The City Beautiful Movement

by

Mariana Leandro Pizzol

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Sponsor: Lisa Keller

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INTRODUCTION

Often when trekking through our cities on our daily commutes, we have time to look around us and see our environment for what feels like the first time. The facade of Grand Central Station in New York, in all its monumentality, the heights of the corporate buildings in Midtown, or just the beautifully arranged townhouses in Greenwich Village all offer glimpses at both the present and the past life of the city. Urban environments offer a rich history behind them, encompassing the very beginnings of the nation as a colonial entity all the way to its industrial rise and emergence as major centers of commerce and culture. Many of the ways that these historical events are expressed in today’s cities are through their physical environments, whether that be zoning, planning, or simply architectural ornamentation. All of these aesthetic and practical elements offer a way of analyzing what the city was before and what it is now, and particularly how they got there. Different ideologies and developments all push against one another, and sometimes even converge, to create the cities we know today.

This paper aims to look at one of those ideologies, and offer an analysis of its place in contemporary urban environments. This work will look at the City Beautiful movement, one of many architectural and ideological movements of the early 20th century in America during the Progressive Era. This movement is often forgotten in the larger context of urban planning and design, but in looking at its place in history, I hope to further illuminate its importance in how we look at our cities today, and what work the City Beautiful did in creating a new consciousness in the public eye for planning and thinking about what cities could be. For the City Beautiful, the main concern was the combination of aesthetic and practical elements in planning the development of new cities during the rising age of industrialism. The proponents of the
movement were concerned with the scale and rapid pace of development and urban sprawl, and sought through their own ideological framework to alleviate the newly discovered stresses of the industrial city. Through comprehensive planning and careful attention to public space, the City Beautiful’s solution lay in its name: making the city beautiful to make its inhabitants beautiful, too. Civic duty was emphasized, and in planning what became the centerpiece of City Beautiful planning, the civic center, architects and planners alike hoped to instill pride in not only the physical environment but also in democracy itself.

My interest in the subject arises from a broader interest in cities as centers of cultural development, and I happened upon the City Beautiful in part during research on public and municipal art in New York. In Dr. Michelle Bogart’s book, *The Politics of Urban Beauty: New York and its Art Commission*, the City Beautiful movement is mentioned in passing, but Bogart emphasizes its significant role in the development of public consciousness regarding the role of aesthetics in cities, which would extend to the creation of the Art Commission and their role in creating public art for public good. In reading the book, I was interested in the City Beautiful specifically because I had never heard of it previously. In further researching the subject, I realized that the movement was fairly short-lived, spanning only about 20 years from the beginning of the 20th century and until the Roaring 20s took over. I sought to understand why a movement which seemed to have an incredibly broad range of plans and a great number of ideas that fit quite well into Progressive ideology was so buried in the history books, and why I had not heard of them sooner.

The key issues with the City Beautiful movement’s rapid rise and fall in the public eye encompass many things that are explored further in the chapters that follow: prohibitive costs
and competing ideological standpoints, as well as idealistic and often impractical planning initiatives that sought to completely replan cities which were already quite well-established were a few of the major pitfalls that befell the movement and contributed to its quick demise. Though the time in which the movement was most active was prime for new ideas dressed in the rhetoric of reform, the extremely broad scope that the City Beautiful took in their efforts to plan better and more beautiful places to live were more often than not either partially or completely abandoned, and so contemporarily, there are few concrete examples of their influence to point to. One of the major discoveries of my research points to exactly how influential the movement was in planning one of the most prominent cities of the U.S. today, Washington, D.C. Its layout and general architectural plan is a direct byproduct of the City Beautiful, as one of its more well-known architects, Daniel Burnham, had direct influence over its planning.

I used primary and secondary source material, from newspapers to primary publications by figures like Daniel Burnham and Charles Mulford Robinson, both active participants and spokespeople for the movement. I was able to create a timeline of the City Beautiful’s rise and fall during the 20th century, and look closely at the roots of its ideological form. The work of Charles Mulford Robinson, who was the ideological spearhead of the movement, serves to flesh out the less concrete goals of the movement; in his many works, from *The Improvement of Towns and Cities* in 1901 to *The Call of the City* in 1908, he outlined the City Beautiful in extraordinary detail, offering aesthetic and practical guidelines for what he saw as the future of urban planning. Burnham offers even more perspective; in his work as an architect for both Washington, D.C. and Chicago, two cities majorly impacted by City Beautiful planning, the guidelines set forth by Robinson become real. Analyzing the published plans for both of these cities, as well as earlier work in San Francisco, Burnham’s commitment to creating beautiful and organized public space
illustrates the best of the City Beautiful’s influence. These primary sources, combined with the work of scholars in the field of urban planning such as Jon Peterson, David Schuyler, and Robert Wiebe, creates a picture of a movement filled with optimism, and pushed forward by the tide of reform characteristic of the Progressive Era. In creating a timeline of the movement’s rise and fall, I hope to illustrate the impact this optimism and tirelessness had on urban planning today.
THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

Beginning in the mid-1870s, the Progressive Era of American politics and culture was one defined by massive change. The Progressive era encompasses both the postbellum Civil War moment and the Gilded Age, which is marked by the massive increase of wealth and rapid industrialization of population centers like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Detroit. Ending around 1920, it was also a period of reform movements aimed at improving different aspects of society: “social movements…[arose] from a committed minority of citizens working together to shape larger public consciousness about particular injustices in addition to working for concrete political change.”

