LONE STAR BEAUTIFUL:
THE CITY BEAUTIFUL MOVEMENT IN TEXAS

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A few years into the twenty-first century, cities continue to grapple with similar questions about planning and urban growth that perplexed planners a century ago. For one small city, in East Texas, the remnants and legacy of the City Beautiful Movement live on. In 2007, Tyler, Texas, a city with a population of approximately 100,000, launched a community-wide planning project that would come to be called “Tyler 21.” Using a number of methods to garner community input, including surveys, focus groups, workshop retreats, open houses and public displays, the city’s planning department was able to reach out to a wide variety of citizens and collect diverse opinions about the future of planning for Tyler. The city and its planning consultants also employed more modern means of input and communication, including email newsletters and a project web site. Through smaller and smaller working groups and public hearings, the city, finally, was able to publish a comprehensive plan that addressed issues that were brought up during the public sessions and project possible solutions out 20 to 30 years. Historic preservation, public safety, traffic congestion, business growth, municipal management, and the desire for a renewed downtown core were all areas covered by the Tyler 21 plan. To date, the city has moved forward on several projects with many more in the planning stages.¹

It is likely that only a handful of people who were involved in the Tyler 21 planning process had ever heard of the City Beautiful Movement, which flourished during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. However, despite some obvious differences in the planning process and the breadth of input provided in Tyler, the very act of bringing together diverse populations and voices in order to improve and plan for growth in a city, like Tyler, has its roots in City Beautiful. Many other planning philosophies and ideologies had their moments

Throughout the twentieth century, but the lasting legacy of citizens wanting to make their cities places of pride and inspiration has never gone out of style. And, in Texas, during the early part of the twentieth century, one can see how City Beautiful played out with grand plans but only a few significant outcomes.

To understand the role that City Beautiful thinking played in both small and large Texas cities, one must first understand the early influences on the movement and how the movement developed its own ideology and aesthetics. Many historians trace the origins of American efforts to improve cities to what has come to be called “village improvement.” Begun in the 1850s in small New England villages, village improvement grew out of concern for the image visiting summer residents had of the condition of some villages. These, mostly, middle class summer residents would often comment on the poor sanitation and general ugliness of the small villages. In response, groups of mostly women, in a way, turned the tables on these summer residents, enlisting them in organized efforts to improve sanitation, plant trees, and work with business owners to improve the overall condition of their shop fronts. The movement, if it can be called that, was at its height during the Civil War and had a significant effect on future city improvement efforts. First, village improvement took a comprehensive view of the village, coordinating improvements on many levels. Village improvement is also seen as a response to changes brought on by immigration and the need to assimilate and improve the condition of immigrants. Finally, village improvement methods slowly moved into larger urban centers with the returning summer residents who saw the outcomes of organized city planning efforts on a small scale.²

Following village improvement, the work of Frederick Law Olmstead, often, is cited as having a large influence on the City Beautiful Movement. While Olmstead focused on natural landscapes and, at times, criticized City Beautiful ideology and aesthetics, one can, clearly, see a legacy he left to City Beautiful planner, no matter how unintentional. The mere fact that he fiercely promoted the idea of parks – and later, his boulevard systems – as means of bringing order to rampant urban growth can be considered his first legacy. Further, Wilson describes a more important intellectual legacy left by Olmstead. The value of natural beauty in the urban environment instead of built forms has been key to understanding Olmstead’s work on parks but also leads to a second impact on city planning that beauty and utility cannot – and should not – be separated. To Olmstead, with both beauty and utility, competition thrives among cities, the stage is set to change behaviors and restore the workforce, recreational activity increases, and property values rise. Olmstead also believed in expert planning by specialists and that with such planning, parks and other civic spaces could become meeting places for different classes of people to meet and mingle. Also, with planning, cities could better cope with inevitable, if not desirable, urban growth. Finally, through his own large consulting practice, Olmstead would help train a new generation of landscape architects who would play significant roles in the City Beautiful Movement, including his own son, Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr.\(^3\)

Just as hotly debated among some historians as Olmstead’s contributions to City Beautiful is the impact of the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Wilson would have historians remember, first, that the Columbian Exposition closed in 1893. The City Beautiful Movement was not, according to Wilson, named as such until 1899 with the height of City Beautiful being around 1903. Nonetheless, the Exposition’s influence on City Beautiful can be seen in several

\(^3\) *Ibid*, 22-33
areas. First, visitors to the Exposition are recorded as being amazed at how clean the “White City” was. This was achieved with overnight cleaning crews coming into the park cleaning restrooms, picking up trash, straightening flower beds and scrubbing the walkways and buildings of any dirt or grime. Another influence on City Beautiful was the Exposition’s building designs, which relied heavily on Neoclassicism and Beaux Arts aesthetics embellished with a plethora of patriotic symbolism, which, in turn, was believed to promote a greater civic spirit in the community. Also significant was the level of architectural professionalism apparent in the number of architects employed to design and build Exposition buildings. Through their desire to create civic monuments at the Exposition, the new breed of professional architects could demand respect for municipal art and raise its standing among the middle classes. And, in turn, they began to use architecture to express cultural and governmental functions while at the same time, furthering efforts to affect change in citizens by embracing higher ideals.⁴

