

## **Eternity or the landfill, you have the choice**

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Once upon a time, there was a man who ruled a small state in central Italy. He also worked as a professional soldier for other rulers. His military career earned him a huge amount of money, more than was required to run his state. He thought carefully about how best to spend it.

The man's name was Federico da Montefeltro, and he governed the Duchy of Urbino from 1444 until his death in 1482. A few generations earlier, people with lots of money had been discouraged from using it to glorify themselves. By Federico's time, a wealthy person was expected to demonstrate how magnificent he was. Magnificence, from the Latin "magnus" (great) and "efficere" (to accomplish), had become an obligation for the rich and powerful. By showing their grandeur and dignity, they encouraged others and added to the prestige of the place in which they lived.

Federico knew that works of art in gold and silver were often melted down to reuse the metal, so they were not a good investment for lasting glory. As a young boy at school, Federico had read the works of ancient Roman authors, written more than a thousand years before, and hence he knew that scholarship endured. A library filled with the works of scholars, then, was definitely a good investment. Similarly, when he saw the number of ancient Roman buildings still standing in the fifteenth century, Federico realized that architecture, like scholarship, could survive for thousands of years—an eternity, practically.

So he made up his mind to spend most of his extra money on commissioning illuminated manuscripts of important writings and on

constructing palaces for himself in the various towns of his state. His private library is now part of the Vatican Library, and his palace in Urbino, the duchy's capital, still stands after 550 years. Ever since it was built, it's been considered one of the most beautiful Italian Renaissance buildings, an emblem of magnificence.

Now to Richmond in the twenty-first century. The other week I watched the entire face of a house being torn off in a matter of minutes. Soon afterwards the smashed bits of the whole building – probably not more than fifty years old – were carted off to a landfill.

In 2010, nearly 900 houses were demolished in Vancouver. But architectural remains aren't the only things dumped into the landfill. Almost all the conveniences of modern life end up there. And these are the things on which we spend much of our money. They are testimony to our civilization, all eventually demoted to rubbish, and all quickly replaced by more rubbish-to-be.

Of course, we recycle what we can of the trashed items. We do it for the environment, which is good. But it adds nothing to human dignity.

Maybe there are lessons to be learned from the people of long ago, who thought of magnificence as a goal. It's important not to confuse magnificence – accomplishing greatness – with conspicuous consumption, which nowadays is often the goal of those who have extra money to spend. Magnificence is very different, a kind of long-term investment. What we consume conspicuously is ultimately destined for the overflowing landfill – but the consequences of magnificence are headed for somewhere with an eternal capacity.