Notable reforms and movements of the era were in the areas of tenement and housing, labor (more specifically, child labor reform), factory safety regulations as a result of “dramatic advances during the latter decades of the 19th century in scientific knowledge,” and new philanthropic endeavors allowing for investment in public programs by magnates like Andrew Carnegie. All of these factors created one of the most tumultuous times in history, as economic anxieties and the new problems of industrialism emerged. Cities became overcrowded, dirty, mismanaged, and disorganized as they became industrial, and organizations came into existence to alleviate those problems.

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The evolution of the city from pre-industrial to industrial began in the mid-19th century. Following the Civil War, cities increasingly became industrial labor centers, which coincided with a population boom following immigration from eastern and Southern Europe.

The population in these new industrial cities could result in neighborhoods which were homogeneous along religious and demographic lines. As some historians indicate, the industrial city was characterized by a “major transformation in the social order[…]and more complex administrative and legal systems and more rigorous systems of thought.” Public police forces were critical in maintaining and securing this new complex social order: “A method had to be found of securing public order, and that method[…]was to be the newly constituted public police.”

In the late 19th century, cities saw rapid population growth, which proved a problem for many reformers working to alleviate the stress on tenements. The tenements were densely populated areas of cities, most often occupied by low-income immigrants. They were plagued with problems of crowding and mismanagement because of the extremely haphazard condition of their construction and the lack of space in them. Immigration was at an all-time high, and these masses would only exacerbate anxieties about space and sanitation in the city. Using New York as an example, between 1890 -1920, the foreign-born population percentage remained

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between 35%-40% of the overall population of the city.\(^8\) Almost half the population of New York City was immigrants by the first decade of the 20th century, and as a result, population density skyrocketed. Overcrowding gave way to concerns both practical and physical about new development, as reformers sought a way to make it harder for new buildings to house more tenants than was legal. In 1894, “parts of Manhattan recorded the highest population density in the world. The most congested wards of the Lower East Side had between 366 and 701 people per acre.”\(^9\) By comparison, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average population density of New York City in 2010 was 42.2 people per acre, with the highest density in Manhattan being 108 people per acre.\(^10\)

Reformers like Lawrence Veiller and Jacob Riis worked in their respective fields to create awareness and eventually legislation like the New York State Tenement Act of 1901, setting parameters for new tenement development in efforts to minimize overcrowding and mandating minimum standards for light and air.\(^11\) Veiller especially was well-known for his work with the Charity Organization Society and later as a city planner for the city of New York, and became a great name in housing reform during the era for his legislative work on the Tenement Act.\(^12\) His

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\(^9\) Beito, “The ‘Lodger Evil.’”


work enforced a growing “deep-seated ideological belief that urban congestion represented an offense against human nature.”  

Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, which depicts some of the worse conditions of the tenements of the time, remains as the best example of muckraking journalism of the era. Published first in 1890, the book detailed the conditions of families in some of the most dense areas of the city, including modern day Hell’s Kitchen and Five Points, both concentrated areas of factory work and low-income housing. Most important to Riis and his readers alike, though, were the dozens of photographs published in the book, serving as the most damning evidence of the disorder of the growing city and their plight of the urban poor. These exposes showed that “poor urban dwellers appeared susceptible to every variety of social, physical, and spatial disorder: crime, saloons, and a steady deterioration of the mind and body.” This marked the beginning of an increasingly common theme in the Progressive Era’s ideology: the confluence of health and environment, illustrated in the tenement houses’ lack of clean living spaces.

Child labor reform was similar to the tenement house reform: it was in part catalyzed by muckrakers exposing conditions of factory labor. Jacob Riis, as well as Upton Sinclair, known for *The Jungle*, were two of the most notable muckrakers of the time; their works detailed extreme cases of cruelty to children and the dangers of factory work on young minds and bodies. In the case of Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, some muckraking journalism fictionalized the struggle,

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13 Beito, “The ‘Lodger Evil’.”


creating allegorical narratives to illustrate real-life conditions in places such as Chicago’s Packingtown, a major center for slaughterhouses and meatpacking. Others, like Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, used the emerging art of photography to ignite public debate about both working conditions for children and living conditions for immigrants. Science was also gaining a more significant foothold in public debate of this kind. “The development of scientific expertise within newly founded public agencies such as the State Bureaus of Labor Statistics were instrumental in child labor reform[...]]”

Child labor reform had in fact begun before 20th century; for example, the 1886 New York State Child Labor Law was the first of its kind, prohibiting “the employment of children under 13 years of age in any manufacturing establishment, making no exceptions for children of needy families.” This inspired 44 more states and territories to enact similar child labor legislation by the end of the century. Advocates for reform characterize it as a moral wrong uncharacteristic of advanced societies. The rapid change in the labor force wrought by economic transformation led directly to the steep increase of child labor, and it was only through the work of notable legislators like Lawrence Veiller, the creation of unions, and the

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17 Perera, “Science as an Early Driver of Policy.”


