Daniel H. Burnham and the Plan of Chicago

Burnham and Bennett's magnificent Plan of Chicago (1909) symbolized the maturation of the City Beautiful. Analyses of the plan accept the symbolism and divide its proposals into advanced elements looking forward to contemporary planning and atavistic schemes expressive of a City Beautiful already under attack when the plan appeared.

Critics generally have approved of the plan's attention to the metropolitan region, which Burnham defined as a 60-mile radius from the Loop (Chicago's downtown). They have admired the system of diagonal and circumference roads designed to ease crowding and congestion. They have applauded Burnham's attention to the lakefront, a concern of his virtually from the time of the World's Columbian Exposition. Burnham's bold conception of a continuous green strip from Jackson Park to the north city limits and beyond would banish or suppress the railroad along Lake Michigan and open the vast water sheet to the citizens' recreational and aesthetic enjoyment. Burnham's plans for active recreation areas within the lakefront park strip have worn well with critics, as have his calls for expanded park and boulevard areas and for forest preserves.

The proposed cultural center in lakefront Grant Park, between Lake Michigan and the southern portion of the commercial core, has been less commented upon, but its merits have been recognized despite its dated neoclassical designs. The realization of Burnham's plan for widening Michigan Avenue north of the Chicago River has been hailed because it opened underdeveloped areas to retail-commercial expansion. The critics generally have approved his plans for reorganizing the city's passenger and freight rail traffic and for improving the Chicago River.

Burnham's other proposals, associated with the allegedly narrow social and aesthetic concerns of the City Beautiful, have fared less well. The commentators have been particularly antagonistic toward his grand - or grandiose - civic center at the intersection of Congress and Halsted streets, on the southwestern fringe of the downtown commercial district. Here Burnham fashioned an overpowering centerpiece, a huge city hall with a soaring dome resting upon an elongated drum. Fernand Janin's sketches of the city hall, published with the plan, intended to flatter Burnham's conception but outlined instead a gargantuan parody of an administration building or a capitol. Three analysts of the plan, Carl Condit, Paul Boyer, and Mario Manieri-Elia, have understood the purpose behind the huge building and its vast plaza, which was to inspire the public to civic unity and adoration. But no one expressed the purpose better than Burnham himself, who wrote of the "central administration building, ... surmounted by a dome of impressive height, to be seen and felt by the people, to whom it should stand as the symbol of civic order and unity. Rising from the plain upon which Chicago rests, its effect may be compared to that of the dome of St. Peter's at Rome." 2

The other proposed government buildings, the city hall, and their accessories "would combine to unite the square into an harmonious whole." Further, the civic center, "when taken in connection with this plan of Chicago ... becomes the keystone of the arch." After reviewing the plan's elements of practicality, beauty, and harmony, Burnham returned to "the center of all the varied activities of Chicago," where "will rise the towering dome of the civic center, vivifying and unifying the entire composition." 3

The civic center had to bear so much heavy symbolic and ceremonial weight and was so obviously costly that there would be doubts about its feasibility. The center conformed in a general way to prevailing civic center theory but was without an existing anchor building such as the Colorado capitol in Denver. It was a mile or so from the northern and eastern areas of downtown and far from the northern expansion of the commercial city that the widening of Michigan Avenue was expected to produce. Burnham himself disclaimed any commitment to specific

designs, writing that his were “suggestions of what may be done, for the report does not seek to impose any particular form.” Manieri-Ellia’s reasonable conclusion is that the civic center buildings involved “a kind of ceremony,” and “illusionistic” inspiration “persuasive in direct proportion to the improbability of their execution.” In order to agree with his fundamental proposition, one need not accept Manieri-Ellia’s contention that Burnham was boosting real estate in the civic center area. Burnham himself knew very well how little relation to reality his huge hexagonal space could have. In the year of his plan’s publication, the city and county broke ground for a new city hall and courthouse well away from his proposed site. There was virtually no possibility of his design becoming more than what it was, an awesome visual idealization of civic harmony.4

Commercial buildings of uniform, limited height appear in the Chicago plan, a second source for the criticism of Burnham’s supposedly alien, aristocratic, Parisian solution. In the absence of a clarifying statement from Burnham, there are two possible responses to the criticism. One is that Burnham intended his city to adopt height limitations corresponding approximately to the building heights in the perspectives accompanying his plan. Height limitations were hardly unknown in twentieth-century American cities. They dated from the municipally imposed cornice height limits around Boston’s famous Copley Square and were inspired by desires for visual harmony, for abundant sunlight and air, which excessively tall buildings would block, and for public safety in case of serious fires or other disasters. Denver had height limitations, though Speer’s “Skyscraper Bill” raised them late in 1908. So did Seattle. The Puget Sound city retained its 200-foot limit until 1912, when it permitted the Smith Tower to rise forty-two stories. As Thomas Hines, Burnham’s biographer, has pointed out, Beaux-Arts buildings lining the architect’s conception of Michigan Avenue were scarcely squat. Uniform ranks of huge, block-long structures rose eighteen stories, although the heights generally tapered off to the north, south, and west.5

For all the cohesion and rationality of the uniform facades and heights, and despite ample precedent, it is doubtful whether Burnham intended Chicago to adopt building height limitations. He wrote nothing about height limits, even while he lavished analytical prose upon a civic center practically impossible to build in the shape or on the site projected. Thus, it hardly seems likely that he seriously hoped for the adoption of a height-limit program that he did not bother to defend at all. Had he fought for building height limitations and facade uniformity, he would have added to the already formidable expenses of the plan with the huge costs of demolition, exterior remodeling, and possible purchase of unusable air rights. He would have, additionally, created an aesthetic controversy potentially inimical to his plan’s success. Burnham’s silence on the subject could be interpreted as indifference to height limits, but if that were so, why did he bother to introduce plate after plate of perspective paintings revealing buildings uniformly clad and corniced?6

The more plausible response to Burnham’s critics identifies a valid role for his buildings. They served as the matrix for his proposals. Practically superfluous but visually vital, they framed the reconstructed Michigan Avenue and the new railroad stations and deferred without competition to the dominating dome of city hall. They were a pictorial representation of Burnham’s hopes for a dynamic cultural and commercial city where mere individualism was subordinated to the harmony of the greater good.

Critics of the Plan of Chicago have decried Burnham’s brief if trenchant references to the slum problem and his routine solutions, cutting boulevards through dilapidated housing and enforcing sanitation measures. Burnham and other City Beautiful planners were little concerned with housing. If true, whether their approach is open to criticism is another matter, to be considered later. For now it may be said that housing details were outside the purview of the comprehensive planning of the era. The planner’s task, instead, was to provide the spatial opportunity for good housing at all income levels. Ensuring adequate housing for poor people was a matter for private initiative and for thoroughgoing housing code inspection and enforcement.7

Burnham paid little attention to the automobile, an omission costing him additional credibility with the critics. A more charitable approach would suggest how difficult it is to predict the future, especially without any particularly sophisticated tools and substantial data on trends in metropolitan areas. It is one thing to understand the American expectation of democratized technology—Burnham probably had some grasp of it—but quite another to gauge accurately when the inexpensive, durable mass car would arrive. It had not arrived by 1909. To judge beforehand the urban, spatial, social, and economic impact of the mass automobile was a still greater challenge. The planners of the city practical era might better be charged with dereliction. The compilers of City Planning Progress in the United States: 1917 derided the City Beautiful, as it was fashionable to do, “but barely hinted at the congestion and parking problems the automobile was already causing,” problems that only “emerged clearly in the 1920s” with soaring car registrations.8 It is unreasonable to criticize Burnham for failing to incorporate the car into the city plan when his supposedly scientific successors did not, though the mass car and its developing consequences were right under their noses.