One of the most significant, and lasting, influences of the Columbian Exposition on the City Beautiful Movement was the role of women in the planning, organizing, fundraising and execution of civic improvement. By 1915, women had achieved great notoriety for the work in improving the conditions in America’s cities. For some, women were natural leaders within the City Beautiful movement. While they met with resistance from all-male city councils, women persevered across America to advocate for better street lighting, garbage cans, cleared sidewalks and paved streets. One catalyst for women’s entry to city planning and improvement was the founding of the national association, called the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, in 1890. Through this association, local clubs could report on the progress of projects in their cities and towns, thus encouraging other women’s clubs across the country. And, if the men in these cities

⁴ *Ibid*, 57-60
were not prepared to do the actual work, women were. During clean up days or weeks, organized by the women’s clubs, women were not averse to scrubbing sidewalks, cleaning up alleyways, and, if need be, filling potholes themselves.5

However, men did participate in City Beautiful efforts, and much of their advocacy for city improvement can, again, be traced to the Columbian Exposition. Here, the committees were made up of businessmen from the middle and upper-middle classes and many of their wives. Joining them were professionals, like doctors and lawyers, and for one of the first times, experts in the fields of architecture, landscape architecture and city planning.6

Together, these groups brought together an ideology with characteristics that would pervade the later City Beautiful Movement. First, they worked to transform cities within the existing social, political and economic arrangements in their communities. They were keenly aware of class lines, but felt city improvements would benefit all classes of people. Beyond the benefits, though, there appeared, again, the idea of city improvement as a vehicle for social control, or environmentalism, and solutions for social problems, since they also recognized that many cities fell short when it came to overall aesthetics and functionality that left many citizens uninspired. However, it was not all about beauty and flowers. Advocates for city improvement at the Columbian Exposition insisted on beauty being matched with utility and, most of all, efficiency. All of the grand ideas were then wrapped in a certain optimism about the future with a view to Europe for inspiration – although, those European ideas quickly were translated and repackaged for America. Finally, there was an overall enthusiastic welcome of the city as a place that could bring people together and provide inspiration for its citizens.7

6 Wilson, 75
7 *Ibid*, 78-86
The outward expression of these ideals produced a strong aesthetic that would carry from the Columbian Exposition into the City Beautiful Movement. The guiding principle behind many of the buildings at the Exposition was a reverence for natural beauty and naturalistic constructivism, taking great pains to connect civic centers with landscaped parkways, sidewalks and boulevards. For buildings, Neoclassicism provided planners with the ultimate expression of nineteenth century values. The style was easily adapted to many forms large and small, offered basic conceptions of proportion and arrangement, and provided both skilled and struggling architects a classic style within which to work. Finally, for many, the style harkened back to Federalism and even further back to a classical age within which lay the roots of democracy. On a slightly more flamboyant level, however, City Beautiful also employed the Beaux Arts style of architecture, which adorned classical buildings with patriotic motifs and allegorical statuary. The Movement also rejected certain styles like Romanesque, which was popular through the 1890s; Gothic architecture, which did not allow for municipal architecture to be set apart from church architecture; and, finally, the slow-slung, whitewashed stucco of the Mediterranean style did not suit City Beautiful.8

In the end, all of the people and ideas led to developing a singular concept for the Exposition and, ultimately, City Beautiful – the civic center. Much different from today’s notion of a single building, operated by the city for multiple uses, the civic center concept of the nineteenth century revolved around developing an ensemble of government buildings – city, state and federal – arranged in an organized, planned formation. Besides buildings, civic centers might have great lawns, sidewalks, benches, fountains and monuments all encompassed by well-planned boulevards radiating out to all parts of the city. Above all else, the purpose of the civic

8 *Ibid*, 86-91
center was social, or environmental, conditioning. Once again, planners tried to find ways through planning to strengthen civic pride and produce a calm, orderly and proper citizenry. Though planners wanted to draw citizens to the civic center, they were quick to dispel notions that such a grand meeting place would replace or reduce traffic in the commercial districts.  

While cities in the East and some in the Midwest were dealing with overcrowding, slums and exhausted municipal services, cities – more accurately, towns – in Texas were still working to get basic services running and charting their future development. For instance, by the late 1890s, Houston, Texas, was still dealing with a shifting political landscape that brought hotly contested basic utility services alongside efforts to improve the image of the city. Two major events at the dawn of the twentieth century would catapult Houston into its future as a major American city. In September 1900, Galveston Island was devastated by a hurricane that claimed over 6,000 lives and caused an estimated $30 million in damage. Prior to the hurricane, Galveston was a major seaport, while Houston’s port, 50 miles inland, played a secondary role in shipping traffic. However, after the hurricane, the port in Houston emerged as a safer and much preferred alternative to Galveston’s port. Three months later, millions of barrels of oil came gushing out of the ground at Spindletop, south of Beaumont, a town of 9,000 people eighty miles east of Houston. Members of Houston Business League, like John Allen Kirby, seized on the opportunity to direct the oil to Houston through construction of a pipeline and to continue exploration around Houston, which led to the discovery of the Humble oilfield north of Houston. These developments spurred ideas about the future of Houston. While adoption of any improvements that could be remotely associated with City Beautiful could take shape, Houston’s business leaders agreed on three more practical goals for the city – greater unity and cooperation