19 Perera, “Science as an Early Driver of Policy.”

20 Perera, “Science as an Early Driver of Policy.”
establishment of the National Child Labor Committee in 1904 that change was effectively enacted nationwide.

Philanthropic endeavors became increasingly important during this time, as powerful social and economic elements converged to create some of the wealthiest men in American history: John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, the Vanderbilt family, and Andrew Carnegie were just a few of the people controlling some of the most important and useful resources in the nation. Carnegie, for example, was a steel magnate, and amassed a huge fortune over a number of years. He is considered the premiere example of the rise of the magnanimous philanthropist during the Gilded Age; his work *The Gospel of Wealth* illustrated a new way of looking at wealth distribution through charity. In *The Gospel of Wealth*, traditional forms of charity were investigated by Carnegie, who offered up a solution to the problem of mismanagement and corruption common with inherited estates: instead of amassing the fortune, or otherwise frivolously spending it, the task of the inheritor was “to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds, which he is called upon to administer, and strictly bound as a matter of duty to administer in the manner which[…]is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community.”¹⁷ Carnegie’s conception of the distribution of charity was simply to engage in charity actively during life, rather than passively amass and spend wealth in life only to leave an unassuming sum to charity in death. This novel conception of wealth distribution did a lot to change the way projects for the public good were funded, as well as expanding the possibilities for those projects. With wealth from the top theoretically being

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distributed among the populace, reformers could found new initiatives based on private donation, and work more concretely towards their goals.

Carnegie especially proverbially put his money where his mouth was, through his numerous philanthropic endeavors, including the funding of libraries, pension funds for public educators, the founding of a university (Carnegie Mellon University), and endowments for peace, among other smaller donations.\textsuperscript{22} The concept of entrepreneurial philanthropy is necessarily accredited to him because of this; defined as “the pursuit by entrepreneurs on a not-for-profit basis of big social objectives through active investment”\textsuperscript{23}, entrepreneurial philanthropy had both the purpose of social improvement and increasing power over the outcomes of their investments. He was like many reformers of the time focused on the “power of the environment to make new citizens”\textsuperscript{24}; believing in the ameliorative power of education and the arts, he donated thousands of church organs to faith organizations, as well hundreds of thousands of dollar’s to a pension fund for teachers he started\textsuperscript{25}, believing in the ability of those teachers to help the underserved help themselves.\textsuperscript{26} His mentality mirrored that of the “bootstraps” narrative; that is, Carnegie believed only in charity insofar as those who were the

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\textsuperscript{24}Gillette, Jr., \textit{Civitas by Design}, 9.
\textsuperscript{26} Harvey et al., “Foundations of Contemporary Entrepreneurial Philanthropy.”
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recipients of it were “those who will help themselves.”\textsuperscript{27} His idea of a democratic society lay in his wish “to give to those who desire to rise the aids by which they may rise; to assist, but rarely or never to do all;”\textsuperscript{28} in this way, he would prevent reliance on public funding as a means of living, instead providing the tools which people could use to create their own wealth, and by extension, tools which people could use to create change.

Carnegie was the rich reformer; in providing his funds, which he did liberally throughout his life, using only personal funds and leaving the money from his companies untouched, he was able to enact change from the top down, providing resources and capital to populations with little but factory work to keep them occupied.\textsuperscript{29} Until his death in 1919, at the denouement of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, he served as the example to be followed of the power of entrepreneurial investment in public programs, and in the belief that public policy could change the course of the industrial city’s influence on its population. This belief was central to the turn toward entrepreneurial philanthropy in the era, and profoundly influenced the efforts for improvement in public policy and environment in the emerging industrial era.

These historical efforts for social improvements in cities were unprecedented in their time. Never had such impulses for change arisen so quickly and become so widespread in the United States, and the force with which they became important influences on public change is obvious in the reforms enacted during that time which still exist today. The abolition of child


\textsuperscript{29} Harvey et al., “Foundations of Entrepreneurial Philanthropy.”
labor in dangerous places like factories or mines in 1938, the regulation of zoning and development in city architecture, and the “birth of large-scale primary industry” all occurred during this period. Reformers cared deeply about these issues, and out of that empathy arose organized efforts from the individual to the federal level to find improvements for every day maladies. The activists of the Progressive Era “believed deeply in the empowerment and equality of the less privileged in society, the primacy of democracy in American life, and the notion that government should safeguard the common good from unchecked individual and commercial greed.” These beliefs gave way to changes to the environment meant to enact real change in people’s behaviors and psychologies, and “the belief that in improving the physical environment lay the key to civic as well as social regeneration.”

Out of this broader vision for reform the City Beautiful movement rose to prominence. The movement advocated protection of democracy, the alleviation of population growth, the improvement of the social and physical lives of workers, and the need for municipal programs to facilitate the organization and harmony of the city plan. The City Beautiful was a natural progression from tenement reformers’ concerns about zoning and planning new developments;

31 Beito, “The ‘Lodger Evil’.”
34 Gillette, Jr., Civitas by Design, 1.
“exuding the social optimism of the Progressive era, the national spokesmen for the cause repeatedly claimed that beauty would evoke or at least express a regenerated civic life.”

