# The City Beautiful Movement

The 1890s and early years of the twentieth century were a turning point in American society. The economic system struggled to define itself and Americans through the language of consumption; social unrest and violence, results of economic depressions, disgust with corruption in government, and overcrowded urban centers erupted periodically throughout the era; and the agrarian way of life, so familiar and fundamental to American thought and self-image, was passing away into a nostalgic past. Historian Harold Faulkner observes that Americans

> witnessed the passing of the frontier and the rise of the United States to a position of world power and responsibility which was to make any return to her old isolation increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Old issues were dead or dying; sectional tension was no longer a force of much importance in politics, and efforts to revive it proved unavailing. Most important of all, the triumph of industry over agriculture was now assured. The Industrial Revolution, if not completed, had gone so far as to make turning back to the ways of a simpler agrarian society out of the question.

Life had come to be lived, for many, in the city. Not only had population increased during the period 1860 to 1910 from 31.4 million to 91.9 million, but the percentage of Americans living in cities increased as well--by 1910, 46% lived in cities with populations of over 2,500. (Hines, 81) With population centering on urban areas, the questions of the city--the "good life," crime, poverty, urban blight, and civic idealism--all came to the fore near the turn of the century.

Many "believed in the classic definition of the city as the means to the 'good life,' a life in which man could aspire to more than mere physical survival..." (Blanton, 15) The attractions of the city were many--restaurants, theater, music and dancing, shopping. However, the real consumers of the city's goods were not its residents; increasingly, with the advent of improved transportation and roadways, the middle and upper-middle class retreated from the cities into the suburbs, leaving the less well-to-do and the downright poverty-stricken to the quickly decaying urban center. The upper classes traveled into the city to attend to their business, consume the leisure activities contained therein, and the return to their comfortable and beautiful suburban homes. What they left behind in the cities is the subject of numerous Progressive reform movements throughout the period.

Jacob Riis, as early as 1890, observed (of New York City) that "three-fourths of its people live in the tenements, and the nineteenth-century drift of the population to the cities is sending ever-increasing multitudes to crowd them...We know now that there is no way out; that the 'system' that was the evil offspring of public neglect and private greed has come to stay, a storm-centre forever of our civilization." (Riis) As an early social reformer, Riis' concern with the city was echoed by future reformers. Yet while his activism seemed to stem from genuine concern-- "The remedy that shall be an effective answer to the coming appeal for justice must proceed from the public conscience." -- the reformers who followed Riis were concerned less with the poor of the cities than with their own fear of these growing urban masses. Their concern can be understood in the context of the social upheaval centered on the city during the Gilded Age, beginning with Chicago's Haymarket Riot of 1886 and followed by labor unrest just prior and just after the beginning of the 1893 depression--the Homestead strike of 1892 and the Pullman strike of 1894. The depression starting in 1893 lasted until 1897, its pain, division, and violence a memory fresh in the minds of Americans.

The reformers of urban America were generally middle and upper-middle class, whose concern was with the potential violence of those left in the cities. Paul Boyer explains,

> The process of urbanization functioned as a potent catalyst for social speculation and social action...social thinkers, reformers, philanthropists, and others whose assumption and activities seemed otherwise very different were often linked by a shared preoccupation with the city and, more specifically, by a common interest in controlling the behavior of an increasingly urbanized populace. (vii)

The lower classes these activists were attempting to "help" (and control) were living in squalid and significantly unhealthy conditions. An excellent example of these conditions are the alleys and tenements of Washington D.C. The type of squalor found in these "homes" was understandably unacceptable in the nation's capital--these alleys were hidden away. A square block of fine townhouses and mansions enclosed a courtyard of buildings accessible by a small alley from the street--where poverty, crime, illegitimacy, and TB swarmed over its inhabitants, unknown to the upper-class homeowners who resolved to live in the urban center. In 1897, 303 of these alleys housed 18,978 people. The conditions found in the city center of Washington D.C. was not unique; the squalor and hopelessness of city life for immigrants and the poor throughout the country has been recounted numerous times by writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Riis, and Frank Norris.