In fact most of the criticism of the Plan of Chicago, as well as much of the praise, arises from a misunderstanding of the City Beautiful movement. While the critics correctly acclaim the plan for its sumptuous, evocative craftsmanship and correctly attribute its quality to the extraordinary resources at Burnham’s disposal, they do not see it for what it really is—a typical, if grand, City Beautiful plan. Burnham’s regional
sweep was one proof of his self-assessment as “a door opener” who grasped the implications of tendencies a little in advance of the rest. Many cities grew fabulously after the turn of the century, projecting urban regionalism beyond the era of the big city into the age of the metropolis. Mayor Robert Speer and others in Denver already had under consideration some sort of regional relationship with recreation areas in the Rocky Mountains. Street traffic improvements similar to Burnham’s were embedded in Kessler’s 1893 Kansas City plan and the 1901 plan for Harrisburg, in various Denver proposals, and in many other plans of the City Beautiful era.

Burnham’s lakefront park scheme was as sweeping in its way as his street plans were in theirs, but waterfront improvement ideas reached back at least as far as the senior Olmsted’s Charlesbank in Boston, through Manning’s River Front Park in Harrisburg, John Olmsted’s plans for the Lake Washington boulevard in Seattle, and many more. Burnham’s plans for active recreation in the park deferred to a movement whose time had come. His replanning of Chicago’s rail traffic extended a tradition in which he and his firm were much involved. Burnham designed the monumental Union Station in Washington in conjunction with the massive rail reorganization in the capital city. He lost the Kansas City station job to Jarvis Hunt but was aware of the great rail relocation in the offing there. His firm’s other union station designs testify to the rail transportation activity associated with the City Beautiful.

Nor was the Plan of Chicago the swan song of the movement. Continued development under existing comprehensive plans aside, Bogue’s Plan of Seattle was yet to appear, as was Kessler’s Dallas plan. In sum, the Plan of Chicago was most extraordinary because of its generous funding by Chicago’s business elite, its comprehensiveness, and its evocative paintings and drawings of a sublime City Beautiful.10

City Practical Criticisms of the City Beautiful

By the time Burnham’s plan appeared, the reaction against the City Beautiful had set in. The attack combined valid criticism with ridicule and misrepresentation, but it was effective. Opponents of the City Beautiful succeeded in stigmatizing it as excessively concerned with monumentality, empty aesthetics, grand effects for the well-to-do, and general impracticality. Most defenders of the City Beautiful offered little resistance to the onslaught and soon joined their attackers’ ranks. The city practical carried the battle because it benefited from three interrelated developments: increasing specialization, rising professionalism, and burgeoning bureaucracy.

Specialization developed rapidly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The National Municipal League dated from 1894, and the American Society of Landscape Architects from 1899. They joined the revived American Institute of Architects (AIA) and were joined in turn by the National Playground Association of America in 1906. Housing reformers and settlement house workers held conferences and organized the Committee on Congestion of Population. Professional awareness reinforced specialization. The hallmarks of both included university curricula, a growing body of literature, prerequisites for professional standing, and exclusivity. For a time professionals coexisted with enthusiastic laymen in such organizations as the American Park and Outdoor Art Association (APOAA) and the American Civic Association (ACA). But professional organizations and activities increasingly claimed the specialists’ time and energy. Although laymen, not professionals, were the primary targets of the City Beautiful bulletins of the American League for Civic Improvement (ALCI) and the ACA, increasingly specialized publications appeared; the Pittsburgh Survey, launched in 1907, the city planning issue of Charities and the Commons in 1908, and the appearance of American City in 1909 were among several newer entrants in the field of urban problem writing.11

The bureaucratization and professionalization of the planning and other functions of city government were equally ominous for the City Beautiful. Beginning in the nineteenth century, municipal engineers deliberately preempted several planning areas, especially those involving sanitation, street grading and surfacing, drainage, and the oversight of improvement construction. The search for discipline, accountability, and professional service in city government moved from “strong mayor” charter proposals, to the city commission form, and to reformers’ advocacy of the council-manager system. Simultaneously, the rise of the quasi-independent, specialized commission heralded the increasing bureaucratization of urban government. Most significant for the City Beautiful movement was the establishment of the first city planning commission at Hartford, Connecticut, in 1907. That body forecast a new reality. City governments would assume planning responsibilities and retain professional planners, usurping the catalytic role of the lay activists, who were the backbone of such groups as the ACA.12

The planners welcomed the changes because they held out the hope of divorcing professional planning not only from various lay enthusiasms but also from sponsoring elites, who might advance their own ideas with proprietary firmness. As Manning discovered in Harrisburg and John Olmsted learned in Seattle, the experts’ continuing supervision of a plan did not ensure harmonious relations with its sponsors. Increasingly, consulting planners worked with city governments directly, with private developers, or with corporate planning groups more remote from electoral politics than earlier organizations such as the Harrisburg League for Municipal Improvements.13

All these developments were visible or were just below the horizon
when the First National Conference on City Planning convened in Washington, D.C., during May 1909, Benjamin C. Marsh, a New York housing reform enthusiast, organized the conference. Marsh was already on record against the City Beautiful as too concerned with cosmetic display. Parks, civic centers, and other great public works were attractive, he wrote, but the poor only occasionally could afford to “escape from their squalid, confining surroundings to view the architectural perfection and to experience the aesthetic delights of the remote improvements.” Marsh mixed practicality with his humanitarianism. He called for zoning, especially limits on factory location, for height limits, efficient transportation, parks and playgrounds in crowded districts, and excess condemnation.

The conference attendees ranged from housing reformers through architects, planners, and engineers, to socially aware businessmen. Politically the group found equilibrium in the moderate left. The sessions reflected Marsh’s efforts to condemn the “rhetorical cudgels against the city beautiful” as too concerned with cosmetic beautification. The movement had “congestion” of population, which was “to remedy congestion” of population. Population “congestion” was, not surprisingly, the hobby of Marsh, the guiding spirit of the Committee on Congestion of Population. Pope attacked the City Beautiful for encouraging the assumption that “the first duty of city planning is to beautify.” The movement had “made the aesthetic an objective in itself.” Pope decried “the expenditure of huge sums for extensive park systems . . . inaccessible improvements . . . made available to but a small portion of the community—the wealthy and leisure classes, who of all society needs these advantages the least.” Moreover, “we have rushed to plan showy civic centers of gigantic cost,” inspired by “civic vanity . . . when pressing hard-by, we see the almost unbelievable congestion with its hideous brood of evil: filth, disease, degeneracy, pauperism, and crime. What external adornment can make truly beautiful such a city?”

Other speakers joined Pope in praising European, especially German, cities for improving housing and thereby raising the character and quality of their inhabitants. They asserted, with Pope, that a city planned for social benefit and economic efficiency would be beautiful. Marsh’s speeches featured propositions for effective urban improvement; a survey of existing conditions bent on an “ascertaining of the facts,” which would discredit “corporate interest”; dissemination of the facts through publicity campaigns; and the creation of powerful planning commissions able to enforce planned change. Marsh called on the federal government to conduct a civic census of American cities in conjunction with a nationwide city planning committee organized along the lines of other national organizations such as the Consumer’s League and the Red Cross. At the end of the conference he proposed a “commission on land values in our great cities, similar to the Interstate Commerce Commission,” which would determine a “fair profit on the estate.” Marsh having already decided to his own satisfaction that “a profit of three or four fold in a few years is . . . unsafe and unnecessary and undemocratic.” Marsh could hardly have better expressed the latter-day left-progressive faith in statistics, publicity, and the beneficence of drastic governmental intervention.

Nor could he have more decisively repudiated the City Beautiful belief in the ability of uplifted, enlightened citizens to work through their private destinies harmoniously amid scenes of surpassing public beauty, in a city organized for utility and efficiency. But if any supporter of the City Beautiful believed that Marsh and his fellows represented merely a fad, a passing squall, he was soon disabused. In December 1909 architect Cass Gilbert flayed the City Beautiful at the annual meeting of the AIA.

“If I were disposed to delay, interrupt, or confuse the progress of city development I would publish the phrase ‘city beautiful’ in big head lines in every newspaper,” Gilbert declared. “Let us have the city useful, the city practical, the city livable, the city sensible, the city anything but the city beautiful,” Gilbert called for “a city that is done, completed, a city sane and sensible that can be lived in comfortably. If it is to be a city beautiful it will be one naturally.” Gilbert’s tirade was a hit. “The sentiment against the ‘city beautiful’ term was unanimous.” According to one account, the AIA delegates issued a search warrant for “the originator of ‘city beautiful.’ The culprit had not been discovered at three o’clock this afternoon.”