Unlike the legislation-minded reformers presented, though, the City Beautiful’s focus on aesthetic progress in cities accompanied their belief in the power of organization in creating better cities. The City Beautiful focused on both enacting zoning laws to control the urban environment and consideration for what the city looked like, believing that improving both the civic and aesthetic life of the industrial city would create “better citizens, […] better instructed, more artistic, and filled with civic pride.”

The goal of the movement was to take a comprehensive approach to planning the industrial city, regulating the sizes of developments but also the widths and lengths of streets, creating uniform plans that would support a sense of harmonious design meant to support public commerce and interpersonal relationships between fellow workers. It sought to alleviate all of the newly discovered ills of the urban environment through this detailed approach. Combining tenets of European architectural aesthetics and ideas from the preceding garden movement (whose most notable contributor was Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park), “these activists shared a belief in the beneficial effects of beautifying their communities.”


37 Robinson, “Excerpt from ‘Improvement in City Life’,” 213.

38 Gillette, Jr., *Civitas by Design*, 14.
The City Beautiful movement combined the reformer’s impulse for social and civic improvement and the popular moral argument for the improvement of towns and cities, “creating recreational opportunities [that]…would enable workers to ‘take up the burden of life in… crowded streets and endless stretches of buildings with renewed vigor and hopefulness.’” But, unlike many of the reformers of the physical city before them, their concerns extended beyond the realm of legislation, intersecting with artistic sensibilities in multiple places to combine aesthetic, political, and civic improvements.

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39 Gillette Jr., *Civitas by Design*, 17.
CITY BEAUTIFUL

The City Beautiful movement was a 20-year effort that changed the ways people thought about cities and how they were planned. It was connected to the Progressive era in promoting better conditions for cities that were changing under the effects of industrialization: immigration, expansion, and the stress of population growth all contributed to the Progressive era’s impulse for reform. The focus of the City Beautiful was to improve the physical spaces of cities, and to create “one harmonious architectural plan that shall create a magnificent centre of public business.”

Charles Mulford Robinson was the face of the movement; others associated with it included architects and planners such as Daniel Burnham and John Nolen. San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and even New York City were, at first, the focus of the City Beautiful; they hoped to make cities communities of “like-minded citizens”, and sought “to control urban growth and modify civic form” through beautification and organization. The movement originated in 1893, when the Chicago World’s Fair presented the public with the beautifully organized and idealized White City exhibition. The Fair changed public consciousness regarding how cities could look, and “gave a tangible shape to a desire that was


arising out of the larger wealth, the commoner travel, and the provision of the essentials of life.” In other words, the Fair’s aesthetic value and the comprehensive planning Burnham embarked on were an expression of newly arising desires and activities of the modern era, aided by the increase in wealth associated with this time period, which is the beginnings of the Gilded Age. Increased wealth of common citizens meant more travel and exposure to different architectural and aesthetic principles, especially in Europe. This is reflected in the adoption of Beaux-Arts style that became so common in Burnham’s and other City Beautiful plans.

The White City exhibition, organized by Daniel Burnham, an architect from Boston, was the first visualization of comprehensive planning in an urban setting. It was in Chicago for the first time, that people could walk through a town square that was highly organized, and built to be the center of the White City itself. The organizational principle behind the White City unified all of the most important aesthetic elements of the City Beautiful, and “offered Chicago a blueprint for growth and influenced city planning around the world.” Utilizing monumental architecture and a European-influenced style that emphasized ornamentation, the White City became a template for urban design and architecture going forward, and even today, its influences can be seen in buildings such as the Museum of Science and Industry and the Art Institute of Chicago.

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The major unifying architectural element of the White City was the classical style, known as Beaux-Arts architecture. Coming from France, Beaux-Arts architectural buildings became the calling card of the City Beautiful, with its emphasis on “‘correct’ reproduction of historical styles[…]and[…]the highest architectural values in the ceremonial grandeur, monumentality, and formal discipline…” In other words, the style imitated the monumental buildings found all over Europe, prominently displaying statues in building fronts with detailed trim, taking care to make the reproduction of these styles as historically accurate as possible. As a result, buildings took on old-world characteristics often associated with early Roman and Greek architecture, including high columns with decorated capitals along the front and statues or ornamentation along the tops of buildings. Burnham’s turn toward this architectural style in designing the White City caused the sharp turn toward Beaux-Arts architecture in larger culture that followed the exhibition, and as the Exposition came to a close, this influence remained, as “the American architectural establishment turned toward an ideal architecture that was held to represent eternal values.”

The City Beautiful entreated city-dwellers to take on the responsibility of improving their own environment through a new awareness of its possibilities. They were not concerned with cost, as they felt anything that improved people’s lives and the physical environment was worth it. This is seen most obviously in plans designed by Charles Robinson himself; in a plan designed for Los Angeles in 1907, and recounted in the Los Angeles Times, Robinson set no financial cap for the mass of improvements to the city that he outlined in 4 pages of the


newspaper. Instead, he took a different stance: “What does the city need, how can certain conditions be improved, and will the proposed remedy be worth the cost?”

