

Some may have noticed (librarians are especially quick to catch on) that the front cover of this issue of the journal proclaims itself "Volume II, Number 1." That means that there were only two issues in Volume I, a strange set of affairs for a journal that is published three times a year. The explanation is this: for convenience, we prefer to have our volume numbers correspond to calendar years. To bring that coincidence into being, Volume I will have only two issues, while all succeeding volumes will have the expected three issues. We hope this minor oddity will prove more reasonable than troublesome.

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THE IDEOLOGY OF THE CIVIC ARTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA, 1890-1920

BY PAUL BOYER

The American city planning movement began not in tentative obscurity, but in a national burst of visionary enthusiasm. If we are to understand the movement's subsequent achievements—and failures—we need to look at its dramatic beginnings. Commencing in the mid-1890s, and culminating in the first decade of the 20th century, the United States was engulfed in an amorphous but intense wave of interest in civic art and urban beautification. Municipal art societies and improvement organizations burgeoned; a torrent of articles on the subject appeared in magazines and newspapers; and conferences and exhibits were organized in a number of cities.

This development, sometimes called the "City Beautiful" movement, both gratified and awed contemporary social observers. "The work is proceeding rapidly, almost feverishly," commented the *New York Times* in 1911; "We are carried away with the almost religious fervor of it; it has become a cult," declared one leader of the movement in 1912.¹

The beautification impulse took many forms. At its most rudimentary—as in Allentown, Pennsylvania—it might involve suspending baskets of flowers from downtown streetlights.² Elsewhere it was expressed in campaigns for smoke abatement, improved streets, billboard regulation, burying electric wires, better trash collection, landscaping and tree planting, civic statuary, and murals in public buildings. At its most ambitious, it gave rise to large-scale city plans featuring spacious boulevards, imposing monuments and fountains, and great civic centers grouping government buildings and cultural institutions around vast squares. The best known products of this monumental phase of the movement were the civic-center

¹"Modern Cities" (editorial), *New York Times*, June 14, 1911, p. 8; George B. Ford, "Digging Deeper into City Planning," *American City* (March, 1912), p. 557. The American city planning movement has been explored by a number of urban historians whose work illuminated my own thinking and which I commend to those wishing to go beyond this brief interpretive essay. Among these are Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley, 1969); Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago, Architect and Planner* (New York, 1974), especially chapter VIII, "The Paradox of Progressive Architecture"; John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, 1965); and John Hancock, "Planning in the Changing American City, 1900-1940," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 33 (September, 1967), pp. 290-304. City planning also figures in the histories of American architecture, notably Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York, 1969).

²Mary Procter and Bill Matuszeski, *Gritty Cities* (Philadelphia, 1978), p. 36.

plans proposed for Cleveland (1903), San Francisco (1905), New York City (1907), and the landmark *Plan of Chicago* (1909) by Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett.

The most effective spokesman for this early phase of the civic-art movement was Charles Mulford Robinson of Rochester, New York. In lectures, magazine essays, two major books—*The Improvement of Towns and Cities* (1901) and *Modern Civic Art; or the City Made Beautiful* (1903)—and as professor of civic design at the University of Illinois (1913-17), Robinson tirelessly preached the gospel of the City Beautiful. This stage of the movement was characterized by popular journalistic treatments and soaring rhetorical summonses to a national beautification crusade; Charles Mulford Robinson was typical in urging all citizens to join in a great national effort “to make the city splendid, inspiring, socially serviceable and lovable.”³

What were the sources of this movement? Why, after years of neglect, did so many Americans at the turn of the century become obsessed with civic art and beautification?

Certainly European influences played a part. Interest in city planning was running high in Germany, France, and Great Britain in these years, and developments in these countries were fully reported in the United States. As more American tourists witnessed at first hand the monumental civic-art achievements of Paris and other European centers, they realized with chagrin the paucity of such distinguishing landmarks in even the largest American cities.

Late 19th-century cultural developments in England—particularly the arts-and-crafts movement associated with William Morris—were especially influential. Morris preached civic beautification in *News From Nowhere* (1891), and a lecture series on civic art sponsored by London's Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1896—a series clearly reflecting Morris's ideas—had a considerable impact in American artistic circles.⁴ In *Tomorrow: The Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), the Englishman Ebenezer Howard proposed a series of carefully planned “Garden Cities” where factory workers' families might live in beautiful, healthful, semi-rural surroundings. In Letchworth (1903) and the London suburb of Hampstead Gardens, the civic architect Raymond Unwin brought Howard's ideas to realization. In 1906, a Garden City Association was founded in the United States. The Scottish town planner Patrick Geddes was influential as well through his American lecture tours in the 1890s and his 1904 work *City Development*.⁵

³Charles Mulford Robinson, “The Replanning of Cities,” *Charities and the Commons*, 19 (Feb. 1, 1908), p. 1490. For general surveys of this phase of the movement see Charles Mulford Robinson, “Improvements in City Life. III: Aesthetic Progress,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 83 (June, 1899), pp. 771-785 and J. Horace McFarland, “The Growth of City Planning in America,” *Charities and the Commons*, 19 (Feb. 1, 1908), pp. 1522-1528.

