An Overview of the City Beautiful Movement as Reflected in Daniel Burnham's Vision

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The City Beautiful Movement was an attempt by late nineteenth and early twentieth century architects and planners to establish a sense of order and dignity in American urban planning at a time when land-use decisions were exclusively dictated by local, often provincial, urban traditions. Daniel Burnham typified the new kind of architect and planner who felt that large-scale, rational planning initiatives were imperative if American cities wanted to create better urban environments for all of their citizens. The motivating factor responsible for much of Burnham’s thinking was L’Ecole de Beaux Arts.¹

Part of the University of Paris, L’Ecole de Beaux Arts was the leading international school of architecture from the 1870s to the 1930s. The mission of L’Ecole de Beaux Arts was to train architects in the latest design techniques so that they could plan wide-scale projects within various communities. Students were indoctrinated to believe that such all-inclusive designs would not only lead to more effective urban planning, but would also promote economy, efficiency, and good citizenship within the cities they served.² The success of George Haussmann in transforming Paris from an old, outdated city to a modern world capital showed that this planning rationale worked.³

Enthusiastic about the possibilities of such wide-scale planning, American architects such as Richard Morris Hunt, George Post, and Daniel Burnham brought these ideas to America. In Burnham’s case, the overwhelming success of the 1893 Columbian Exposition not only catapulted him to national prominence, but reinforced his belief in the positive good of such planning initiatives.⁴ This, in turn, led him to publicize the advantages of the City Beautiful Movement throughout the nation. The public responded most favorably to such planning schemes, and a number of business and civic organizations were established to promote such development.

The clamor to implement these new planning initiatives did not go unnoticed in Washington, D.C. Washington’s one-hundredth anniversary as the national capital prompted Congress to form a legislative committee in 1901 to investigate the possibility of replanning the mall area.⁵ Headed by Senator James McMillan of Michigan, the committee hired Daniel Burnham, Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles McKim and others to develop a mall plan. The McMillan Plan, unveiled in 1902, recommended the elimination of inappropriate buildings from the mall area to be replaced by Roman Classic structures within a parklike setting. These
new buildings were to reflect the grandeur of the U.S. Capitol, the White House, and the Washington Monument. All new structures were to be grouped by government function. Strong axial relationships and broad vistas were developed as a way to visually connect the various outlying areas to the central mall. The entire area is now known as the Federal Triangle. The mall design was reminiscent of the Champs Elysees; the reflecting pool of the fountain area at Versailles; and the Lincoln Memorial of the Arc de Triomphe. The plan’s insistence that all the Roman-styled super-blocks in and around the mall be symmetrical in form did not serve to discourage individual architectural expression. In fact, no two structures contain exactly the same applied details. The plan was implemented in various stages beginning in 1902. The later addition of the Lincoln Memorial, the Arlington Memorial Bridge, the Jefferson Memorial, the Vietnam Memorial, and the Korean War Memorial reflect the original intent of the McMillan Plan.\(^6\) Height restrictions within the district were also a direct result of this plan.

The success of the McMillan Plan prompted similar City Beautiful plans in other major cities. One city to take the lead was Cleveland, Ohio. Business and community leaders in Cleveland recognized that they needed a new city hall, post office, courthouse, convention hall, and library. In 1903, the city received state approval to hire a panel of experts to develop what became known as the Cleveland Group Plan. Daniel Burnham, Arnold Brunner, and John Carrere served on this panel. All three architects were well-known to Clevelanders, having already designed buildings in the city.