The call for needs before means was another defining feature of how the City Beautiful viewed the path to better cities. As Robinson outlined in his Los Angeles plan, the improvements to the city were specifically formulated to encourage broader tourism and open commerce, and so as the costs mounted, the revenue weighed evenly against it. In reality, though, as it was for many cities, the costs of improvements on such a grand scale vastly outweighed possible tourist revenue, and the prohibitive nature of these costs often meant the dream of the City Beautiful remained a dream.

With this in mind, though, there were many challenges to imposing sweeping reforms to cities that were already in the throes of urbanization. One of the major pitfalls of the City Beautiful was its insistence upon fully redesigning already-existing urban communities, such as New York City. The radical alterations to city structure and form were often at odds with “the value of urban real estate [which] made large-scale departures from an existing city plan prohibitively expensive.” Even in major cities, where capital was flowing with more rigor due to major philanthropic and economic investment from Gilded Age magnates like Andrew Carnegie, the cost-benefit scale of City Beautiful was less than ideal. The push from municipal improvement societies often meant that some improvements were pushed through and realized,

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47“Grand Concourse Dominant Idea in Rare Vision of City Beautiful… Artistic Grouping of Public Buildings and Extension of Boulevards and Parks Also Are Recommended. Magnificent Approach to Union Depot, the Crowning Feature of the Plan. Picturesque Boulevards and Beautiful Central Mall are Mapped Out. City Beautiful.” Los Angeles Times (1866-1922), Dec 01, 1907.

48 “Grand Concourse Dominant Idea in Rare Vision of City Beautiful…” Los Angeles Times.

but for cities like New York, “the great achievements of the City Beautiful movement were [...] limited to the construction of discrete ensembles of Beaux Arts monuments and to the creation of imposing plazas…” 50 An example of this small-scale but lasting effect in New York is in monumental facades like the Public Library. As for the ever-present idea of the plaza or civic center in City Beautiful planning, grid-system style development in New York basically prohibited this, and the existing structures remained.

The idea of a civic center in the city was one of the most popular ideas of the City Beautiful, and a common thread throughout the numerous city plans proposed by its most active participants. In fact, in Charles Mulford Robinson’s 1904 work *Modern Civic Art, or the City Made Beautiful*, he details the importance of the administrative center of the city, stating that a city’s “municipal life should be centered here, and it should be a distinct and definite point.” 51 In creating a central space of administration and commerce, the City Beautiful believed that a sense of community was fostered more effectively, as the power of the centralized local government could be seen alongside the beautiful elements of their city. Thus, the people could trust their local governments to work in their best interest, on a path to creating “an enlightened local authority to guide future urban growth.” 52 From a well-organized city naturally came a well-organized local government, and the rest simply naturally followed.


This emphasis highlighted the desire for “one harmonious architectural plan that shall create a magnificent centre of public business”. The civic center idea serves as a microcosm of the ideals of the City Beautiful concentrated in one spot: organization of government both physically and ideologically, the convergence of multitudes of like-minded people in a democratic space, and out of that, a “natural setting for the sharing of interests.” A central point for all to engage in democracy and pleasure in a public forum made clear “the power of the environment to make new citizens,” which was the underlying message for the movement itself. As the spread of municipal organizations inspired by Robinson and Burnham’s rapidly growing visibility increased, local groups coalesced into the National League of Improvement Associations; the American Park and Outdoor Association joined it, meant to address the naturalization of the urban space. These groups worked on a small scale, often enacting legislation for the addition of park or outdoor play structures for their respective cities, or enlisting the commissioned assistance of Robinson himself in drafting new plans for improvements upon growing cities. Robinson’s professional life became busier in the early 20th century, and Burnham followed suit soon after with a major plan of his own: the McMillan Plan of 1902 drafted for Washington, D.C.

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54 Goist, “Planning the American City,” 124.


The McMillan Plan is the City Beautiful typified, and served as a viable blueprint for the development of Washington, D.C. Taking into consideration an earlier plan for the city drafted by a French major, the McMillan commission moved away from that plan, and was “chiefly concerned with the beautification of the city, the development of the park system, and the adequate treatment and development of the Federal public buildings.” In a stunning example of City Beautiful planning at work, the McMillan plan addressed the creation of what became the National Mall, Beaux-Arts architectural elements in the surrounding buildings, a parks and parkway system that would lead to the creation of the Fort Circle Parks, and the clearing of slums and railroad tracks to unify the city center with the surrounding green.

In reality these developments occurred incrementally, and the extensive park system grew smaller in scale as it was developed. Its focus on beauty and its tie to civic good gave the public the image of the City Beautiful that was sought after by Robinson and his peers: a “commitment to uplifting cities as a whole with the ultimate goal of reshaping civic life that made the movement so ambitious.”

The McMillan Commission and its influence on the aesthetic sensibility of Washington D.C. to this day offers a great example of the rare but lasting permanent impact of City Beautiful planning on our cities today. The National Mall remains an icon of Washington, D.C.’s map, as well as a major tourist attraction, and in looking around at its surrounding buildings, it is easy to see Burnham’s civic center coming to life.