⁴Jon A. Peterson, “The City Beautiful Movement: Forgotten Origins and Lost Meanings,” *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (August, 1976), p. 419.

⁵“Garden City Movement,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Social Reform*, ed., W. D. P. Bliss (New York, 1908), p. 532; Benjamin C. Marsh, *An Introduction to City Planning* (New York, 1909), pp. 113-119 (on English “Garden Cities” and model towns for workmen); Patrick Geddes: *Spokesman for Man and the Environment*, ed. with an introduction by Marshall Stalley (New Brunswick, N.J., 1972).

In this country, the event which did most to spark national interest in civic art was the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, for which a team of architects and landscape designers led by Daniel H. Burnham created the famed “White City” on the shores of Lake Michigan. This monumental assemblage of stately exhibition buildings, statuary, and a large reflecting pool in a beautifully landscaped setting was profoundly inspiring to the hundreds of thousands of visitors and millions of others who encountered it through stories and photographs in the press. For years after, city planning enthusiasts nostalgically recalled this tantalizing fantasy creation. The White City, wrote one in 1913, “was a vision that did not fade; it was a permanent denial of the assumption that the city must of necessity be an uncontrolled behemoth of ugliness and disorder . . .”⁶

If the White City piqued the popular imagination, developments in Washington, D.C. offered tangible evidence that the vision of 1893 could be achieved in the real world. In 1901, Congress created a prestigious commission to draw up plans for the completion of Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plan for the nation's capital. Its proposals, made public the following year, were widely publicized and inspired similar planning efforts in many other cities.⁷

But European models, the World's Fair, and the revival of interest in the L'Enfant plan do not alone explain why the civic art movement aroused so immediate and passionate a national response. To understand the fervor of that response, one must explore the ideology which underlay the movement, and its relation to the broader currents of social thought in these years.

Civic beautification and city planning became such vogues, I would suggest, because they seemed so immediately relevant to certain deep-seated fears of the American middle class in these years: fears having to do with corporate power, urban disorder, class conflict, and municipal politics. The intensity of these inter-related fears has often been demonstrated by historians. By the 1890s, American business was largely controlled by a complex network of corporations, trusts, and holding companies which to many middle-class observers seemed to pose a profound threat to individual opportunity and democratic ideals. Simultaneously, immigration was soaring to all-time levels: over 17 million in 1900-1917, with the single-year total exceeding one million for the first time in 1905. The cities, where most of these newcomers settled, were not only becoming increasingly stratified along class lines, but they seemed perpetually poised on the brink of moral collapse, social disorder, and perhaps even violent upheaval. Compounding these evils (from the upper and middle class perspective) were the political bosses who perpetuated their corrupt rule through bribery, favoritism, and cynical pandering to the vast underclass of immigrant slum dwellers.

The civic art/city planning movement spoke to these fears in certain quite specific ways. It allayed fears that a voracious and self-seeking business class might tear apart the American social fabric; it offered hope that the immigrant masses could be controlled and transformed into good citizens; it promised to

⁶Frederick C. Howe, “The Remaking of the American City,” *Harper's*, 127 (July, 1913), p. 189.

⁷Frederick Law Olmsted [Jr.], “The Town-Planning Movement in America,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 51 (January, 1914), p. 179.

bridge widening class divisions; and it suggested an alternative to the old-style urban political machines. Each of these four components of the city planning ideology merits attention.

City Planning and Corporate Power. Businessmen were key leaders in the early movement for civic beautification and planning. In city after city, through commercial clubs, chambers of commerce, municipal leagues, and merchant associations, it was they who took the initiative. In 1913, after a three-month American tour, a leader of the British town planning movement wrote: "My audiences have consisted largely of business men . . . It was [they] . . . who seemed to appreciate best what a city plan, generously conceived, would mean for their communities" The *Plan of Chicago*, sponsored by the city's influential Commercial Club, was only the best known of many city plans in these years initiated and financed by local business interests. In a 1908 survey of city planning developments, the head of the American Civic Association stressed the key role of businessmen not only in the larger cities but also in smaller urban centers like Billerica, Massachusetts, and Munising, Michigan. Writing of the City Beautiful idea in 1904, Charles Mulford Robinson declared: "Nobody now laughs it to scorn. Boards of Trade work for it; Chambers of Commerce appoint commissions to consider the local development" When New York State in 1913 required all cities and towns to appoint planning commissions, the city plan advisory committee of the state's council of mayors recommended that the commissions consist of "engineers, architects, landscape architects, and businessmen"—art and commerce joining hands for civic uplift.⁸

In explaining the affinity of capitalists for civic art and city planning, some saw it simply as a natural extension of the profit motive; more attractive and better planned cities would be more prosperous cities. Frequently, however, city planning spokesmen interpreted business support as evidence that American capitalism was moving beyond its preoccupation with competition and profits to a larger social consciousness. Writing on "The New Civic Spirit" in 1903, Charles Zueblin of the University of Chicago contended that the post-Civil War era of profit-getting and ruthless competition had been replaced by "a new conception of public responsibility and activity." While patterns of urban growth had once been dictated by "private profit or corporate greed," suggested another city planning leader in 1913, business interests were now supporting city planning out of concern for the general good.⁹