Covering a five-block area and containing seven structures, the plan incorporated many of the same design features found in the McMillan Plan. Massive rectangular Classic-styled structures were placed strategically around a central mall area running from Rockwell Avenue to the bluff above Lake Erie. Treelined walkways in and around each structure added a further parklike quality to the district. The idea of placing public buildings around a parklike setting was not new with Burnham and his associates. In fact, many colonial cities had set aside large tracts of land in the center of their communities for commons and public buildings. What made Burnham’s plan so unique was the sheer magnitude of the undertaking. All buildings within the Group Plan were to contain different Beaux Arts, Neo-Class, and Renaissance Revival details; and all structures were to be built of granite, limestone, or marble.\(^7\) These buildings were also to conform in height, scale, and proportion. Like the McMillan Plan, the Cleveland Group Plan was built in stages from 1905 to 1930. Newer structures on the periphery, including the Society Bank complex, the Anthony J. Celebrezze Federal Building, the Cleveland Public Library Annex, and the Sheraton Centre Hotel, although reflecting more current styles, contain classic architectural elements reminiscent of the earlier designs of the district.
Wider in scope than either the McMillan or Cleveland Group plans, Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett’s Chicago Plan of 1909 truly reflected their belief: “Make No Little Plan.” Unlike the earlier plans, this design package called for regional redevelopment, which included a totally modern highway plan, a cross-county park system, and a new enlarged civic and business center. In terms of revamping the business center itself, Burnham and Bennett proposed sweeping changes, including the widening of Twelfth Street, extending Michigan Avenue to new suburbs north and south of the existing central business area, re-routing rail lines and terminals away from the lakeshore to west of Michigan Avenue, and creating a civic center south of the Chicago River.

The Chicago Plan also proposed an expanded commercial district for Michigan Avenue north of the Chicago River. Specifically, the plan called for the construction of Neo-Classic super-blocks on both sides of Michigan Avenue from the Civic Center to the Watertower. Of uniform height, these super-blocks were to flank a modern, treelined Michigan Avenue. This part of the planning initiative was derived from the earlier plans developed by George Haussmann for the Champs Elysees in the 1860s. The proposed building height restrictions were never enacted; however, the adoption of setback and zoning laws in the 1920s helped to create the intended “Champs Elysees” impression throughout this urban district.

Burnham and Bennett’s plan recommended two other major improvements. First, it proposed that the current of the Chicago River be reversed so that the river’s overflow would collect upstream and not at the mouth of the river. This proposal was later implemented. Second, that a series of elaborate bridges span the Chicago River at strategic downtown points. Designed to be architectural achievements in their own right, these bridges were to connect the older, more densely settled areas in and around the loop to the south and the newer well-planned business district to the north. Parklike areas in and around the bridges and along the banks of the river were to add greenspace to this part of downtown. The present-day North Michigan Avenue, Columbus Drive, North State Street, and North La Salle Street bridges were the result of this plan. Although Burnham died before his vision for Chicago was completed, many of his original planning concepts were incorporated into the final design scheme.

To conclude, Daniel Burnham and the City Beautiful Movement represent an important early stage in modern American urban planning. Prior to that time, planning was based almost exclusively on the needs of individual patrons who often responded to local economic, political, and social pressures. This kind of reactive thinking sometimes fostered great architectural achievements, but more often than not, led to noticeable design inconsistencies. Perhaps the greatest contribution made by Burnham and the disciples of the City Beautiful Movement was to get architects and planners to reconsider what constituted good design and to think of the long-term ramifications of their efforts.
Modern urban development is an outgrowth of this earlier planning form, especially when it concerns the spatial arrangement of civic structures within a limited urban environment. Architects like Burnham may have lacked the technical sophistication of modern planners, but they possessed a very keen insight into what constitutes rational design and how these concepts could be successfully incorporated into their own contemporary urban settings. In most cases, they achieved their intended goal by producing a quality product beneficial to the entire community. Whatever the contemporary economic, political, and social forces motivating the planners of the City Beautiful Movement, one fact is undeniably true: their architectural legacy is still appreciated by the public, whether in Washington, D.C., Cleveland, or Chicago.

Endnotes


2. Ibid., 121.

3. Ibid., 17.

4. Ibid., 4-5, 117.


9. Ibid., 61-78, 100.

10. Ibid., 87.

11. Ibid., 97-104.