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59 Gillette, Jr., Civitas by Design, 15.
After the publication of the McMillan Plan, Burnham and Robinson both enjoyed long and steady careers in the field of urban design, mostly on commission. The Plan for Chicago of 1909 brought Burnham back to the forefront of the City Beautiful’s public career, and Robinson’s continued work with the National League of Improvement Associations led to many commissions for cities nationwide: Colorado Springs, Oakland, California, Honolulu, Hawaii, and many others. Plans for cities like The City Beautiful began to taper off around the time of Charles Robinson’s death in 1917, as practical concerns based on cost and resources mounted and the piecemeal success of Washington, D.C.’s design showed some of the faults of the movement in considering aestheticism before practicality. Often, the concerns of beauty before those of economic viability meant that City Beautiful plans became simply pieces of paper with big dreams written on them, rather than concrete ways of moving forward with the urban community. The celebration of the city so sought by these architects and planners created an unprecedented “urban perspective on the possibilities of community” but often fell short of realizing those possibilities. Whether it was the prohibitive cost or the eventual rifts in the movement caused by differing perspectives on municipal improvement between social-social-justice minded reformists and urban designers, the movement fell short of its idealistic and lofty goals of creating a democratized civic environment to promote social regeneration. Though


63 Goist, “Planning the American City,”121.

64 Gillette, Jr., Civitas by Design, 19.
the movement itself was particularly short-lived, its effects remain among our landscape today, when looking at the National Mall of Washington D.C., the New York Public Library, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Even in seeing modern-day sustainability movements and community gardens becoming more visible, one can find a thread of City Beautiful-like community, where people come together to make their environments more beautiful for themselves and their neighbors.
MODERN CITIES MADE BEAUTIFUL

The true impact of the City Beautiful movement is often reduced to “the construction of discrete ensembles of Beaux Arts monuments and to the creation of imposing plazas…”\textsuperscript{65} Issues of cost and the idealistic nature of the movement’s goals limited the movement with a “middle-class bias that sought less to eliminate injustice than it did to restore an idealized vision of established republican principles”;\textsuperscript{66} as a result, much of the concrete impact of the City Beautiful today is limited. The focus of this chapter, then, is the analysis of that impact, both in particular modern cities and in modern academia. Criticisms of the City Beautiful’s limited perspective and overly optimistic nature have a valid place among the wider analysis of the movement, but are often also short-sighted when evaluating the extent of its impact on city planning today. In Washington, D.C. and Chicago especially, the lasting imprint of the City Beautiful is seen plainly in their park systems, civic centers, and administrative buildings. In academia, the still-growing field of urban planning and design owes much of its creation to Charles Mulford Robinson and Daniel Burnham. Beginning in the Progressive Era, the City Beautiful’s comprehensive approach to planning and improvement echoes across time through these cities, regulations, and more profoundly, in the communities created from them.

Though both Charles Mulford Robinson and Daniel Burnham were extremely active during the City Beautiful’s most prominent years in various civil and municipal improvement


\textsuperscript{66} Howard Gillette, Jr., Civitas by Design: Building Better Communities, from the Garden City to the New Urbanism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010): 5.
associations, there are unfortunately very few complete examples of City Beautiful-style planning. In truth, many cities resisted being re-planned so completely, mostly because of prohibitive cost. This was a historical problem, stretching back to Olmsted’s work in New York, where he found that “the value of urban real estate made large-scale departures from an existing city plan prohibitively expensive.” The idealism of the movement often overshadowed more practical concerns of cost to a city, and that is why so few examples of City Beautiful cities exist today. Robinson and Burnham in fact drew up plans for dozens of cities, including Colorado Springs, Raleigh, North Carolina, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and others. In the end, few chose to adopt these plans as a whole, with cities like Los Angeles and Colorado Springs opting for piecemeal reform. Despite this, those examples we do have of complete City Beautiful planning are formidable ones, and are exemplary of an overlooked icon of urban design.

Washington, D.C. remains as the best example of what a fully realized City Beautiful-style plan looks like in practice. In the nation’s capital, the implementation of the 1902 McMillan Plan for Washington D.C. created the National Mall as we know it today. The Mall represents the vision of the perfect civic center that became so integral to the City Beautiful’s plans, later elaborated upon in Charles Mulford Robinson’s *Modern Civic Art; or, the City Made Beautiful* in

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70 “Grand Concourse Dominant Idea in Rare Vision of City Beautiful.: Artistic Grouping of Public Buildings and Extension of Boulevards and Parks Also Are Recommended. Magnificent Approach to Union Depot, the Crowning Feature of the Plan. Picturesque Boulevards and Beautiful Central Mall are Mapped Out. City Beautiful.” *Los Angeles Times* (1866-1922), Dec 01, 1907.

Daniel Burnham’s important work on the plan all but guaranteed the inclusion of City Beautiful ideas into the plan itself; his earlier work on the White City of Chicago for the 1893 World’s Fair was the catalyst for the movement’s very creation. The McMillan Plan introduced “a fresh approach to the shaping of cities[…] [and] soon gave rise to city planning as a recognizable movement[…]making[…]comprehensive plans as the root instrumental purpose of that movement.” Not only did the McMillan Plan create a real-life City Beautiful, it also fundamentally changed the way urban planning as a discipline developed over the course of the 20th century.