⁸"Planning Commissions Authorized for all Cities and Incorporated Villages in New York State," *American City*, 9 (July, 1913), p. 79; Edward G. Culpin, "Some Impressions of City Planning in America," *ibid.*, 8 (May, 1913), p. 509; McFarland, "Growth of City Planning in America," p. 1908; Charles Mulford Robinson, *Modern Civic Art; or, The City Made Beautiful*, 2d ed. (New York, 1904) p. vi. For instances of business support for city planning see, e.g., Vincent Oredson, "Planning a City: Minneapolis, 1907-1917," *Minnesota History*, 33 (Winter, 1953), p. 332; Michael P. McCarthy, "Chicago Businessmen and the Burnham Plan," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 63 (Autumn, 1970), pp. 228-256; Charles Mulford Robinson, "The Development of Denver," *American City*, 2 (May, 1910), p. 200; and *New York Times*, December 3, 1913, p. 14 (letter from Elizabeth Ogden Wood).

⁹"New York Mayors Want No Politics," *New York Times*, December 6, 1913, p. 9, quoting Nelson F. Lewis of the New York City Planning Commission; Charles Zueblin, "The New Civic Spirit," *The Chautauquan* (September, 1903), p. 56.

Those who adhered to this view were profoundly encouraged when corporate leaders such as Robert R. Patterson of Dayton's National Cash Register Company and the Boston merchant prince Edward A. Filene gave enthusiastic leadership and support to the civic beautification effort.¹⁰

In his Utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888), Edward Bellamy had suggested that the nation's great business corporations would one day voluntarily give up the competitive struggle and join forces in a public-spirited commitment to the general welfare; in the overwhelming support of the business class for city planning and civic art, it was tempting to find evidence that Bellamy's prophecy was coming true.

Civic Art and the Urban/Immigrant Masses. A tradition of urban social-control effort extending back to the early 19th century flowed into the civic beautification movement of the early 1900s, investing it with a heavy freight of moral meaning. While such coercive moral crusades as prohibition and anti-prostitution have loomed large in the social history of this period, the moral-control component of the city-planning movement must not be overlooked.

If concern about the implications of corporate growth was widespread in these years, so, too, were fears about the immigrant masses pouring into the cities. Could these newcomers be made into good citizens, or were they a cancer gnawing at the vitals of the body politic? Could they be shaped to the moral norms of a middle-class, Protestant society, or would they transform the cities into sinks of immorality and degeneracy?

These were weighty questions at the turn of the century, and again the civic art and city planning movements provided reassuring answers. Through urban beautification and civic art, the argument ran, the masses would be inspired to a greater love for the city. Gradually, as their civic consciousness awakened, their social and political behavior would change for the better and they would be molded into a moral, law abiding citizenry.¹¹

As early as 1900, sociologist James H. Hamilton formulated the social assumptions underlying this view of the moral power of civic beautification. The reason that the level of personal and political morality was so low in many cities, he wrote, was that "the municipal spirit is weak." The key to "infusing purity into our municipal life," he went on, lay in creating a "social organism" by arousing people to "a higher sense of the beautiful . . ."

The roots of the municipal spirit must extend deeper than the brain; they must penetrate the heart . . . [M]eans must be found to arouse love and devotion on the part of the people . . . The people must come to look upon the city as ministering to their joys as well as their conveniences.¹²

¹⁰Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York, 1967), pp. 73-74 (Filene); John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History* (Boston, 1961), pp. 178-179 (Patterson).

¹¹For a fuller discussion of this theme see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 261-276.

¹²James H. Hamilton, "A Neglected Principle in Civic Reform," *American Journal of Sociology*, 5 (May, 1900), pp. 746-760, quoted passages pp. 747, 750, 752, 754.

As a way to "penetrate the heart" with love of the city, beautification and municipal art seemed the ideal answer. It was an article of faith with these early city planners that in creating more beautiful cities, they would create more moral and politically responsible city dwellers. It is no coincidence that the leading social-welfare journal of the period, *Charities and the Commons*, devoted an entire issue to city planning in 1908—becoming, according to one civic art spokesman, "the first in America to summarize and to recognize so emphatically the new movement." Municipal reformer Frederic C. Howe had no doubts about the moral dimension of city planning. The problems of vice and crime, he wrote, were "intimately connected with the way the city is built." "The city has neglected the people," he continued, "and the people in turn have neglected the city." But it was perhaps Charles Mulford Robinson who made the connection most succinctly, in a formulation nearly all of the early civic art partisans would have accepted unquestioningly: "The happier people of the rising City Beautiful will grow in love for it, in pride in it. They will be better citizens, because better instructed, more artistic and filled with civic pride."¹³

