

A place that makes sense: On not living too large

by [Bill McKibben](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

Not far from Siena, in the Tuscan hill town of Montalcino, is the Abbey of Sant'Antimo. It was first built in—well, no one's certain. It was there by the ninth century. What you see now is a modern reconstruction, modern meaning 12th century. In other words, it's a part of the landscape.

And the landscape is a part of it. As I sat in the pews one afternoon earlier this summer, listening to the monks chant Nones in sonorous harmony, I kept looking past the altar to two windows behind. They framed prime views of the steeply raked farm fields in back of the sanctuary—one showed rows of dusty-leaved olive trees climbing a hill, the other rank upon rank of grapevines in their neat rows. With the crucifix in the middle they formed a kind of triptych, and it was easy to imagine not only the passion, but also one's cup running over with Chianti, one's head anointed with gleaming oil.

And easy enough, I think, to figure out why this Tuscan landscape is so appealing to so many. Its charm lies in its comprehensibility—its scale makes intuitive, visceral sense. If you climb one of the bell towers in the hill towns of Tuscany, you look out on a compassable world—you can see where the food that you eat comes from, trace the course of the rivers. It seems sufficient unto itself, as indeed it largely was once upon a time. And in the ancient churches it's easy to construct a vision of the medieval man or woman who once sat in the same hard pew—a person who understood, as we never can, his or her place in the universe. That place was bounded by the distance one could travel physically—save for the Crusade years, it was probably easy to live a life without ever leaving the district. (Florentines speak of living an entire life in view of the Duomo.) And it was bounded just as powerfully by the shared and deep belief in the theology of the church. You knew your place.

Which is a phrase with several meanings. You would have been deeply rooted in that world—it's hard to imagine there the identity crises that are routine in our world. You

would have been considerably more rooted than we're comfortable with. You knew your place in the sense that you were born into it, and there was little hope of leaving if it didn't suit. Peasants were peasants and lords were lords, and never the two met. Inequality was baptized, questioning unlikely. The old medieval world made sense, but it was often an oppressive sense—hence the 500-year project to liberate ourselves in every possible way.

And though Tuscany still looks comprehensible—and is thus a suitable backdrop for profitable tourism and powerful travel fantasy—it's now mostly sham. The farms remain, largely supported by farm subsidies from the European Union and the wine-buying habits of affluent foreigners. The villages are mostly emptied out, with only the old remaining—on weekends traffic swells as Florentines and Romans head to the country house. Even the churches are largely relics. Stop in for afternoon mass and you're likely to find three or four old women listening to an African priest limp along in halting Italian—there aren't nearly the vocations necessary to fill these pulpits. Even the chanting monks at the Sant'Antimo abbey are imports—a French brotherhood that took over the church a decade ago.

Still, it's so alluring, this idea of rootedness. Especially for those of us who live in places that make no sense at all. Where food travels 2,000 miles and arrives at a Wal-Mart. Where God lives at a megachurch without the tradition or culture to give worship much weight. How we thirst for places that make sense.

Which is why it was such a pleasure, a few days later, to find myself in a very different kind of church, this one compact, ultramodern, made of glass. Oh, and Lutheran. The ground floor, on this Thursday, was a day-care center filled with parents and kids; the second floor was all offices; and the third housed the sanctuary, a kind of window-girded nest. And when I looked out past the small cross, what I saw were the canals and sidewalks of Hammarby Sjostad—another place that makes sense. Real sense.

Hammarby Sjostad, a ten-minute ferry ride from the center of Stockholm, used to be an industrial brownfield, toxic and unpopulated. When Sweden bid to host the 2004 Olympics, it was slated to become the Olympic Village; the bid failed, but the momentum for a new neighborhood was enormous, and ground was broken seven or eight years ago. It was designed from the start to be an ecological gem, where the average person would live half again as lightly as the average Swede, who is already among the most ecologically minded citizens of the developed world. The whole

place is a closed loop—food waste is turned into biogas, trash is burned for energy, water is recycled. None of it is outrageously high-tech; it's just all thought out.

And the fancy piping is actually only a small part of what makes the place work. The town requires an uncoerced but very real willingness to cooperate, to be part of a community. For instance: by the lobby of each apartment is a series of portholes built into the wall, each one connected to a pneumatic tube. You put food waste in one, paper trash in the next and so on—everything is sucked off to the right processing center. But if you put plastic in with banana peels, the system breaks down. So there's a little graph above the chutes showing how many times each building screwed up the month before. Building 7 (five stories high like most of the blocks in the development), 3 errant bags. Building 8, one. Building 9, none at all.

Or say you want to wash your clothes. There's no washing machine in your flat—much energy is saved by having a wash house shared by a few buildings. You walk in and wave your key over a sensor, and up pops a digital display. You use it to book a time in the next few days to do your wash in the high-tech machines.

It's a reminder of why most places in the U.S. make so little sense. Cheap energy has led Americans to sprawl endlessly out. We rattle around enormous houses and enormous suburbs, distant from each other in every sense of the word. (The average American eats meals with friends, family or neighbors half as often as he or she did 50 years ago.) Cheap fossil fuel has turned us into the first people in human history who have essentially no need of each other—a kind of hyperindividualism has replaced community.

So maybe Hammarby Sjostad's way of doing things would chafe a little—the American cry has become “Don't tell me what to do,” and it's hard to imagine us sharing washing machines with our neighbors. We don't even want to travel together—or at least we didn't until high gas prices began pulling us from our single-occupancy SUVs.

But the responsibilities come with deep pleasures. To stroll the streets of this town is to realize that you've stumbled into a low-key paradise. On a fine day it seems as if all 25,000 residents are out and about, strolling the boardwalks and paths, oblivious to car traffic because it's almost nonexistent. (Parking is expensive, and who needs it—there's a fast ferry to town and a tram that comes by every few minutes.) The community was planned with bars every few blocks, with a community kayak dock,

with playing fields and community centers, with shared barbecue pits. Swedes may not be gregarious, but there's the steady hum of community—clusters of moms pushing prams, for instance. (And if you want proof that this place works, the number of families with kids is higher than expected—they're having to build extra schools.) What I'm trying to say is, the place make sense.

The place makes sense in the world, as well. Here's the cost: the flats are relatively small, between 600 and 1,000 square feet. That's two or three rooms plus a modest kitchen and a balcony. You can't have endless stuff because there's not room (everyone has storage space in the basement, and there's a special room for bikes). So there's way less space than we've come to consider normal—it's about like living in a trailer, maybe a double-wide.

But that's OK. When the community is an extended home recreation center, you don't need a special warren in your dwelling. What it means is a resident of Hammarby Sjostad is able to live, more or less, at a level calculated to be sustainable for all of the world's 6 billion humans—as compared with the American lifestyle, which would require five additional earths if it were extended across all humanity. This is a place where people aren't drowning Bangladesh or spreading malarial mosquitoes or doing all the other things that come with living too large.

Which brings us back to the church. The state built it—Lutheranism is the official religion in Sweden. And though I wasn't there on a Sunday, to judge by the number of chairs in the sanctuary, the congregation is a small percentage of the neighborhood. Still, there was a powerful sense that the gospel had been consulted in the construction of this town, if only instinctively. The rooted, practical gospel, the one that centers on loving your neighbor as yourself. I've never been in a place that made more sense.