Robinson fell in line. Reporting on the “unanimous and hearty applause” that greeted Gilbert’s remarks, he insisted that the people who were “doing most to make cities beautiful, long ago gave up use of the phrase.” They now understood the source of urban beauty: the “adaptation to purpose and cooperative harmony of parts.” Arnold Brunner echoed Gilbert’s and Robinson’s themes at the ACA’s 1910 convention. “To the average citizen the ‘city beautiful’ suggests the city impossible,” he asserted. Brunner insisted that “boards of aldermen and city treasurers are apt to believe that it means an attempt to tie pink bows on the lamp posts.” George B. Ford, a Columbia University planning instructor, took up the cry before the ACA in 1911. The City Beautiful, Ford charged, was too often concerned with “superficialities,” with “frills and turbelows,” and was “dazzling,” but it was a mistake to advance the City Beautiful “before the problems of living, work and play have been solved.”

At last the leading lay apostle of the City Beautiful capitulated. Although McFarland did “not at all agree with his separation of what he called the aesthetic from the practical,” Ford’s attack shook the ACA president. The effect of Ford’s charges was evident when McFarland stepped forward to address the 1912 convention of the ACA on “Not Only the
City Beautiful.” In a speech that surrendered to functionalist aesthetics, he ridiculed laymen who clung to the idea of the City Beautiful as “a tawdry soldier’s monument, flanked by a monstrous flagpole, several dismounted cannon . . . and four or five enormous telephone poles.” When cities were made clean, practical, and efficient, then they would be beautiful. McFarland looked back to the World’s Columbian Exposition, taken in his own time to be the starting point of city planning, but with an eye to its utility. Planners “properly” admired and emulated “that glorious ‘White City’ that the great Burnham gave to us in 1893,” he said. Planners needed to recall, however, that the fair was “both convenient and beautiful, both sanitary and sightly, and therefore truly admirable.”

These assaults on the City Beautiful caricatured the movement as being as concerned with the wealthy as it was indifferent to the poor and as obsessed with surface aesthetics as it was disregardful of practicality. It was, furthermore, outrageously expensive, an affront to responsible citizens and public officials. Attacks on the City Beautiful reflected the changing relationships among citizen activists, professional planners, and urban governments. Ideas not professionally or bureaucratically approved could be denounced as allegedly expensive and impractical. Moreover, by 1909 there was some impatience with the optimism of early progressivism, when men of lofty purpose and goodwill would refashion American cities. Perhaps the panic of 1907, the portentous electoral successes of Socialists, and the bureaucratic routinization of reform all made Robinson’s and McFarland’s hopeful urgings seem a little threadbare.

Nor were the grand city plans all that successful. Some remained partly or wholly unbuilt, unable to confer their presumed psychic and material benefits on the citizenry. “Practically all the planning of cities and ‘additions’ to cities . . . has been done by Engineers,” Olmsted, Jr., wrote in a candid, perceptive letter, “and while most of it has been very badly done their work has simply met the standards and demands of their communities.” Landscape architects had planned, usually, better than engineers, with regard for aesthetics and for life’s amenities, but their work was “a drop in the bucket” compared with the influence of municipal engineers in the lives of the people. For “real results” in planning “and not just a continuation of the interesting but ineffectual talk and theorizing that has been going on for some years now upon this subject, it is essential that able and influential municipal engineers should take a more prominent part in the movement.”

Frederick’s half-brother John addressed the related issue of taxpayer resistance to expensive grand plans at a time when he yet believed that he would be chosen to help design what became Seattle’s Bogue plan. “It is going to be much harder to get the money for expensive schemes here than it was in the case of Cleveland. Grand schemes were devised for St. Louis, but I haven’t heard how the execution is getting on,” he wrote to his wife. “I think they wanted $30,000,000 to carry out the St. Louis scheme . . . it’s hard to persuade economical practical voters and taxpayers to spend that much in improving the plan of the city.”

Another problem involved the phrase City Beautiful itself. By 1909 it had been in service for a decade and was becoming a bit timeworn. It was a protean phrase, comprising activities as disparate as a women’s club agitating for improved trash collection and Daniel Burnham superintending the corps of designers at work on the Plan of Chicago. Unfortunately, City Beautiful denoted aesthetic concerns, not necessarily an important consideration in housing surveys, recreation, or land-use control. City Beautiful devotees such as Robinson, Kessler, and McFarland could embrace playgrounds, zoning, and improved housing without betraying the movement, but their eclecticism did not deflect the bureaucratic thrust toward utilitarianism.

Finally, the City Beautiful was a victim of its own success. Citizen activists achieved or approximated their goals in Chicago, Denver, Harrisburg, Kansas City, and other places. Utility wires went underground. Graceful street furniture replaced crude utility poles or grotesque drinking fountains. Billboards were tamed by municipal regulation and the self-imposed restrictions of the bill posters. Park, parkway, and boulevard systems expanded while their older segments were developed. Many civic centers were planned, and some were built. Public and semi-public buildings usually improved in design and commodiousness, whether or not they were grouped along civic center malls. All this was expensive, however, and as the years of construction went by, there were fewer fresh victories to inscribe on the banners of the City Beautiful. It became easier for critics to attack the City Beautiful for aesthetic obsessions and to ignore the movement’s long-standing concerns in such areas as recreation, traffic and smoke control, and urban efficiency. This city practical critique was a caricature – but it was credible enough to be accepted for years, in the absence of careful studies of the City Beautiful movement. In 1962 an otherwise thoughtful analysis declared the City Beautiful to be “a narrow and pathetically fragile ideal, remote from business, commerce, industry, transportation, poverty, and similar mundane but integral features of urban life.” Few critics questioned, then or later, whether the presumably more realistic and more humane city practical could, or did, advance comprehensive planning with greater effectiveness.

The junior Olmsted was one who looked into the pit that the city practical planners were digging for themselves and saw problems almost beyond imagination. Olmsted confessed to the Second National Conference on City Planning his dismay over “the appalling breadth and ramification” of planning and “the play of enormously complex forces which no one clearly understands and few pretend to.” Olmsted’s
solution was to divide the planning task among specialists, from whom a comprehensive plan would somehow emerge. He glossed over the danger of lost or compromised comprehensiveness with the statement that anyone who fashioned “any smallest element” of the plan was responsible for the welfare of the entire city. Olmsted’s rhetorical resolution of the city practical dilemma was as fatuous as any City Beautiful formulation. John Nolen and other city practical planners, far from abandoning the city practical dilemma was as fatuous as any Axial survey technique or other city practical mechanisms neither eliminated the wake of World War I. Mel Scott found that the application of the survey technique or other city practical mechanisms neither eliminated biases or assumptions nor guaranteed a plan’s implementation.26

Later Attacks on the City Beautiful

Another, later critique censured the movement for its limited achievements. The analysis rests on a number of assumptions. The first assumption is the city practical belief in the impossibility of completing City Beautiful plans. It built on criticisms about unfulfilled plans; these criticisms were made in the early years of the city practical, before greater experience provided a better perspective. The second assumption failed to acknowledge the centrality of politics to the City Beautiful and reduced the movement partly or wholly to civic center design exercises. Then it declared the alleged design movement a failure because so few civic centers were built. Thirdly, the critics asserted a functionalist or “American” aesthetic against the neoclassicism of many City Beautiful designs, assuming that the designs were rejected because they were dated foreign imports false to American needs or ideals. Beyond these three assumptions, the critics believed that the city practical and subsequent planning eras enjoyed a significantly higher rate of implementation than did the City Beautiful. Almost the only positive value of the City Beautiful, in this view, was its success in stimulating public thought and discussion of planning.