Before the publication of the plan, reform in cities was fragmentary and “provisions, when made during the nineteenth century, did not manifest a generalist planning ideal of the sort

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72 Charles Mulford Robinson, Modern Civic Art; or, the City Made Beautiful. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904): 81.


that took root thereafter.” With the rapid development of industrial cities and massive commercial centers came a growing commitment to a broader approach to planning to accommodate for the population explosion these places were experiencing; the McMillan Plan was one of the first to respond vigorously to this commitment. People became more interested in the possibilities of urban reform as the plan was implemented, especially as the city began taking shape over a number of years.

Both the philosophical and physical goals of the City Beautiful combine in Washington, D.C.; the necessity of representing the strength of democracy through organized physical space does not fit in better anywhere than in our nation’s capital. The city as it was developed during the era of the McMillan Plan looks incredibly similar now; the National Mall is a massive open green space, flanked by imposing Beaux Arts facades of museums, political institutions, and monuments to the past. These all come together as a gathering space.

An aerial view of the National Mall today. Library of Congress. loc.org.


76 Peterson, “The Mall, the McMillan Plan,” 103.

77 Gillette, Jr., Civitas by Design, 6.
for people to enjoy their surroundings, as well as a space of protest and dialogue historically. The National Mall, then, represents the most conscious evocation of the City Beautiful in the modern urban environment that we have. Without its influence, Washington D.C.’s development would not look the same as it does; the symbols we have come to know as intrinsic to the nation’s capital are informed by Burnham’s City Beautiful idealism.

Another city where the impact of the City Beautiful is apparent is Chicago. Similar to Washington, D.C., Daniel Burnham’s 1909 Plan of Chicago fundamentally changed the direction of development for the city, which had been rapidly changing into an industrial center beginning in the late 19th century. Unlike Washington, D.C., though, Chicago did not take an all-in approach to the plan. Instead, similar to other cities planned by Burnham and Robinson during the early 20th century, ideas for a new park system were adopted to fit the budget and ability of the city to accommodate. Over a number of years, Chicago saw new streets being introduced, existing streets widened and organized, and over 25 miles of lakefront development for public use.78 Today, those 25 miles of public lakefront property serve as an active transportation

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route for many, as well as a center for recreation. According to figures from the Trust for Public Land, Chicago today has 1,230 parks, and 10% of its city land is used for parks and recreation.\(^{79}\) This comes directly as a result of Burnham’s push for a focus on lakefront and public park development, which was a cornerstone of the extensive plan, occupying the very first chapter.

Besides the development of parkland for the city of Chicago, the plan also emphasized a few more features of urban life that we recognize today; railroads, traffic patterns, freight centers, and passenger transportation.\(^{80}\) Chapter 5 of the plan is dedicated entirely to the development of public transportation and led to the development of new streets in Chicago meant to alleviate congested traffic patterns for the benefit of both commercial and pedestrian movement; the widening of the streets and the creation of Wacker Drive is attributed to the plan.\(^{81}\) These features were the most effective in creating a new plan for the city’s development. The streets created during the implementation of the plan of Chicago are still notable today for their ability to alleviate north-south traffic patterns along the Chicago River, especially Wacker Drive, which was “named for then chairman of the Chicago Plan Commission, Charles H. Wacker.”\(^{82}\) Wacker’s push for the development of Wacker Drive, which was finished in 1926,\(^{83}\) helped alleviate major long-distance and local traffic from the south to the north of Chicago.

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\(^{81}\) “1901 Plan of Chicago,” Chicago Architecture Center (CAC).


\(^{83}\) Leroux, “Lower Wacker Drive.”
along the river, and is still considered a major positive achievement of the plan. These features of
the plan were successfully implemented in Chicago over a number of years, even after
Burnham’s death in 1912, and their longevity and importance in modern Chicago’s landscape is
a testament to the lasting impact of the City Beautiful there.

Combining the impacts of the McMillan and the Chicago plans, as well as City Beautiful
counterpart Charles Mulford Robinson’s growing notoriety in his own right as his published
works gained public support, the field of urban planning quickly rose in prominence. The City
Beautiful changed the public opinion on city planning and urban design as a career field from its
very beginnings at the World’s Fair in 1893. This shift in opinion was only helped by the success
of these plans, especially the McMillan Plan; with its public success, “diverse forms of practical
knowledge and experience, previously pursued in fragments, should now be brought together as
a coherent public agenda to master the urban environment.” People now had a growing
consciousness regarding the objectives of city planning. Rather than think of the effort as a
personal endeavor, this time saw the increased professionalization of the field, with the creation
of the Municipal Art Association and the American Civic Association, both helped tremendously
by Robinson’s presence in both associations.

