

# Beautiful Urbanism:

*How a short lived, feeble  
movement continues to  
shape the contemporary  
American city* by Pierre De Angelis

The Cities Beautiful movement exists as an insignificant footnote in the current discourse on urban planning. It stands as a relatively short lived movement which flourished in the 1890's; a genuine attempt to reform the wretched conditions of inner city poverty. And while today

the term beautiful has been virtually banished from any discussion about urban life, much of the way the American city continues to be shaped is arguably the consequence of our inability to shed the vestiges of this short lived feeble movement. In order to reclaim the con-

cept of beauty for progressive thinking, a radical departure from its conceptual and physical origins is necessary. The possibilities of beautification need to be extended beyond its proven effectiveness as a remedial device, and we must abandon the industrial city as a testing ground for new ideas; as its capacity for reinvention is insufficient for an allegiance with the Cities Beautiful movement.

The conceptual frame work of the Cities Beautiful movement has its origins at a significant turning point in the economic and social structure of American society. The advent of improved transportation systems ushered the upper and middle classes from the city centers to the suburbs, leaving the less affluent and poverty stricken to the quickly decaying urban centers (1). However the upper and middle classes continued to travel into the city, to attend to their businesses and participate in leisure activities. Whether out of genuine concern or simply fear for their own safety and the continued viability of their businesses, middle and upper class reformers attempted to relieve the malaise of the city and lower classes. They did so by embracing the concept of beauty as an "effective social control device"(2). Reformers had no interest in beauty for its own sake but in its ameliorative power which could inspire civic pride and moral rectitude amongst the impoverished and poverty stricken. It is on these principals that the cities beautiful movement was born and on which much of our contemporary thinking on urbanity finds its ancestry.

The emergence of the Cities Beautiful movement coincided with a larger reform movement gaining momentum in America (3), and as such was quickly and eagerly embraced as part of a larger American goal and ideal (4). Once reformers established the conceptual framework for the Cities Beautiful movement, the "White City" (included in the 1893 World Columbian Exposition), was the first large scale elaboration of these principals. The White City, under head planner Daniel Burnham, developed an appropriate visual language to reinforce the concept of beauty as an effective social control device. To this extent the White City relied heavily on the Beaux-Arts idiom, emphasizing the necessity of order, dignity and harmony and combined with vaguely classical buildings and principles of classical monumental planning. All of the buildings were decorated in a similar fashion, adhered to a uniform cornice height and of course were all painted white. The buildings opened onto a main court which had a balanced composition of buildings, water and open green spaces (5).

For the 27 million visitors the "White City" presented a monumental and dignified utopia in sharp contrast to the blight and well-worn cityscapes of Chicago and other American cities. It presented an idealized social model of a city run with such extreme efficiency which allowed it to boast clean transportation systems, state of the art sanitation, no poverty and no crime (6). It comes as no surprise that the exposition is credited with setting the taste in American architecture for the next 15 years; significant projects

that took the "White City" as their lead included the Mc Millan Plan and The Mall of Washington.

By the early 1900's the movement waned after it came under increased criticism for its expensive, impractical and allegedly elitist and superficial characteristics. However, prior to its demise the Cities Beautiful movement had successfully established the beginning of what came to be recognized as comprehensive city planning model, which continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary American planning.

Today evidence of the extended influence the Cities Beautiful movement is supported by the increased frequency with which critics disparage at the Disneyfication (7), or more broadly 'theming' of our urban centers. Even though we must give Disney due respect for elevating 'Main Street U.S.A' into an intricate and sophisticated science of planning, the template for America's first "large-scale urban control zone" (8) was realized years prior at the White City.

The contemporary 'theme park city', continues the tradition of the large-scale urban control zone by adhering to two key strategies developed at the White City: First embracing a uniform and harmonious architectural style which suggests consensus and contentment. Second, crafting a simulation of the world which is idealized and stripped bare of any significant risk, conflict or controversy. (This can be witnessed in almost every large scale urban development constructed in America over the last decade.

The increased reliance on these strategies has created a blanket of quasi-cities across based on an urbanism of leisure which the New Yorker architecture critic Paul Goldberger observed "...lack a sense of the serendipity, diversity and humanity..." (9) Under this planning regime cities have become theme parks in which urban facilities are judged by how well they comply with the demands of business and tourism...Urban life is thus expressed as staged consumption.

Some counter that critics like Goldberger err in crediting theme parks with an excess of influence, arguing that "these mutations to the landscape are simply reflecting the prevailing economic order," (10), specifically mass tourism and the increasing importance of brand aura. However, what such arguments fail to take into account is to what extent the seminal Chicago World Fair and its offspring had in shaping the economy of cultural production in advanced industrial cities. An acute observer noted with foresight in 1896 that " In the day in which the better, the best, American city shall become a common spectacle, we shall perceive how much sooner it came by reason of the vision of the White City which we all beheld upon the shores of the great lake."(11)

Regardless of whether the recent inclination towards 'theming' cities is an emulation of past strategies or simply the formalization of the economic force of late capitalism, key strategies born out of the Cities Beautiful movement have undeniably become what seems the only

response toward shaping the contemporary American city. The only real mutation is that today, the shopkeepers who wished to ensure continued viability of their businesses have been superseded by multinationals and corporate entities.

If the current proclivity for theming our cities says as much about a timeless desire to preserve some version of the past, as it hints at our present insecurities in our ability to improve the future, (12) then it begs the question; can we reclaim the concept of beauty for progressive thinking on the city?

In order to rescue the concept of beauty from a life of boutique urbanism and mega projects a departure from its conceptual and physical origins is necessary. The possibilities of beautification need to be extended beyond its legacy as a remedial device, and the industrial city must be abandoned as a testing ground for new ideas. Perhaps we should turn with hope to ugly duckling of American planning, the Post-Industrial city. Its pioneering spit and string form of dispersed urbanity has created unique programmatic and spatial relationships which have until recently enjoyed relative immunity to 'themed metropolitans'. However these are slowly being eroded under the pressure of economic and cultural globalization in an effort to increase the touristic appeal of the post-industrial city.

Would it be too optimistic to imagine that the post industrial city could provide the necessary context in which beauty could be resuscitated for progressive thinking and in turn to have itself rescued from a Main Street U.S.A future? Sadly our most contemporary form of urbanity is forced to contend with a decades old movement that speaks more about an unremitting nostalgia than a conviction in our capacity for reinvention.

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#### Notes

1. Julie K. Rose, "The City Beautiful Movement", (University of Virginia, American Studies, 1997)
2. *ibid*
3. Thomas S. Hines, "The Imperial Mall: The City Beautiful Movement and the Washington Plan of 1901-02" from "The Mall in Washington, 1791-1991, ed. Richard Longstreath,
4. John W.Reps, "The Making of Urban America" (Princeton University Press; New Ed edition, June 15, 1992)
5. Julie K. Rose, "The City Beautiful Movement", (University of Virginia, American Studies 1997)
6. Thomas Vonier quoted in "Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis", John Hannigan, (New York: Routledge, 1998)
7. Sharon Zukin, "The Cultures of Cities", (Blackwell Publishing Professional, January 1, 1996)
8. Thomas Vonier quoted in "Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis", John Hannigan, (New York: Routledge, 1998)
9. Tom Vanderbilt, "Themed Architecture: It's a Mall World After", (Harvard Design Magazine, 1999)
10. *ibid*
11. John Coleman Adams, "What a Great City Might Be; A Lesson From The White City", (The New England Magazine, March 1896)
12. Tom Vanderbilt, "Themed Architecture: It's a Mall World After", (Harvard Design Magazine, 1999)