This strident criticism dominated in the 1930s and 1940s and persisted much longer. Two examples will impart the flavor. Henry S. Churchill noted in 1945 how “scarcely a single city carried out, except in minor details, any plan that was drawn up. Of the 135 published reports, nearly every one was filed in the City Engineer’s office and forgotten.” The few exceptional cities “carried out only plans relating to large and spectacular public works,” while they avoided “real replanning.” To Churchill, the City Beautiful “plan generally meant the paper architectural development of a civic center,” one with a domed building, fountains, and marble paving. “Fortunately, little of it came to pass, except in Washington and

an occasional place that got out of control, like Harrisburg.” James Marston Fitch found “a lot of Baron Haussmann and precious little democracy in these vast geometrics of befontsed plazas and intersecting boulevards.” For Fitch, their “vastly important role” was “introducing the concept of planned reconstruction into the popular mind. However pompous and autocratic the solutions, they were at least admissions that real problems did exist.” The movement by and by “involved many well-intentioned souls” who eventually understood “that the problem was much more than one of simple face-lifting.”27

Unfortunately, the critics of the 1930s and 1940s molded their social and aesthetic biases into a critical framework. It is doubtful whether any City Beautiful plan succeeded or failed because it was judged to be unworkable by city practical standards, included a civic center, or was neoclassical. As for the success rate of City Beautiful plans, comparing City Beautiful successes with later efforts would be a study in itself. In its absence, a present judgment is that the full implementation of comprehensive plans is modest in all eras.

A less biased examination of nationwide City Beautiful planning suggests that a variety of reasons lay behind the limited success of the City Beautiful. The low proportion of plans in the South (an even distribution by states, territories, and possessions should have produced about fifty) indicates that conditions in the region and not the City Beautiful should explain the South’s relatively weak planning impulse. Of the 233 planning activity reports in the 1917 compendium City Planning Progress, only 34 concerned cities in the states of the Old Confederacy. Of the 34, more than half involved cities in southwestern Texas and in the upper southern states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee.28

Some southern City Beautiful proponents seemed to exhaust themselves in the early stages of the planning struggles. The Woman’s Club of Raleigh, North Carolina, hired Robinson in 1912, who submitted a typical Robinsonian effort the next year. The club printed and sold copies of the plan but failed to agitate for concomitant political or administrative reforms. It may have been that Robinson’s suggestions were insufficient to gather popular support, but there is no way of knowing, for the Woman’s Club conducted no further promotion of the plan, such as newspaper followup stories or reprinted excerpts. Greensboro, North Carolina, hired Robinson in 1917, but he died before completing a plan. The Greensboro movement died with the planner. In Birmingham, Alabama, transplanted Yankees and native southerners worked for civic improvements under the leadership of the chamber of commerce. Warren Manning produced a civic center and park system plan in 1919, the latest date indicative of cultural lag. Unfortunately Birmingham’s inadequate parks were little improved and expanded, especially in black areas, and Manning’s plans came to naught.” Labor spokesmen opposed spending municipal funds on civic improvements until free school textbooks and
other services were provided. The Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron Company defeated the city's smoke abatement efforts in a series of maneuvers extending over several years. These and other problems frustrated the southern City Beautiful, but they were unrelated to aesthetics.29

The areas outside the Deep South, where the greater proportion of City Beautiful plans appeared, were those enjoying the most City Beautiful success. Again, however, design considerations played a negligible or modest role. City Beautiful planning succeeded most often in commercial cities similar to Kansas City, Denver, and Seattle, although manufacturing did not militate against the City Beautiful when it involved light industry and processing. Heavy-industry cities and single-industry towns fared less well, perhaps because they held a higher proportion of laborers likely to be skeptical of sweeping improvement plans. They may have lacked a large, powerful, dedicated middle class. Plans were prepared for eastern cities, but with some exceptions—the reconstruction of politically anomalous Washington, the earlier Boston metropolitan park system, Philadelphia's Fairmount Parkway—much less was done. Sheer size, high land values inhibiting large public works, diversity of interests, and fragmented leadership played negative roles. Smaller cities sometimes fared better, if, like Harrisburg, they were state capitals or for some other reason contained a significant middle class.30

New York's City Beautiful failed principally because, as its historian demonstrated, it suffered through a long gestation. When it finally emerged as the Report of the New York Improvement Commission in 1907, it was an orphan without adequate media or community support, another reflection of the city's scattered interests and leadership. But its historian condemned the plan, instead, for its "static conception," its failure to "pay enough attention to the vast economic resources of the city and the way in which these resources could be better developed through planning," and its "overemphasis on aesthetic considerations" resulting in "slighted social concerns." All this criticism poured out upon a plan devoted to unifying the city through an expanded park and boulevard system, improved traffic circulation, and revitalized piers, including recreation piers, among many other proposals.31

If such ritualistic condemnation of the City Beautiful in the face of its social, economic, and utilitarian concerns does not advance the analysis of failure, what does, beyond naming New York's diversity and fragmentation? Herbert Croly, in his 1907 criticism of the plan, grasped another part of the problem when he cited the stupendously high land costs "in the central part of the older city," leading the city fathers to "inevitably adopt the cheapest plan which has any promise of being adequate." But the high costs of a comprehensive plan depended upon New York's size, density, and economic dynamism. New York had long since lost the plasticity allowing for a relatively inexpensive implementation. Charles F. McKim refused to have anything to do with New York planning for that very reason. Although willing to advise Mayor Seth Low of the need for an independent, well-salaried commission to pursue a comprehensive plan with expert, specialized advice, he would not become personally involved with "any but an ideal proposition, which is not very likely to be made. The difficulties to be overcome here, are, so far as the Borough of Manhattan are [sic] concerned, insuperable, and with but a few years of breath left to hope for, there are several ways in which I could put in my time more effectively."32

The critics of City Beautiful achievement have one more high card to play: San Francisco. In 1905 Burnham, with Bennett's collaboration, completed his excellent planning report for the bay city elite. On 18 April 1906, the great earthquake and fire destroyed most newly printed copies of the plan while they reduced some 4 square miles of San Francisco to a charred ruin. Within four years the city was rebuilt almost entirely as it had been, without reference to Burnham's plan. The failure allows the plan's most careful interpreter the pleasure of declaring San Francisco to be "better off" without the plan while condemning private property interests for preventing its realization. Many of Judd Kahn's observations about Burnham's plan and the City Beautiful movement in general are intelligent and sympathetic, but his point that the plan required an imperial power lacking in the American system is not well taken. The point is, instead, that existing cities may be replanned through politics, but cities destroyed are almost always reconstructed on the old street pattern, and their damaged areas are rationalized with commercial considerations in mind. Baron Haussmann possessed imperial authority, true, but he worked with an existing city.33

Kahn surveyed post-World War II reconstruction and found the "overall pattern" to be "one of continuity"—in other words, rebuilding on the preexisting lines. There were a "number of cities in which street plans were modified and a few in which more extensive changes were accomplished," yet Kahn admitted that "disaster seems more likely to beget substantial continuity in urban form, rather than radical innovation." The post-World War II reconstruction is all the more remarkable when the international growth of planning lore and planning consciousness from Burnham's time is considered. Human beings confront urban destruction with a powerful urge to rebuild. Across time, cultures, and systems of land ownership, existing cities may be more or less replanned and modified. Destroyed cities, including San Francisco, usually are restored.34

The civic center problem raises issues similar to those already discussed. Beginning two or three years after the publication of the 1902 plan for Washington, civic center designs were important, if not central, to the City Beautiful. The failure of civic center plans, while not synonymous with an unsuccessful City Beautiful movement, calls into question its methods and goals. For the plans did fail. Joan E. Draper has identified seventy-two civic center plans. Perhaps a tenth of them were begun
during the City Beautiful era, and very few after that time. Draper isolated five circumstances affecting a center's fate: “(1) the quality of project leadership; (2) the financial situation of the city and funding methods for the project; (3) the city's legal powers; (4) the degree of cooperation from potential tenants (city, state, federal, and semipublic agencies); and (5) the feasibility of the plan in physical terms.” Her induction is sound and, excepting her point 4, could be applied to almost any public improvement project, including the park and boulevard systems identified with the City Beautiful.39