City Planning and Class Conflict. Closely related to the two themes discussed above was the conviction that city planning offered a means of muting and perhaps even eliminating the sharpening class divisions of the city. As early as 1897, Daniel Burnham assured a Chicago business audience that the development of a comprehensive beautification plan for the city would be "a long step toward cementing together the heterogeneous elements of our population . . .," and this theme continued to pervade the literature of the movement. A city plan, declared the St. Louis Civic League in 1907, was the answer to the "riot of conflicting and selfish interests" that plagued the city. In Philadelphia, planner Arthur E. Buchholz insisted that urban class divisions were "due almost wholly to bad city planning." Good planning, he believed, would "bring about a proper intermingling of the rich, the prosperous, [and] the poor"—a mingling that would be "of vast use to humanity."¹⁴

The word *harmony* pervades the writings of these early city planners, and in using it they clearly referred not only to systemic or architectural harmony, but to social harmony as well. A major contribution of city planning, declared the *New York Times* in 1913, lay "in bringing harmony into the discord of the huge cities . . ." It would, agreed George B. Ford, lecturer in city planning at Columbia, "harmonize" the conflicting interests and projects of diverse urban groups and unite them in working for "the best economic, social and aesthetic development of the community as a whole."¹⁵

This would come about in two ways. First, all elements of the urban populace would be inspired by the vision of a more beautiful, coherent, and

¹³Robinson, "Improvements in City Life. III: Aesthetic Progress," *Atlantic Monthly*, 83 (June, 1899), p. 771; Frederic C. Howe, "The City as a Socializing Agency," *ibid.*, 17 (March, 1912), pp. 590, 601. The special issue of *Charities and the Commons* devoted to city planning was February 1, 1908 (quoted passage, p. 1489).

¹⁴Edward Marshall, "The Modern American City a Monument to Stupidity," *New York Times*, June 25, 1911, v, p. 6 (quoting Buchholz); Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago, Architect and Planner* (New York, 1974), p. 315; "The City Plan Report of St. Louis," *Charities and the Commons*, 19 (February 1, 1908), p. 1542.

¹⁵*New York Times*, December 7, 1913, p. 6 (letter from George B. Ford); "Bringing Symmetry Out of the Chaos of Our Cities," *ibid.*, December 14, 1913, VI, p. 12.

well-planned city, and forget their differences in a collective effort to achieve it. Once this had been achieved successive generations of city dwellers would be knit together in the awareness of being inhabitants of a lovely city which represented their common inheritance. No one expressed more eloquently this vision of city planning as a balm for class conflict than Frederic C. Howe. The movement represented, he believed, "the first conscious recognition of the unity of society," and when cities actually began to be reshaped in expression of that unity there would "be none of that cleavage of classes that we have today."¹⁶

City Planning and Urban Politics. A final ideological current which fed the enthusiasm for civic art and city planning was the powerful movement at the turn of the century to replace the old-style urban politics with a "non-partisan" administrative system that would be scientific, efficient, and dedicated to the interests of the city as a whole. This was the generation which looked to "experts"—managers, commissioners, and technical specialists of all kinds—to redeem the city from the grip of entrenched politicians, and the city planners, landscape architects, and civic artists who flourished in this period were precisely the kind of disinterested public servants who seemed to fill the bill.

As early as 1893, a city engineer minced no words in contrasting the vision and expertise of this new profession with the narrow outlook of the typical city politician:

The city engineer is becoming the most important director of the material development of cities, and his office is becoming more and more a permanent one. He is thus to a certain extent responsible for holding the successive political officials to a consistent, progressive policy in all the branches of work under his charge. To him, even more than to the successive mayors, falls the duty of serving as the intelligence and brains of the municipal government in all physical matters.¹⁷

By the early 20th century, not only engineers but specialists in all branches of what Charles Mulford Robinson called "the new science of city building" were insisting that it was they, not the politicians, who had the true interests of the city at heart. As the *New York Times* put it in 1911, city planning was marshalling the talents of "architects and designers, landscape gardeners, and eminent engineers in place of the politicians and camp followers of the old army of civic spoils mongers." The new movement, agreed Frederic C. Howe, meant "a city built by experts . . . by a new type of municipal official who visualizes the complex life of a million people as the builders of an earlier age visualized an individual home."¹⁸

¹⁶Frederic C. Howe, "The City as a Socializing Agent," p. 601; "The Remaking of the American City," p. 186.

¹⁷John G. Olmsted, "Relation of the City Engineer to Public Parks," *Journal of the Association of Engineering Societies*, 13 (October, 1894), pp. 594-595, quoted in Stanley K. Schultz and Clay McShane, "To Engineer the Metropolis: Sewers, Sanitation, and City Planning in Late 19th Century America," *Journal of American History*, 65 (September, 1978), p. 403.

¹⁸Howe, "The Remaking of the American City," p. 187; "Modern Cities" (editorial), *New York Times*, June 14, 1911, p. 8.