The middle and upper-class reformers who sought to remedy this situation did so, for the most part, out of their own fear. They knew that for their own safety and business viability something had to be done; but how to attack the problem? They had to make the assumption that the poverty-stricken were somehow morally, and by extension civically deficient, a point of view quite in vogue at the time, with the continuing popularity of Darwin's theories of survival of the fittest and Spenser's translation of these ideas into the social realm. "Common to almost all the reformers...was the conviction--explicit or implicit--that the city, although obviously different from the village...should nevertheless replicate the moral order of the village. City dwellers, they believed, must somehow be brought to perceive themselves as members of cohesive communities knit together by shared moral and social values." (Boyer, vii)

The most visible expression of this belief in the creation of moral and civic virtue in the urban population was created by the reformers of the City Beautiful movement. The movement was conceived as explicitly reform-minded; Daniel Burnham, a leading proponent of the movement, linked their efforts with Progressivism. A reform "of the landscape, he suggested, [would] complement the burgeoning reforms in other areas of society." (Hines, 95) While other reformers concentrated on improving sanitary conditions or opening missions like Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, the City Beautiful leaders (upper-middle class, white, male), believed the emphasis should be on creating a beautiful city, which would in turn inspire its inhabitants to moral and civic virtue. "The reform movement in America, which had largely been concerned with corruption in local government, exploitation of the laboring classes by big business, improvement in housing conditions in large cities, and other social causes, quickly embraced the concept of the city beautiful as an American goal." (Reps, 195)

Generally stated, the City Beautiful advocates sought to improve their city through beautification, which would have a number of effects: 1) social ills would be swept away, as the beauty of the city would inspire civic loyalty and moral rectitude in the impoverished; 2) American cities would be brought to cultural parity with their European competitors through the use of the European Beaux-Arts idiom; and 3) a more inviting city center still would not bring the upper classes back to live, but certainly to work and spend money in the urban areas.

The premise of the movement was the idea that beauty could be an effective social control device. "When they trumpeted the meliorative power of beauty, they were stating their belief in its capacity to shape human thought and behavior." (Wilson, 80) Based on their fear, and a sincere sense of responsibility to improve the lives of the inner city poor, the City Beautiful reformers believed that "'civic loyalty' itself--that elusive abstraction which rolled so easily from Progressive tongues--[could] provide the foundation stone" for a harmonious urban moral order. (Boyer, 252) Edward A. Ross' contemporary work *Social Control* advocated that "emotions once channeled toward the supernatural be redirected to the civic ideal..." (Boyer, 253) but did not posit a method of inculcating the masses in this ideal. Boyer's point that civic loyalty, if it is to be an effective instrument of social control, must become compellingly real, is the idea which the City Beautiful leaders themselves made real.

> Important as beauty was for itself, its role in environmental conditioning was never far from the minds of civic center advocates. The civic center's beauty would reflect the souls of the city's inhabitants, inducing order, calm, and propriety therein. Second, the citizen's presence in the center, together with other citizens, would strengthen pride in the city and awaken a sense of community with fellow urban dwellers. (Wilson, 92)

The idiom the City Beautiful leaders used in their ideal civic centers was the Beaux-Arts style, named for the famous Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which instructed artists and architects in the necessity of order, dignity, and harmony in their work. The first expression of this monumental style in the United States was found at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The shimmering "White City," as the fair came to be known during that summer in Chicago, was a tour de force of early city planning and architectural cohesion. In the grand Court of Honor, architects, brought in from the East by Director of Construction Daniel H. Burnham of Chicago, put their Beaux-Arts training to use in the monumental and vaguely classical buildings, all of uniform cornice height, all decorated roughly the same, and all painted bright white. The beauty of the main court, the well-planned balance of buildings, water, and open green spaces was a revelation for the 27 million visitors. Not only was the White City dignified and monumental, it was also well-run: there was no poverty and no crime (so the visitors were led to believe), there were state-of-the-art sanitation and transportation systems, and the Columbian Guard kept everyone happily in their place. In contrast to the grey urban sprawl and blight of Chicago and other American cities, this seemed a utopia.

The fair set American taste in architecture for at least the next 15 years, although some argue that its influence extends even farther into the twentieth century. Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, who designed the Transportation Building at the fair (not included in the Court of Honor), complained that the reliance on European forms and the monumental idiom set native American architecture back decades. The Beaux-Arts style was nonetheless considered dignified and beautiful, and Americans embraced the order the style provided during a period of great disharmony and disorder in their country. The fair also introduced the concept of a monumental core or civic center, an arrangement of buildings intended to inspire in their beauty and harmony, as well as the beginnings of comprehensive city planning--although in many cases the city planning was directly only at the monumental core and public parks, rather than addressing zoning issues or affordable housing.

The first organized expression of the City Beautiful movement as a means of beautification and social control was, as we will see in the next section, the 1901 Plan for Washington D.C., designed by Daniel Burnham, former Director of Construction for the fair, and his Senate Parks Commission.

The
City Beautiful

The
1901 Plan

Washington D.C.
and Beyond

Notes and
Further Reading

The City Beautiful ~ The 1901 Plan ~ Washington D.C. and Beyond ~ Notes and Further Reading ~ Home