Robinson became one of the first ever professors of civic design in the country; in 1913,
he began working as a professor at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, officially

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www.chipublib.org/about-daniel-burnham/


86 Park Dixon Goist, “Planning the American City: Charles Mulford Robinson and John Nolen,” in From
Main Street to State Street: Town, City, and Community in America (New York: Kennikat Press Corp.,
1977): 123.
signaling the entrance of civic design into the academic field. By the time of his death in 1917, civic design had become a real field of study for many, and the development of the discipline later led directly to the establishment of other fields. The environmental strides made under the Roosevelt administration of the time alongside the efforts of architects like Burnham and designers like Olmsted “provided a strong basis for future urban and regional ecological planning, natural resources planning, and the balancing of nature and development,” and the extensive planning of sanitation systems “led city officials to recognize their responsibilities for the quality of the environment and public health.”

Though the early focus on the physical environment was an incomplete viewpoint from which to plan emerging industrial cities, the plans made by Olmsted, Burnham, Robinson, and their contemporaries gave way to a theory of urban development that many agree with today; that is, “that environmental quality [is] linked to economic growth, as well as to public health and the general quality of life.”

Even in cities where the influence of the City Beautiful was not quite as obvious, the effects of the World’s Fair of 1893 and the visibility of the movement can be seen. The most common influence found in major cities across the country is the architectural style that became the calling card of City Beautiful plans: Beaux-Arts architecture. This style was a direct import from cities like Paris and Berlin, where Charles Mulford Robinson went on assignment for Harper’s magazine at the beginning of his career. His exposure to these monumental and grand

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89 Daniels, “A Trail Across Time,” 185.
styles of architecture profoundly influenced the way he saw cities developing stateside, and as he brought those influences back with him, he wrote extensively about the merits of ornamentation in public places, stressing the “fashioning [of] noble public buildings.”

Burnham was also quite inspired by Beaux-Arts, apparent in his extensive use of the style in his White City of 1893. The use of this architectural style in the White City consolidated support for a new movement in the United States centered around the adaptation of Beaux-Arts for the purposes of “city planning and urban design as solutions to the problem of the city,” as well as “bringing national prominence and prestige to architects working in the Beaux-Arts mode.”

Cities soon after began rapidly adapting to this newly found style of architecture, and as a result, many of the most monumental buildings we see in cities today have highly decorated facades. In Chicago, buildings like the Chicago Cultural Center, completed in 1897, are exemplary of the remarkable materials, expenses, and scale of the new American Beaux-Arts movement.

In cities even less directly touched by City Beautiful plans, like New York, Beaux-Arts saw an explosion in popularity; the Stephen A. Schwarzmann Building of the New York Public Library, completed in 1902, features some of the most intricate planning of the era, and everything from the foundations to the tables, lamps, and chandeliers inside the reading rooms was planned to fit the European style. The popularization of this architecture is directly

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90 Robinson, “Excerpt from ‘Improvement in City Life’,” ed. Conn and Page, 212.


attributable to both Robinson and Burnham’s commitments to include their European inspiration in their plans. Robinson included photos of notable European cities’ architectural elements, such as the Arc de Triomphe of Paris, or the Thames Embankment in London, in *Modern Civic Art* as illustrations toward his points about civic art as a democratic necessity.\(^{94}\) Burnham injected direct European influence into the McMillan and Chicago plans, dedicating Chapter 2 of the Plan of Chicago almost entirely to describing Haussmann’s transformation of Paris, city-planning in Germany, and the creation of new towns in England.\(^{95}\) Washington, D.C., especially, is a perfect example of how important it is to consider the Beaux-Arts craze as part of the City Beautiful’s influence; almost all the monuments that stand in and around the National Mall are in that style, and the major political buildings we consider important today as well. Our Capitol building, the White House, and even the Smithsonian museums at large are all direct products of that European inspiration, and greatly inform the aesthetics of our major cities today.

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\(^{94}\) Robinson, *Modern Civic Art*, 36.

\(^{95}\) Burnham and Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, vii.
The analysis of these city plans serves as an illustration of the City Beautiful’s real impact on modern cities. Though much of the City Beautiful’s influence has been overlooked, the improvements of these cities and their designs show how much they affected the way cities look today. In a profound way, cities like Washington, D.C. and Chicago came out of a particular juncture in history when the future seemed up in the air for many developing cities. The City Beautiful movement’s particular brand of optimism and forward thinking captured many imaginations in this time, as a way of looking toward a brighter future for cities mired by the problems of urbanism. Daniel Burnham, Charles Mulford Robinson, and their cohorts gave rise to an entirely new academic discipline, from which the modern field of urban planning originated. City Beautiful also gave rise to a new form of consciousness regarding “the possibilities of community in our cities,”96 and the ability of civic design to create better citizens. Though the particular piecemeal nature with which some of these plans were implemented speaks to a certain hesitance on the part of those swept up in the midst of the City Beautiful heyday, the very fact of their implementation shows their ability to inspire cities to look more closely at their development in a critical way. In short, our cities today are a direct product of the City Beautiful’s early commitment to making urban spaces better for the people that live in them. Modern sustainability movements, concerned primarily with the wellbeing of both the natural elements and the human elements of cities, echo that commitment, and look toward the future in a similar way that Robinson and Burnham did in the early 20th century.

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96 Goist, “Planning the American City,” 121.
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