So strong was the anti-political sentiment that even politicians found it advisable to bend with the wind. At a 1913 gathering of New York State mayors to discuss city planning, one mayor after another emphasized the anti-political theme. City planning, declared Schenectady's mayor, was "a new and non-political vision . . . of service for the whole population instead of for any one party"; "We have wiped politics out of the city," chimed in the mayor of Troy. "There is less politics in Troy today than in any other city in the world."¹⁹

A revealing insight into this dimension of the early city planning ideology is provided by Arthur E. Buchholz of Philadelphia. The son of a machine politician, young Buchholz was drawn into urban reform early in the 20th century. Appointed tenement-house inspector by a reform mayor, he organized a Philadelphia City Planning Exhibit in 1911 and lectured widely on behalf of the new movement. In all his pronouncements, Buchholz bluntly contrasted the high-mindedness of city planners with the narrow selfishness of the bosses, "who, if they are not definitely dishonest, are almost certainly incompetent." Only when intelligent, nonpartisan planning replaced "the stupidity of the present course of procedure in civic management," he asserted, would the venality and inefficiency of municipal politics be ended.²⁰

This generation's idealization of the nonpartisan expert coincided perfectly with the developing professional consciousness of artists, sculptors, architects, landscape designers, transportation specialists, and the various branches of civic engineering. The list of new professional associations in the arts and engineering in these years is a very long one. Typical are the Municipal Art Society of New York (1893) and similar groups in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, and Baltimore; the National Sculpture Society (1896); the Architectural League of America (1899); and the National Society of Mural Painters.²¹

In the civic-art movement, these newly self-conscious groups found an important outlet for their energies. The literature of the City Beautiful movement is full of the sense of young professionals defining their social role and establishing their areas of expertise. The National Committee on Municipal Improvements and Civic Embellishments of the Architectural League of America was established explicitly to win municipalities to art patronage, while the National Art Club, founded at the very end of the 19th century, sought "to encourage the fine arts in many directions and the broadest spirit, especially agitating for beauty and good taste in civic architecture, town parks, public sculpture and painting . . ."²²

The movement quickly produced a mobile corps of civic-art experts whose public pronouncements were widely reported; who communicated through national publications, organizations, and conferences; and who moved from city to city advising and directing the planning effort. In 1907, for example,

¹⁹"New York Mayors Want No Politics," p. 9.

²⁰Marshall, "The Modern American City a Monument to Stupidity," V, p. 6. This article features a long interview with Buchholz.

²¹Robinson, "Improvement in City Life. III: Aesthetic Progress," pp. 780-781.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 781; Peterson, "The City Beautiful Movement," p. 417, 419, 420.

when Columbus, Ohio, appointed a city planning commission, the members included Charles Mulford Robinson; Albert Kelsey, a Philadelphia architect and planner; and three New Yorkers: Austin W. Lord, an architect; Charles N. Lowrie, a landscape designer; and H.A. MacNeil, a sculptor and municipal art leader.²³

These civic-art experts were often given broad powers. In New York City, for example, the Municipal Art Commission ("unpaid, non-partisan [and] well entrenched," as one admirer noted) had authority to pass upon all plans for the public structures including "even the design of a letter box in a public building, as well as the building itself."²⁴

The Professionalization of City Planning

The preoccupation with efficiency, expertise, and scientific management which so influenced reformers' attitudes toward urban politics in the Progressive Era was, in fact, as Samuel Haber has shown, one of the fundamental ideological forces of the period.²⁵ Surely, it was widely assumed, the intractable social problems of modern America would yield to the kind of rational and scientific approach which had transformed American industry in the Gilded Age. The evolution of the city planning movement in the pre-World War I period was, in large part, a response to this central ideological current. Rejecting the generalized, all-inclusive, and often overreaching enthusiasm for beautification which characterized the beginnings of the movement, the leaders displayed a growing professional exclusiveness and insistence on scientific precision and technical expertise.

This shift did not come about without stress. Charles Mulford Robinson, for one, continued to praise intuition and dedication as the most important ingredients in city planning, and resisted efforts to transform the City Beautiful movement into a narrow specialty accessible only to experts:

A man might be wondrously learned in engineering, in landscape designing, and in architecture; but unless he is so sympathetic to the spirit of cities that he can catch the individual expression of each, he must fail in the making of city plans. To dream worthily of each separate project . . . is well, . . . but there still is needed the art of bringing all the parts into a [sic] atune with the voice of the city one loves and would help.²⁶

By 1908, however, when this was written, the position Robinson espoused was rapidly being supplanted by a rising group of young professionals who insisted on the complexity of city planning and repudiated the notion that dedicated amateurs might have a useful role to play. The emphasis now shifted to specific and limited technical problems, professional training and certification, and the development of city planning and its various subfields as

²³"City Plan Notes," *Charities and the Commons*, 19 (February 1, 1908), p. 1557.

²⁴McFarland, "The Growth of City Planning in America," p. 1526.

²⁵Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1964).

