the mission of the de Nicola Center: how can the built environment promote, or undermine, human dignity, authentic human freedom, and the common good?

Walking made those questions much more concrete. Over-the-Rhine was one of the clearest examples. The neighborhood is often discussed through the language of crime or danger, yet during the day I experienced a historic urban fabric with mature street trees, active streets, and many places that were genuinely pleasant to walk through. At the same time, vacant lots, surface parking, new development, and visible gentrification raised a harder question: whether development creates life simply by adding buildings, or whether it must repair and reconnect the existing fabric so that growth strengthens the life already present. One small image stayed with me: a row of trash bins placed directly on a brightly painted children's play area. It was a minor condition, but it felt like a metaphor, and it became a notable example of how even ordinary design and maintenance decisions can communicate what, and whom, a place appears to value.

The physical experience of walking also changed the way I understood authentic human freedom and the common good. Downtown's grid and landmarks made the urban core easier to navigate and physically smaller than I expected. Moving outward, however, hills, highways, wide roads, heat, limited shade, and breaks in the pedestrian network could make nearby neighborhoods feel much farther apart. A route may technically exist, but if reaching a school, park, church, service, or neighboring community requires dangerous traffic, extreme heat, or an illegible path, the existence of that route alone does not create meaningful freedom of movement. By contrast, eastern Newport and Bellevue felt comparatively human-scaled, green, calm, and locally oriented. The common good therefore became more physical to me: it includes the shared conditions that allow people to move, participate, encounter one another, and belong to the life of a place.

The project also changed me personally. I sometimes entered less-invested areas carrying assumptions shaped by news coverage or reputation, yet I never had a negative personal interaction during the fieldwork and was often surprised by how ordinary or pleasant the

experience actually was. That forced me to confront the responsibility of an architect or researcher not to diagnose a neighborhood before first encountering the people and place honestly. The Catholic moral and intellectual tradition gave this a deeper meaning for me. Human dignity is not earned by wealth, investment, appearance, or the reputation of a neighborhood. If every person possesses inherent dignity, architecture and urbanism cannot treat people merely as users, consumers, statistics, or obstacles to redevelopment. Yet, visible wealth lines the hills of Cincinnati, almost sandwiching the disinvestment and boasting over the views. Through that, pilgrimage also became less for me an act of simply walking toward a destination and more a process of formation: learning to see more truthfully through embodied experience, attention, and encounter with others.

This work now directly informs my architecture thesis and my developing sense of vocation. I had already suspected that fragmentation and disconnection were important urban problems, but walking the city gave that concern a more objective, field-based foundation. One principle has become especially important to me: architecture should connect people rather than isolate programs. Physical proximity does not necessarily mean meaningful accessibility, and good development cannot simply place isolated “oases” of investment into disconnected neighborhoods and assume that connection will follow. Architecture and urbanism must pay attention to the paths between people, neighborhoods, resources, and institutions while also learning from residents and stakeholders who understand those places from within. The common good cannot be reduced to the amount of new development produced; it also concerns whether people can participate in, belong to, and flourish within the places being shaped around them.

The deeper analysis, mapping, and synthesis of the summer material will continue during the academic year as part of my thesis work. The summer established a body of firsthand observations and a method of reading the city through lived movement, while the coming year will allow me to test those observations through architectural design. In that sense, the project has strengthened both my academic work and my vocational understanding of architecture: not simply as the production of buildings, but as a discipline capable of serving the human person and the common good.

I am deeply grateful to the Sorin Fellows Program and the de Nicola Center for supporting this work. The grant gave me greater financial freedom to devote meaningful time to research while also remaining more present near home with the people I care about. More importantly, it helped me recognize that Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky are not simply places I may design for someday. They are the region in which I expect to live, raise a family, and share responsibility for its flourishing. The project therefore became more than an academic exercise. It helped me understand architecture more clearly as a vocation with a responsibility to encounter people truthfully, respect their dignity, expand the conditions for authentic freedom, and help form places in which people can flourish together.