A full response to the issue of civic center failure involves two additional considerations. First, cost is an independent variable in the civic center case. Civic centers, apart from the other features of their accompanying plans, were necessarily expensive. Unlike parks, boulevards, street furniture, or other elements of the City Beautiful ensemble, they could not, usually, be gradually acquired. Government functions depended upon the immediate acquisition of adequate land and the timely construction of at least some essential buildings. Necessity and civic center theory both dictated a center near the commercial-retail core, where land was expensive. Neoclassical buildings finished to the standards of the day were costly as well. After World War I, construction costs rose to double and more above those of the City Beautiful era, inhibiting late starts on civic centers during the 1920s.38

Second, too many people perceived civic centers to be, in themselves, impractical solutions to problems of poor government organization and inadequate civic idealism. This does not mean that they opposed neoclassical aesthetics. Rather, as in Kansas City and Seattle, they weighed high costs, extreme centralization of government activity, loss of private revenue- and tax-producing property, and the impact on the immediate area of the civic center against the presumed benefits. Not surprisingly, they found the monetary and other costs overwhelming. The realities of civic center politics caution against reading later aesthetic norms, advanced by the architectural and critical avant-garde, into the struggles over realizing the City Beautiful. They also caution against arguing that civic centers and related improvements were meant to increase centralization. City Beautiful advocates saw civic centers as enhancing efficiency, not centralization. They may have subconsciously promoted centralization, but if they did, their institutional agenda left many downtown businessmen unimpressed. Moreover, the street widenings, radial streets, boulevards, and outlying parks associated with the City Beautiful could be interpreted as assisting decentralization.39

Design-oriented detractors of the City Beautiful have attacked its architectural handmaiden, neoclassicism. The argument runs essentially as follows: The World's Columbian Exposition imposed a derivative, passé style upon America. Neoclassicism had no proper relation to American aspirations, ideals, or building needs, yet City Beautiful planners adopted neoclassicism from the exposition, just as they did its formality and axiality. The critics expressly or implicitly follow the convictions of the embittered Louis Sullivan, who declared that the Chicago fair foisted neoclassical architecture on the country. Burnham unwittingly lent strength to Sullivan's charge with his assertions that the exposition inspired civic centers.38

Despite Burnham's inadvertent support, there is a false ring to Sullivan's charge that the fair clouded the public mind with the neoclassic and throttled the development of native American architecture. Thomas E. Tallmadge challenged Sullivan in 1927, three years after the architect's celebrated autobiography appeared. The challenges have continued and may be summarized as follows. The fair did not end Sullivan's career, nor Frank Lloyd Wright's, nor that of any other advanced architect. Sullivan continued with his designing, and Wright built Prairie-style houses into the twentieth century. Chicago school buildings and Prairie school residences appeared until the eve of World War I. Moreover, Sullivan's Transportation Building at the Chicago fair hardly qualified him to be an architectural seer. Its structure, beneath a mediocre exterior, was less advanced than some others at the exposition. Sullivan himself developed a repugnantly toplopy personality, while Wright reveled in his role of feisty maverick. Neither man conceived of city planning ideas congenial to the local elites who retained planners. Shifts in emphasis of Chicago school architects from commercial to residential design and public infatuation with arts other than architecture also explain the expiration of the Chicago school style.39

These challenges may be expanded in several directions. Taking Sullivan first, for all his daring innovation, he was not a high-quality planner. He entertained few notions of the city as ensemble, and the Burnham firm excelled him in interior building design. In his lyrical-to-bombastic Kindergarten Chats Sullivan did not ask the capitalist to shut up shop but rather to develop a social conscience in architecture. It is difficult to imagine a building more congenial to private enterprise than the skyscraper, the style of which Sullivan did so much to advance, or an institution more representative than the bank, small examples of which he designed in the declining years of his practice. As for Wright, nothing save his personal lapses stayed his work. He was in full career as America's reigning architectural genius when he died, nearing ninety-two, in 1959. Wright's city plans, when they did come, were unrealistic. No antidote for pressing urban problems, Broadacres instead visualized a suburbanized middle-class utopia held together by ubiquitous automobiles, telephones, and televisions.40

So far as the Chicago school goes, its demise has as much to do with its own design sclerosis as with anything else. William H. Jordy remarked on the inability of Chicago architects to develop new wall and window treatments after 1900. Sullivan, though he continued his innovation
in detail, achieved his final breakthrough, the Schlesinger, Mayer department store, in 1899. These failures of vision and imagination are as serious as any of those charged against the architects of the City Beautiful. As for the Prairie school, some of its practitioners fed upon City Beautiful ideas. Mark L. Peisch’s sensible study notes the positive impact of the Columbian Exposition upon several Chicago architects and how Walter Burley Griffin used City Beautiful devices such as axes, groupings, and waterscapes in his 1913 plan of Canberra.

The Chicago fair and the City Beautiful hardly impeded the rise of the skyscraper. City Beautiful planners usually left commercial-retail cores to their own devices, except for individual building designs and schemes for functional definition and traffic relief. City Beautiful architects created low public buildings more useful to the governments of their day than skyscrapers. When they designed commercial buildings, they sometimes employed neoclassical detailing on the lower floors. Above five or six stories, however, the motif became attenuated or lost in mass and silhouette as the buildings rose. Talbot F. Hamlin’s straightforward, popular discussion of the “American style” argued convincingly that the “American” quality of the skyscraper lay in its proportions, not in its ornamental detail. As Lewis Mumford deftly phrased it, tall commercial architecture is for “angels and aviators,” not for the terrestrial critic. The City Beautiful influenced the main run of skyscraper design much less than technology, ground rent, labor costs, land-use controls, and tax policy. Sullivan’s statement condemning neoclassicism reflects the pain of a picturesque secessionist whose designs and ideas fail to conquer. Nor had the neoclassic conquered. Both styles continued, before and after 1893, borrowing from one another as well as battling. Both helped to prepare the path for the International style and its successors.42

More recently the City Beautiful has come under the critical scrutiny of Marxist historians. They argue that the City Beautiful movement, responding to imperialistic impulses and economic cycles, strove to create spatial order and unity in the city. The effort epitomized new governmental efforts to rationalize the urban chaos produced by capitalism and to allow private enterprise to function more efficiently. The movement attempted to impose discipline and control upon the masses through visual and spatial manipulation. It tried to provide a noble idealism and the symbolism of a purified city in neoclassic design. Consultant-planners such as Robinson were bound to fail, or achieve limited success, partly because of their fake aestheticism and altruistic rhetoric. Worse, they could not or would not understand that private enterprise itself was the cause of urban malformations. Therefore, they could only arrange, at best, a somewhat brighter facade behind which capitalism continued its dirty work of exploitation. The limits of the City Beautiful were no more evident than in its failure to deal with housing, for an effective housing program would have challenged exploitative, speculative land values.

Americans, in contrast to Europeans, would not assent to significant land-use controls until planners could demonstrate the capitalist utility of zoning.43 A one-paragraph summary cannot do justice to the Marxist analysis, nor can a non-Marxist rebuttal hope to satisfy Marxists. With those caveats entered, the way is open for some observations. First, most of the Marxist critique of the City Beautiful has been advanced by non-Marxists: the relationship to imperialism; the thrust toward utilitarianism, improvement, social control, and civic idealism; and the lack of detailed concern for housing. The critique, in other words, does not necessarily spring from the Marxist beliefs in the depravity of the proletariat. The Marxists themselves, beyond their dialectical conclusions, disagree on such matters as the application of the business cycle to planning and the definition of the City Beautiful movement. A word about housing: Given popular attitudes that place “adequate” housing well down on the list of desirable goods, an ever-expanding definition of adequate housing responding to the rising level of prosperity and to suburbanization, and poor housing in countries having a less potent ideology of private property (or none at all), it does not seem so strange for the City Beautiful movement to place housing beyond the scope of its full treatment. Settlement house workers and others were studying the housing questions without, at the same time, dealing effectively with many of the other problems engaging the City Beautiful planners. It was a sensible division of labor.44