²⁶Robinson, "The Replanning of Cities," p. 1490.

academic disciplines. A British town planner who toured America in 1913 noted "the intensity with which city planning is being studied at the universities." In these years, programs in landscape architecture, urban design, and city planning were indeed introduced at a number of major academic institutions including Harvard, Michigan, Cornell, Columbia, and Illinois.²⁷ In the Progressive years, the conviction prevailed in American higher education that academics should put their knowledge at the direct service of society—the so-called "Wisconsin Idea"—and city planning was one major expression of this impulse.²⁸

A leading spokesman for the new professionalism was George B. Ford of Columbia University. "[T]he 'city beautiful' is not merely a conglomeration of statues, flower beds, and pretty lamp posts," he wrote with asperity in 1910; rather, the city planner must master such technical matters as traffic patterns, lighting, housing, street layout, water and sewerage, the zoning of business and residential districts, and "all those features that go to make a complete city each in its proper relation to each and all of the other parts." Returning to the attack the following year, Ford declared: "In America the cry has been 'the City Beautiful'. Abroad it has been 'The City Logical, Convenient, Healthful, Businesslike, and then Aesthetic'." Once again in 1913 he insisted that city planning was not a "squandering of the city's money on vague, splendid dreams . . ."; it meant careful, comprehensive studies emphasizing practical and economic considerations above all.²⁹

Other city planners joined in the call for less aestheticism and more science, less rhetoric and more expertise. Dismissing the *Plan of Chicago* as a "sumptuous pipe dream," the Boston planner Sylvanus Baxter insisted in 1909 that "the modern city planner" should not aspire to remake the city according to an abstract ideal, but rather devote himself to limited technical projects emphasizing "utility, economy, and above all efficiency." Another of this new generation of planners ridiculed the New York City plan of 1907 as a set of "beautiful drawings and dreams" that had been rightly relegated to "the obscurity of top book shelves." "[T]he words 'City Beautiful' are greatly overworked," declared the chief engineer of the New York City Board of Estimates in 1911, "and thoughtlessly used to indicate the dreams of certain idealists who wish to tear our cities to pieces and make them over . . ." What was needed, agreed Philadelphia's Arthur Buchholz, was not the dreamy "City Beautiful," but rather the "City Sensible."³⁰ Where the monumental civic-art achievements of Georges Haussmann in Paris and the Garden City proposals of the Britisher Ebenezer Howard had earlier provided inspiration,

²⁷Culpin, "Some Impressions of City Planning in America," p. 509.

²⁸Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York, 1962), see chapter 17, "Progressives and the Universities."

²⁹*New York Times*, December 7, 1913, p. 6 (Ford letter); George G. Ford, "Second National Conference on City Planning and Congestion," *Survey*, 24 (May 14, 1910), p. 295; "Unpractical City Planning," *New York Times*, April 11, 1911, p. 7 (Ford quoted).

³⁰Marshall, "The Modern American City a Monument to Stupidity," p. 6 (quoting Buchholz); John Martin, "City Planning," *Survey* 23 (December 25, 1909), p. 417 (comment on New York City Plan, and quote from Baxter on Chicago Plan); "City Plans Should Combine Practical Ideas with Beauty," *New York Times*, March 5, 1911, VIII, p. 2 (quoting Board of Estimates engineer).

attention now shifted to Germany, whose city planners were praised for their practical, detailed, no-nonsense approach.³¹

The professionalization of city planning was facilitated by a series of annual conferences which began in 1909 and culminated in the formation of the American City Planning Institute in 1917. Participants at these conferences endlessly emphasized technical matters and high professional standards. By the time of the 1913 conference, held in Chicago and attended by delegates from some 80 cities, the victory of the technicians over the visionaries was complete, and George B. Ford could note with satisfaction that "[t]he papers were characterized not so much by inspirational flights as by hard-headed, common-sense attention to everyday facts and conditions . . ." The emphasis, he concluded, was no longer on the radical transformation of cities, but rather on "guiding the[ir] normal growth . . ." Another delegate confirmed Ford's perceptions, commenting on the "shift from spectacular and elaborate schemes for reconstructing the heart of the city to practical details . . ." At the concluding banquet a toast was drunk to the recently deceased Daniel H. Burnham, and a portrait of him unveiled, but it was clear that the broad-brush approach to planning which he had embodied was a thing of the past.³²

Indeed, so total was the victory that Ford could afford to be magnanimous:

Psychologically, it is quite justifiable that American city planning began with the "City Beautiful." The "City Scientific" would never have aroused such enthusiasm. However, after floundering around for a number of years we have now got our perspective and a sense of the proportion of things . . .³³

One could hardly illustrate more vividly the depth of the antagonism the new city planning experts felt toward the well meaning amateurs than by citing a 1913 letter to *The American City* magazine from one Alfred J. Roewade, an engineer in Chicago's street department. *The American City* had published the winning entries in a recent contest to propose alternatives to Chicago's gridiron street pattern, and Roewade could not contain his contempt. Most of the plans, he charged, were "useless and impossible" and violated "almost every rule and practice of our street department . . . The competitors [and] . . . jury . . . must have acted on the theory that town planning is a matter of taste only, for the pictorial effect is the governing one in the plans . . ."

