

Community Aesthetics and Planning

by Laurence C. Gerckens, AICP

From 1852 to 1870, Napoleon III, Emperor of France, undertook construction of grand tree-lined boulevards, huge public parks, impressive monuments and public buildings, and architecturally unified streets, making Paris "The City Beautiful." His motives were practical: to maintain himself in office through elimination of unemployment — with its concomitant hunger, riots and political upheaval — by creating jobs in public works. In so doing, he made Paris the most environmentally and culturally attractive city in Europe. This, in turn, helped make Paris a major center of finance and production, further increasing the economic well-being of the city and its residents. Creation of beauty in the public environment brought full employment and social peace, ushering in the greatest period of capital formation in French history and a supporting sense of individual social significance and public pride in community accomplishment.

The physical condition of most American cities was deteriorating in the 1870s. A combination of the Industrial Revolution and a policy of minimal government control of private actions converted the small agrarian villages of the New World into teeming slums and smoke-choked warrens of an exploitative society. American cities became characterized by manure-filled streets, garbage-strewn alleys, public buildings that were poorly constructed and of — at best — mediocre design, and public ways that were often unpaved and unmaintained. By the 1890s, American cities had become known to the world not only for the throbbing success of their economies, but also for their crass commercialism and unrelieved ugliness.

Architect Daniel Hudson Burnham, Director of Works for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 (The World's Columbian Exposition), undertook to realize the first city-scale unified design of buildings, pedestrian

[Editor's Note: While the history of planning may not matter much when you're reviewing a site plan or acting on a zoning amendment, it's valuable (and interesting) to know something about how the practice of planning has developed over the years. Larry Gerckens, one of America's preeminent planning historians, will periodically provide some historical perspective on topics that appear in the Journal.]

"THE MODERN AMERICAN PLANNING COMMISSION IS THE GUARDIAN OF THE PUBLIC PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT."

plazas and public monuments in America. Painted all in white, this "Great White City" thrilled visitors with its beauty, cleanliness and order. It initiated the City Beautiful Movement in the United States and catapulted Burnham into leadership of the newly emerging city planning profession.

Thousands of visitors left Chicago with the belief that things could be made better back home. They began to organize local groups to plan for a visually and functionally unified new "civic center," for metropolitan park systems and tree-lined boulevards with coordinated public benches, street lights and transit stations. They sought to realize architecturally integrated streets through laws regulating building heights and setting building setback lines. Led by major businessmen, unofficial City Plan Committees undertook to raise the quality of the public environment to make physical America a fitting subject for public-spirited support and patriotic respect, capable of inspiring both the ambi-

tions of youth and the visions of the industrious. The idea of America would take positive physical form through the effort of community planning commissions; it would be realized in community actions directed toward shaping and protecting the public environment.

When the first official, permanent and local American planning commission was created at Hartford, Connecticut in 1907, the aesthetic purposes of community planning — realizing an inspiring good order in the public environment while protecting the positive qualities of both the natural environment and the cultural heritage — were clearly dominant forces in the emerging community planning movement. Yet, it would take the courts another 75 years to recognize these community-value based aesthetic motivations as warranting inclusion without qualification in the valid public purposes toward which police-power based regulations may be addressed.

The modern American planning commission is the guardian of the public physical environment. When this responsibility is forsaken, all citizens of the community, present and future, suffer losses that are ecological, cultural, and economic, as well as aesthetic. The planning commission that does not plan to promote and protect the positive features of the physical environment is derelict in its duties and betrays a public trust.

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PHOTO: CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

View across the west end of the Main Basin, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893. Chicago Historical Society.

“The world has been vouchsafed one perfect vision which will never suffer from decay ... then or now, no words can express the beauty of the Dream City, for it is beyond even the unearthly glamour of a dream.”

Candace Wheeler
writing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, May 1893.

“It was indeed worth a journey of a thousand miles to stand on the north bridge of the great lagoon ... here is such accord between the parts and the whole design that every column, every section, every angle is an object of grace and dignity ... If any fault is to be found with this Columbian Exposition, it will be on account of the inability of the human mind to compass and appreciate it.”

C.C. Buel
writing for *The Century magazine*, 1893.

“The fair! The fair! A city of palaces set in spaces of emerald, reflected in shining lengths of water which stretch in undulating lines under the arches of marble bridges ... The result stands to-day ... a vision and foretaste of how the world will one day build in earnest.”

Candace Wheeler
writing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, May 1893.