The origin and spirit of the City Beautiful idea refute the Marxist belief in beautification as the willing tool of capitalism. The phrase City Beautiful had been around at least from the time Frances Hodgson Burnett, in her 1895 formula novel, applied it to the Chicago fair. But the inspiration for its widespread use derived from the lecture series of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in England, published in 1897. Two years later Robinson and Municipal Affairs applied its arguments to American cities, and the gathering movement had a slogan. The English lecturers had emphasized two themes: The city, the home of all citizens, should be beautiful; and its beautification involved a substantial restraint on private enterprise. The problem, in their view, was not the inadequacy of individual housing but the pathetic state of humanity’s common room, the city. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson declared that “Art must be controlled and directed” toward “the creation of the City Beautiful, the beautiful house of Mankind.” Halsey Ricardo spoke for the psychic benefits of a beautiful, polychromatic city. “Strong and brave,” he urged, “let us go out to our flight clothed with the distinction that colour can give us, and cheered by the camaraderie . . . the day’s work done, there is the city beautiful—firm, stable, our home.”45

The curbs on capitalist activity involved more than those necessary to secure public land and construct various improvements. W. R. Lethaby...
William H. denounced the “sticky slime of soot” falling from the London sky. Walter Crane attacked advertising posters, “often vulgar, coarse, and debased.” Ricardo referred to the struggle “against want and disease, dirt and disorder.” Capitalism might survive a cleanup of London soot, strict advertising regulation, and the controls necessary to defeat “want and disease, dirt and disorder.” If it survived, it would be as an economic arrangement much modified from the late nineteenth century’s. In any case the issue was not the destruction or survival of capitalism. It was the creation of the City Beautiful.  

Nor is it correct to claim that the struggle for the City Beautiful involved the more insightful, progressive capitalists versus the retrograde industrial capitalists, who wanted to keep their chimney soot. No such neat vocational divisions existed, as examinations of Kansas City, Harrisburg, and Seattle have demonstrated. Appeals to economic self-interest accompanied improvement campaigns in those cities and others, to be sure. But they rested on a belief in human rationality, a realistic assessment of existing socioeconomic arrangements, and a conviction that the private enterprise system was generally beneficial. They were not born of a blind trust in capitalism or capitalists.

The Survival of the City Beautiful

The ideals of the City Beautiful survived in spite of the critics’ best efforts. The phrase City Beautiful continued popular for years with laymen, who applied it to a variety of planning and improvement concerns. In 1928 the magazine of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce urged each homeowner to adapt an exterior lighting plan and “develop our residential sections into veritable fairylands after sundown.” The use of outdoor lighting would demonstrate how the “quest of the ‘City Beautiful’ proceeds continuously in America.” Two years later the president of the Dallas Chamber told his organization’s annual meeting that “the love of beauty prompts and motivates most of our individual desires.” Urban beauty in architecture, landscaping, and other arts differentiates grandeur from mere size and “leaves its imprint upon the very soul of citizenship.” A beautification program would mean “that Dallas might be known throughout the land not only as the ‘City of the Hour,’ but also as the ‘City Beautiful.’” McFarland, inveigh as he might against the use of City Beautiful, could not keep the phrase out of circulation.

Critics and planners could censure or ignore the City Beautiful, but they did not rule out urban beautification altogether; nor did most of them completely condemn the movement. Thomas Adams’s 1915 statement of city practical planning “factors” would not have caused a quarrel with a City Beautiful advocate. Nelson P. Lewis, a New York engineer and bureaucrat, took a city practical view of planning in 1916 and breathed a sigh of relief over the declining use of City Beautiful, but he did not discourage beauty. Indeed, he stressed the need for park development and the intelligent placement of public buildings. The publication in 1922 of Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets’s The American Vitruvius: An Architects’ Handbook of Civic Art testified to the survival of traditional civic design. The 1922 National Conference on City Planning heard two papers on beautification as an integral part of planning. Two years later Lewis Mumford let fly a scathing criticism of the City Beautiful in his now famous Sticks and Stones. But he was far too perceptive to dismiss the movement outright. “The civic center and the parkway represented the better and more constructive side of it”, as did railroad stations. In the next decade, when Mumford the critic metamorphosed into Mumford the planner, he proposed many City Beautiful concepts and designs for Honolulu: vistas, formal parks in town and wilder ones in remotar areas, and a comprehensive view of the organic city ranged against the special claims of neighborhoods. The Hubbard and Hubbard’s text of 1929 praised contemporary city planning, located its origins in the late nineteenth century, and defused “the bugbear of the ‘City Beautiful.”

Perhaps the most amazing restatement of the City Beautiful ideal was George B. Ford’s, delivered to the 1929 National Conference on City Planning. “Yes, most of our towns are colorless and anything but inspiring and so perhaps a wistful longing comes over us to recapture some of the beauty of life,” declared a man who led the charge against the City Beautiful. Saying that “the demand for beauty is innate,” Ford called for more than making “our towns merely safe, healthy and convenient.” He reminded his listeners that beauty “is not a cosmetic” but “is fundamental and basic to the design of any object.” He lamented how “our towns, so well planned for safety, health, and efficiency, have failed to inspire our enthusiasm.” Ford called for new efforts at tree planting. Of street fixtures and furniture, he says, “We may not be conscious of them, but subconsciously they give us a sense of well-being and satisfaction and a certain unconscious pride in the street.” His praise of beauty and of “The City Beautiful” was so fulsome, it is tempting to interpret it as the recantation of a dubious devotion to the city practical. It is evidence, certainly, that City Beautiful positions were defended for a generation after they first came under siege.

In 1943 Harland Bartholomew praised the practicality of City Beautiful plans. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “most of these first comprehensive city plans were considered too visionary or impractical or were misconstrued to be schemes intended chiefly for beautification of the city. Their more fundamental objectives, intended to correct mistakes and bring about a more orderly growth, were seldom appreciated.” Bartholomew’s appreciation was unusual in a depression and wartime America not so hostile to the City Beautiful as it was forgetful.

In the late 1940s and 1950s professional planners and architectural
modernists held the field, but two books forecast a reawakening to the classical heritage. Christopher Tunnard's *The City of Man* (1953) was at once urban and community history, a celebration of the humane environment, a condemnation of modernist self-indulgence, and a recovery of neoclassical civic design. Henry Hope Reed, Jr.'s. paean to the grace, proportion, utility, and humanity of neoclassicism and to City Beautiful planning appeared in 1959. Mainstream architectural historians ridiculed *The Golden City* and its author, but Reed's book foretold a resurgence of neoclassical appreciation.31

The ferment of the 1960s focused fresh attention on American cities. A rejuvenated search for the urban past arose from nostalgia, preservationism, fresh scholarship, a yearning for individual and neighborhood stability amid a whirligig of change, dissatisfaction with "modern" commercial and domestic architecture, and disaffection from contemporary city planning. The 1962 protest against the demolition of the magnificent, neoclassical Pennsylvania Station drew attention to the emerging attitudes. Lewis Mumford, who forty years before declared halt the great monument's demise, but they helped to spark the preservation movement. Vincent Scully, no uncritical friend of the City Beautiful, was not alone when in 1969 he published second thoughts: "A later generation was to deride [Penn Station's] formal dependence upon the Baths of Caracalla. One is less sure than one used to be that such was a very relevant criticism.... It was academic building at its best, rational and ordered according to a pattern of use and a blessed sense of civic excess. Nor were the contributions of landscape architects forgotten, as when in 1964 Leonard K. Eaton published his appreciation of Jens Jensen.32