[E]very draftsman handy with his pencil thinks it within his sphere to practice town planning, [Roewade continued] and . . . every author or journalist handy with the pen . . . will write or lecture on town planning . . . [I]t proves that we are in the primary stage of the

³¹"Why Germany Leads in Town Planning," *American City*, 1 (September, 1909), pp. 39-40; Martin, "City Planning."

³²Graham R. Taylor, "City Planning as a Civic Asset," *Survey*, 30 (May 31, 1913), pp. 301-302 (including Ford comments).

³³*Ibid.*, p. 301.

evolution, the stage when the awakening is preached. Beyond that should, however, be another stage: . . . the formation of the basic knowledge and the maxims . . . [necessary] to develop feasible plans and practical solutions of the universal city problems.³⁴

By 1913, when this outburst was penned, city planning had already been taken away from the beautifiers, the reformers, and the journalistic publicizers, and safely confined to the preserve of the academics, the technicians, and the professionals. As the American Institute of Architects noted in 1925, the movement had "fallen into the hands of specialists . . . chiefly interested in isolated phases of city development."³⁵

This development had varied causes. In part it represented a well-founded reaction against the effusions of some "City Beautiful" enthusiasts who did indeed ignore the more fundamental urban problems—especially the problem of the slums. After the Pittsburgh Survey of 1908, in which social investigators documented the appalling conditions in the slums of that great steel center, city planners were careful to list "Congestion" among the fundamental problems with which they must try to grapple.

It also reflected the dawning realization that the monumental civic-art achievements of Paris and other European cities were the products of a vanished cultural and political milieu. In 1914, the German city planner Dr. Werner Hegemann warned his American counterparts against trying to imitate the grandiose projects of the great 19th-century European city builders like Haussmann. The "handsome externals," he noted, often masked terrible slum conditions and sprawling ugliness. Further, he went on, these majestic architectural achievements were typically the legacies of powerful rulers who had been able to marshal the artistic talent of their age to create monumental capitals that would impress their subjects as well as foreign emissaries with the power of the state—hardly a pattern replicable, or desirable, in early 20th-century urban America.³⁶

But while the professionalization and narrowing of focus which characterized city planning after about 1908 was in part a salutary reaction to the excesses, illusions, and omissions of the "City Beautiful" phase, it was also a response to the social thought of a period which saw in technocratic "experts" a preferable alternative to the shortcomings and frustrations of the political process. In this respect, as in others, the early city planning movement was an authentic artifact of the Progressive reform ethos.

A Concluding Assessment

For all its laudable aspirations and estimable achievements, the early city planning movement was characterized by a progressive impoverishment of

³⁴Alfred J. Roewade, "Taste and Knowledge in Town Planning," *American City*, 8 (May, 1913), p. 511.

³⁵American Institute of Architects, *Report of the Committee on Community Planning* (1925) in Roy Lubove, ed., *The Urban Community: Housing and Planning in the Progressive Era* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), p. 117.

³⁶Werner Hegemann, "European City Plans and Their Value to the American Planner," *Landscape Architecture*, 4 (1913-1914), pp. 89-103.

vision, a considerable naivete about American political reality, and a disturbing blind spot when it came to examining the implications of its underlying assumptions.

To begin with the most obvious point, one experiences an uneasiness tinged with dismay at the contemptuousness with which the emerging elite of city planning experts dismissed the possibility that the broader company of beautification and improvement enthusiasts might have anything of value to contribute. These self-chosen professionals deliberately turned their backs on a great national reserve of goodwill and enthusiasm.

This is not to say that the criticisms the post-1910 technocrats directed at the earlier devotees of beautification were undeserved. Not only did the beautifiers often neglect the problem of the slums and rely too uncritically on European models, but they tended to approach city planning statically, underestimating the ceaseless dynamic of urbanization, as though planning was an occasion rather than a process. They similarly underestimated—and undervalued—the deep-seated heterogeneity of urban America, as they sought to fit raffish and complex cities within a single procrustean aesthetic framework. As Harvey Kantor has noted of the New York City plan of 1907, it bore little relationship to the "economic aggressiveness and social diversity" of America's largest city.³⁷ (In fairness, one failure of the pre-1910 planners was mainly a matter of unlucky timing: working just on the eve of the railroads' decline, they invariably incorporated great railroad stations into their sweeping plans for urban transformation, and totally failed to anticipate the onslaught of the automobile!)

Yet when all this has been conceded, one still feels qualms at the smug self-assurance with which the partisans of the City Sensible ridiculed the devotees of the City Beautiful. In making their valid criticisms of the monumental civic center plans of the Burnham variety, they also dismissed as mere "adornment" and "furbelows" the quite different beautification goals of people like Charles Mulford Robinson and others. In their glorification of the hard-headedly practical, they played rather too easily on American suspicions of aesthetic considerations as effete and vaguely unpatriotic.

And even as we leaf through the admittedly visionary plans produced by Burnham and others, it is impossible not to feel a wave of regret and loss: the urban America they proposed seems so much more tranquil, harmonious, and visually satisfying than the actual cities we have inherited. But our regret, perhaps, is not that these noble plans were never realized, but that the essential dynamic of urbanization in a capitalist society made it impossible for them to be realized.