The momentum gathered. Ada Louise Huxtable forcefully criticized contemporary architecture and lovingly evoked Beaux-Arts tradition for New Yorkers and the nation. In 1974 August Heckscher published *Alive in the City: Memoir of an Ex-Commissioner*, a sympathetic appraisal of the New York City parks from his commissioner's perspective. Three years later, in *Open Spaces: The Life of American Cities*, he performed the same service for the rest of the country, praising half-forgotten City Beautiful plans and suggesting how their built features could be recaptured for contemporary use. George E. Condon detailed the beginnings of the revival of Cleveland's mall area, and the Da Capo Press republished Burnham's *Plan of Chicago*. Walter C. Kidney's *The Architecture of Choice* (1974) assayed the substyles of the neoclassical. A preservationist and architecture buff could find his fault with the ragtag Mill Creek area. Along Turtle, read a photograph underline, "residential values enhanced and stabilized as the direct result of following a Kessler recommendation." On Mill, cheap construction... of a storm sewer at cost of over $4,000,000... Residential decay is prevalent here today." In the 1970s and 1980s other Dallas authors bemoaned the loss of Mill Creek, revived Kessler's idea of a lake in the Trinity River bottoms, and praised Lake Cliff Park in the Oak Cliff section. In Denver in 1971 and again in 1973, the city council imposed building height limitations around the Civic Center area, responding partly to pressure from the private Civic Center Association. The actions were intended to preserve the Rocky Mountain views and prevent skyscraper encroachments on the center. In 1976 the council designated the Civic Center area as a historic district.33

Harrissburg's Susquehanna riverfront area has become dowdy with age but still graciously hosts civic celebrations such as Fourth of July fireworks displays. In the early 1960s the Kansas City Board of Park Commissioners published an illustrated historical booklet, *Cowtown 1880 Becomes City Beautiful* 1962, proudly reviving the once ridiculed phrase. Kansas City's public fountains spout and splash, and its Civic Center, built far away from the Union Station during the Boss Pendergast era, is attractively maintained. Seattle's city government has been especially sensitive to its civic areas and to the Olmsted legacy. The city's neighborhood associations have demonstrated a remarkable vitality and success in improving the quality and integrity of their communities. The parks and boulevards continue to be attractive.34

The City Beautiful revival continued despite the publication in 1961 of Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Her landmark work condemned the professional planners' macroscale mentality and stimulated a neighborhood revival movement already well under way. The book was trenchant and close-grained in argument, but it also contained a condemnation of the City Beautiful movement written from ignorance of its purpose and achievements, as well as special pleading and faulty logic. Fortunately for the survival of City Beautiful artifacts, Jacobs's many adherents read her book selectively.35

There is, of course, some validity to the critics' comments, however...
The City Beautiful movement attempted too much. America's fragmented politics were a formidable barrier to the coordinated physical overhauling of widely varying sizes and types of cities ranged across a continent. Enthusiastic organizing, speech making, and writing were no substitute for determined and intelligent action in each and every city. Too often a published plan and citizen idealism passed for purposefulness.

The movement was too naive and hopeful, socially and architecturally. McFarland's writings are a case in point. "It is well known that environment very greatly influences human beings," the hyperactive, diminutive printer wrote in 1908. That was well enough, but the moralistic McFarland had a corollary to deliver. "The education in ugliness that is constantly proceeding through the special privilege assaults of the billboards is not an education that tends towards the production of good citizens." It is easy to imagine, behind the charming simplicity and directness of McFarland's statements, a chilling assumption of an adroit environmental manipulation that would produce "good citizens." McFarland could not have achieved such a drastic physical reshaping of cities, and anyway, such a reformulation almost certainly would not have created McFarland's "good citizens." Later generations inherited McFarland's environmentalism, but they are also the legatees of McFarland's environmentalism's horrible brutalities. It is understandable, if nonsensical, for them to read into environmentalist statements an ignorance of the complexity of urban life and an overweening desire for close control of the citizen. 57

Moreover, the architectonic visions of the movement's civic design phase invited the ridicule and reductionist critiques of the city practical. Changes in architectural taste and in society invite us to depreciate outmoded styles. Nothing else earns a certificate of critical acuity as rapidly and easily as an attack on the architecture of the immediate past from the perspective of the present. It is equally facile and as intellectually slipshod to compare architecture in the mode of the City Beautiful with that of a repressive totalitarianism. 58

The Contributions of the City Beautiful

The limitations of the City Beautiful movement and of its critics aside, the movement achieved much. It spoke to yearnings for an ideal community and to the potential for good in all citizens. Therein lies its most important but least remarked contribution. For all its idealistic rhetoric, the movement was imbued with the courage of practicality, for it undertook the most difficult task of all: to accept its urban human material where found, to take the city as it was, and to refashion both into something better. Contrast its realism with the contemporaneous anturban Garden City movement, which proposed radical deconcentration and the destruction of the great cities. The Garden City movement and its heirs have thrilled academics with their altruistic systems involving significant restrictions on private ownership and enterprise. The fact is, however, that the Garden Cities and their successors have at best become suburbs with fairly typical suburban dynamics. 59

The City Beautiful movement was fundamentally an urban political reform movement. It left a legacy of civic activism and flexibility in the urban political structure. The professional planning expert advanced to the fore during the era, but the network of concerned, politically aware laymen was equally important to City Beautiful success. The network survived in the ACA and found outlets in general and specialized periodicals, conventions, and speeches. Women, usually middle-class women, learned how to make their communities aware of problems of sanitation, cleanliness, and public beauty. The physical legacy - tree-shaded boulevards, undulating parks, and graceful neoclassic buildings rich in ornament and craftsmanship - remain to remind later generations of ancestors who built for their own times, to be sure, but who consciously tried to create a future city of order, system, and beauty. We must, therefore, consider not only what City Beautiful planners designed and wrote but also what they did. The City Beautiful mode of civic scale was for a time so pervasive that even the architects of skyscrapers respected it. As Thomas Bender and William R. Taylor have written, the design and detailing of the first five or six stories of the early skyscrapers responded to sidewalk and street viewing. 60

The movement generated a large and continuing interest in the improvement and preservation of beauty in Washington, D.C. While acknowledging Washington's "undemocratic and arbitrary form of government," McFarland appealed to "the opportunity Washington affords for working out the physical details of city improvement in a broader fashion than is likely to be practicable under the ordinary conditions." McFarland understood Washington's oxymoronic quality. It was politically anomalous and therefore of no practical use to the citizen activist in the midst of a struggle over a bond issue, but its inspirational possibilities were potentially unbounded. 61

The City Beautiful movement also illuminates some issues of continuity and change in urban America. The City Beautiful assumed, without acknowledgment, much of the Olmstedian rhetoric about the value of urban beautification. City practical planners embraced beauty in the cityscape despite their denunciations of the City Beautiful. The spirit of each era differed one from the other, underlining the simultaneity of continuity and change. 62

Its development of the comprehensive plan marked the City Beautiful era's great departure from the past. The adjective comprehensive has so often modified the noun plan as to rob comprehensive of all meaning.
Restoring content to comprehensive assumes that a truly comprehensive plan is pervasive, reaching into all or almost all parts of the city; that it attempts to deal with a broad range of urban problems; and that, consequently, it is multifunctional.

By such a definition few of the senior Olmsted's plans were comprehensive, although the later ones addressed the issues of recreation, controlled urban growth, and residential area development, among others. They were multifunctional, but they left important central areas untouched. Andrew Green's 1865 plan for Manhattan Island above Fifty-ninth Street was all-embracing but geographically limited. A single-function plan, a sewage disposal system for example, meets only one need, albeit an essential one. It cannot be comprehensive, no matter how elegantly designed, no matter what insights into urban structure and form its designer gains while developing it. Nor does deciding where certain buildings or institutions should be scattered about make one "a comprehensive city planner" unless the placing is done with reference to a comprehensive city plan. Partial plans were often intelligently designed, carefully integrated with other activities, and systematically carried out, but none of that makes them comprehensive.63

The City Beautiful movement produced the first comprehensive plans based on a theory of the organic city. The park and boulevard systems would provide varied recreational and educational opportunities, help shape cities while they directed their growth, open up new residential developments, divide urban areas into functionally separate subdistricts, and assist in the development of transportation and other utilities. Civic centers adjacent to retail-commercial cores would rationalize and centralize governmental functions, enhance civic pride through inspirational scenes, and build civic patriotism by providing a place of democratic mingling and celebration. The civic center and the park and boulevard system, together with playgrounds, would pervade the city with their positive influences. Later planners would decry the City Beautiful as much as they wished, but they owed it a heavy debt — their own concept of comprehensiveness.