Yet in the triumph of the technocrats—the specialists in traffic, sewage, and zoning—city planning forfeited a visionary quality which it could ill afford to lose. The civil engineer who ridiculed the amateurs who had tried to imagine how Chicago's streets might be made more beautiful and pleasing was perhaps being a bit too smug in his professional self-assurance. Certainly on the evidence of most American cities today, seventy-five years after the professionalization of city planning, one could hardly argue that they achieved

³⁷Harvey A. Kantor, "The City Beautiful in New York," *New York Historical Society Quarterly*, 57 (April, 1973), pp. 149-150.

a stunning success. Would the results have been different if the planners had somehow managed to preserve more of the visionary, aesthetic, and open quality of the movement's earliest years? We shall never know.

Perhaps the most telling criticism to be made of these early city planners, whether beautifiers or technicians, is their political innocence. The assumption, for example, that American capitalism had undergone a profound change of heart, and would henceforth devote itself to the general good, seems in retrospect largely an exercise in wishful thinking. As Samuel P. Hays and others have persuasively argued, business support for the "nonpartisan" reform of municipal government in this period in fact represented an *extension* of business influence in the running of the city, rather than an abnegation of that influence, and the same seems the most plausible explanation for the enthusiastic business support of civic beautification and city planning.³⁸

Similarly dubious is the planners' insistence that city planning could de-fuse urban class conflict, and that their activities lay in some transcendent realm above the grubby world of politics. In fact, the problems they confronted, and the remedies they proposed, were quintessentially political in nature. Their lofty insistence that they were "non-political" was in fact itself a shrewd—if not wholly conscious—political strategy. Time and again they insisted that the "formless" and "chaotic" growth of cities in the 19th-century simply represented a kind of collective oversight which could easily be corrected once attention had been called to it. They failed to confront the implications of the fact that the congestion, ugliness, and deficiencies of civic amenities which they deplored in fact served the interests of specific economic groups and were in fact a wholly consistent product of 19th century American capitalism.

Failing to confront this reality, the planners too easily made their peace with the Chamber of Commerce and denied that they were a part of the political process. Repeatedly they asserted that the reforms they proposed were so rational, so scientific, so eminently reasonable that every class, every interest group in the city must inevitably accept them unquestioningly. One wonders if they had ever read Federalist Ten.

While the city planning professionals who prevailed in the latter part of the period under consideration ridiculed the unrealistic dreams of the City Beautiful enthusiasts, they were not free of illusion themselves. They never doubted, as George B. Ford put it, that there was a "normal" pattern of growth for every city, and once this pattern had been identified by the experts, it would be accepted by everyone, and the process of "rational" growth would calmly proceed. As one city planner put it in 1909, their model was one of "healthful, orderly, and symmetrical development along sane lines."³⁹ The "uncontrolled behemoth of ugliness and disorder" would be subdued at last

³⁸Samuel P. Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 55 (October, 1964), pp. 157-169. My general view of the political role of the business class in these years has also been influenced by Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge, 1962).

³⁹Frederick L. Ford, address to the First National Conference on City Planning, May, 1909, in *City Planning*, U.S. 61st Congress, 2nd Session, S. Document, Vol. 59, No. 422 (Washington, D.C., 1910).

by these Saint Georges wielding their charts and slide rules.

Buried in much of the early city planning rhetoric—not so deeply at times—were strong elitist assumptions. Charles Mulford Robinson perhaps put it the most seductively:

[T]hose to whom the commission is given undertake it reverently, in appreciation of the great trust which thousands of persons are reposing upon them, and of the opportunity, for never before has [the] artist had so wonderful and complex a material with which to work. A man's every higher instinct must respond to the appeal, when called to replan a city.⁴⁰

J. Horace McFarland, president of the American Civic Association, was more blunt. The urban population, he said, was divided between an "unthinking majority" and a "restlessly persistent minority of civic planners" charting the future for "people who cannot—or will not—do it for themselves." Or, as the ineffable Arthur Buchholz put it, the sooner "real experts" gained control of city planning, the sooner the urban masses would "begin to live without waste, and intelligently."⁴¹

In their concentration on the practical, their pretensions to professional omniscience, their repudiation of politics, and their easy accommodation to business interests, did these early city planners lay the ideological groundwork for some of the horrors perpetrated on American cities in a later generation in the name of Urban Renewal, and for the emergence of powerful planning administrators like Robert Moses who rarely had to answer to the citizens of the neighborhoods they destroyed? One can only pose the question—but one *can* assert with confidence that the legacy of the first generation of city planners—dedicated and talented as they were—was an ambiguous one at best.

PAUL S. BOYER is Professor of History and Chairman of the History Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. His most recent book is *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, 1978).

⁴⁰Robinson, "The Replanning of Cities," p. 1490.

⁴¹Edward Marshall, "The Modern American City a Monument to Stupidity," p. 6 (quoting Buchholz); McFarland, *The Growth of City Planning in America*, pp. 1524, 1526, 1528.