Despite the City Beautiful's contributions, its legacy is not always appreciated or preserved. The realities of urban budget constraints, the pressures of the private automobile, and changes in citizen interest and use combine with public indifference to wreak havoc with some City Beautiful survivals. Harrisburg's boulevard system is a shambles of neglect, obliterated in places by trafficways. Wildwood Park is a ruin, its lake silted, its pathways overgrown and befouled with trash illegally dumped, its meadow the site of a freeway interchange — in all a mockery of McFarland's praise for the reclaimed Harrisburg of the 1910s and 1920s. White Rock Lake Park in Dallas, City and Washington parks in Denver, and Green Lane Park in Seattle attract crowds far beyond their capacity, creating maintenance headaches and, in some cases, heartburn in nearby residents. David Dillon, Dallas's insightful architectural critic, warned of the high-rise buildings, many of indifferent-to-ghastly design, crowding the margins of Turtle Creek. Denver's Pioneer Monument stands deserted in a tiny, uninviting triangle reduced to accommodate noisy automobile traffic, its basin empty, its fountain jets turned off. In Kansas City, Jarvis Hunt's grand Union Station, now disused, moldered away.64

The shabby treatment of some City Beautiful artifacts underscores the reality: However much it may be praised or fondly recalled, the City Beautiful movement is over and cannot be revived in the megalopolitan era. Even sympathetic critics find City Beautiful smuttness a little too much. As Joan Draper remarked, when the San Francisco Civic Center was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, the revived interest in neoclassic design did not lead anyone to propose creating new neoclassical monuments.65

Still, a neoclassical revival might not be a bad idea. A look around the later public architecture of Denver's Civic Center area does little to inspire faith in the individuality of architects restrained only by "funding," "the site," and "the problem." The Denver Art Museum appears to be thrown up by a Mesa Verde chieftain to keep his treasures safe from the hordes. Its slabby bulk, too close to the City and County Building, dominates the older structure's tower. The Colorado State Judicial Building stands on two legs at either end of a giant cutout first floor. The four floors above threaten to press down upon the void and bow the building in the middle. It is an unsettling experience either to view this strange white concoction or to walk underneath it, through the cutout. Next to the judicial building is the dark brown Colorado Heritage Center, looking like nothing so much as a wedge of chocolate cake badly cut and indifferently dropped on a plate by a Brobdinagnagian hostess. The site and design make the structure practically incapable of expansion, an unfortunate circumstance in a building dedicated to the perpetual collection and preservation of Colorado's past. Only the 1950s brick-and-glass public library fits comfortably into its corner of the Civic Center and blends well with its surroundings.

It was not just the City Beautiful era in which reach exceeded grasp. So it becomes all the more important to remember what the City Beautiful advocates were reaching for, an ordered society in which dignified, cooperative citizens of whatever station or calling moved through scenes suffused with beauty. It was a glorious ideal, incapable of realization, but eternally beckoning. No one captured the spirit of the ceaseless quest better than Jules Guerin in a painting for the Plan of Chicago. In it, the viewer is suspended above Lake Michigan, near the yacht harbor, looking west over the city. It is dusk. A thin band of fading vermilion lingers above the western horizon. The city lights long since should have been turned on, but it is as though the citizens by common agreement have kept them off. There is purpose in their unity. How else could the
viewer focus upon the dome of the great city hall, as the sun’s last rays light it in glowing gold?

Notes


3 Ibid., 117, 118.


6 "Burnham and Bennett, Plan of Chicago, plates cxxii, cxx, cxxi, cxxi, and cxxii, Chicago: Commercial Club, 1909.

7 Ibid., 108-9.


9 Quoted in Hines, Burnham, 369.

10 A list of buildings completed by Burnham’s firms is found in Hines, Burnham, 371-83.


13 For Manning and Harrisburg, see McFarland to Woodruff, 26 Nov. 1915, box 13, McFarland Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives. For expert planners’ changing relationships, see Scott, American City Planning, 110-269, especially 227-37.


20 For McFarland’s analysis of his role, see McFarland to John Nolen, 15 Feb. 1909, John Nolen Papers, Collection 2903, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Cornell University.


22 Olmsted to Olmsted, 12 Dec. 1909, folder 163, box 20A, Olmsted Correspondence. Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

23 McFarland’s concern for the creation of new slums by failing to provide for the dispossessed from cleared slums is in his letter to Graham Romeyn Taylor, 14 Dec. 1912, box 9, McFarland Papers.

24 For billboards, see Kristin Sylvain Bailey, "Fighting Civic Smallpox": The Civic Club of Allegheny County’s Campaign for Billboard Regulation,


28 Ford, ed., City Planning Progress, v-vi. Most of the plans dated from the City Beautiful era.


30 See Ford, ed., City Planning Progress, 5-193; and Hancock, "John Nolen," 334-44.


34 Kahn, Imperial San Francisco, 200, 201. Other examinations of Burnham's plan are in Hines, Burnham, 174-96; and Mellier G. Scott, The San Francisco Bay Area: A Metropolis in Perspective (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 79-121.

35 Draper, San Francisco Civic Center (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1979), 12 (quotation, 19). The one-tenth of centers begun is my estimate, not Draper's.

36 For comparative construction costs, see Hines, Burnham, 386.


42 For discussions of the parallelism of neoclassical and other styles, see


56 For Jacobs on the City Beautiful, see her *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 24-25. Jacobs may be correct in her claim that parks do not by themselves raise property values, a subject of much debate, but she loads her argument with a discussion of four small Philadelphia squares obviously unable to control the construction around them, 92-101. Her discussion of a "clay dog"-making beach replaced by a park lawn is poignant but it draws a false analogy between the action of waves and sun on clay deposits and the values of unplanned human activity, 446-47. For one criticism of Jacobs, see Fitch, *American Building*, 296-307. For another criticism of the City Beautiful with little practical effect on the growing interest in the movement, see Robert Goodman, *After the Planners* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 60, 98-103, 122, 130.


61 McFarland to Clinton Rogers Woodruff, 31 Dec. 1913, box 12, McFarland Papers. For a sampling of the new extensive material on Washington, see ACA resolution, "Referring to the Improvement of the City of Washington and District of Columbia under Plans of the Commission Appointed by the Senate of the United States" (1904) file 2823, box 135, Olmsted Records; and American Institute of Architects et al., *An Appeal to the Enlightened Sentiment of the People of the United States for the Safeguarding of the Future Development of the Capital of the Nation* (Washington, D.C., 1916). Unfinished...
Washington, not historical continuity, was part of an inspiration for a 1960s effort to beautify the city, although a few of the participants in the movement were aware of their predecessors. See Lewis L. Gould, *Lady Bird Johnson and the Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 37–135.

62 Elements of *City Beautiful* plans survived in later planning schemes, a phenomenon noted as early as 1927 by Jacob L. Crane, Jr., "Errors to Avoid in City Planning," in *Official Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Annual Convention Held at Dallas, Texas, November 14–18, 1927*, American Society for Municipal Improvements (St. Louis, 1928), 98.


65 Draper, *San Francisco Civic Center* 59.

This chapter is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding. It is also, and mostly, an attempt to introduce new principles of city planning and rebuilding, different and even opposite from those now taught in everything from schools of architecture and planning to the Sunday supplements and women's magazines. My attack is not based on quibbles about rebuilding methods or hairsplitting about fashions in design. It is an attack, rather, on the principles and aims that have shaped modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding.

In setting forth different principles, I shall mainly be writing about common, ordinary things: for instance, what kinds of city streets are safe and what kinds are not; why some city parks are marvelous and others are vice traps and death traps; why some slums stay slums and other slums regenerate themselves even against financial and official opposition; what makes downtowns shift their centers; what, if anything, is a city neighborhood, and what jobs, if any, neighborhoods in great cities do. In short, I shall be writing about how cities work in real life, because this is the only way to learn what principles of planning and what practices in rebuilding can promote social and economic vitality in cities, and what practices and principles will deaden these attributes.