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9 Ibid, 91-95
among business leaders, the completion of a modern ship channel, and efforts to attract foreign investment in local manufacturing.\(^{10}\)

Within the first decade of the twentieth century, fortunes had been made in oil, shipping and manufacturing. Houston’s wealthy turned their attention to pursuits embodied in the City Beautiful Movement. However, instead of measures to improve dirty and dilapidated urban centers into the civic center ideal, Houston, along with many other Texas cities, had hundreds of acres of privately owned, undeveloped land – a blank canvas – upon which to envision their beautiful cities. Efforts to bring about such developments, though, would get stuck in a familiar pattern, seen throughout Texas, of significant planning within the City Beautiful ideal, interruptions because of war and depression, the impact of automobiles and more modern planning theories, and, finally, renewed interest in conservation and preservation.

For Houston, large swaths of prairie land lay to the west and south of the city. And it was here that efforts to incorporate City Beautiful ideas and aesthetics came into play, beginning with the concept for a large city park not unlike New York’s Central Park. Seen as the beginning of Houston’s involvement in city planning, Hermann Park was envisioned as a rational, healthy and beautiful civic environment. In 1910, the mayor of Houston appointed commissioners to a parks board that brought in a landscape architect from Massachusetts to assess the proposed location and to make recommendations regarding a park and parkway system. The result was Houston’s first planning document published in 1913 as *Houston, Tentative Plans for Its Development*. In regards to the park, the plan called for development of 277 acres, originally, called Pines Park. Houston industrialist George H. Hermann owned the land and, in 1914, publicly announced his intention to deed 285 acres of land to the city for the purpose of building a municipal park. In

1914, Houston city engineer John Maxcey published the initial plan for the park that, in keeping with City Beautiful, called for redirecting streets and rechanneling a bayou to create wooded islands along the channel. Curvilinear roads created oval-shaped meadows in the center of the park with much of the open space dedicated to a golf course. The main park entrance was to be off a newly landscaped section of Main Street. With enthusiastic support of a new mayor, the city bought an additional 122.5 acres to the east of the original land, increasing the total acreage to over 409 acres. A second plan developed by St. Louis landscape architect and planner, George E. Kessler, continued the City Beautiful aesthetic with the addition of monuments, a “sunken garden,” landscaped boulevards and traffic circles leading into the park. More sophisticated than the earlier plan, Kessler “demonstrated a pronounced facility for reconciling the requirements of ceremoniousness and informality in his design.” However, with the onset of World War I and a lack of money, further improvements to the park would not continue until 1922. By this time, many planners had moved away from City Beautiful ideals to a new paradigm that has come to be called “City Efficient.” The park would undergo numerous changes and reconfigurations over time with only a small portion retaining any resemblance to the original plans.\footnote{Stephen Fox, “Big Park, Little Plans: A History of Hermann Park,” Hermann Park Conservancy, http://www.hermannpark.org/pdfs/Fox_history.pdf (accessed October 22, 2012).}

Within the process of planning for Hermann Park, one can detect a marked difference in who the advocates for improvement were compared to traditional City Beautiful improvement efforts. In Houston, efforts to improve the city and put it on a course toward modern city planning came from within the municipal government with prominent businessmen being appointed to a board. Traditionally, as mentioned earlier, advocacy for city improvements came from within the ranks of middle and upper middle class businessmen and professionals. While
wealthy individuals were involved in the planning process, probably, their greatest contributions came in gifting lands to the city to make the improvements.

Another wealthy Houstonian, William Marsh Rice, would also leave land for not only the improvement of the city but for the improvement of young minds. Literally, across Main Street from Hermann Park, another plot of prairie land would be developed into Rice Institute (now Rice University) in keeping with much of the City Beautiful aesthetic. Watching over that aesthetic was a young architect, planner, educator and writer named William Ward Watkin, who would go on to leave a legacy of both public and private buildings throughout Houston. A devoted believer in City Beautiful, Watkin came to Houston from the prominent architectural firm of Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson in Boston. Construction began at the new Rice Institute in the summer of 1910 with an administration building, a mechanical laboratory and two dormitories. Watkin’s style deviated from the traditional City Beautiful aesthetic of Neoclassicism with what one historian has called “Lombard Romanesque, continuing a theme infusing the whole campus with Italianate design adapted to the Gulf Coast environment.” Over the next few decades, Watkin would become a full professor at the Institute and oversee the design and construction of many additional campus buildings.12

Another building influenced by Watkin’s City Beautiful aesthetic was the Museum of Fine Arts Houston – the first art museum in the state. Opened in 1924 (quite late in the City Beautiful Movement), the museum was designed as a “temple for art” in the popular Neoclassical style and built on a wedge of land northeast of Hermann Park and east of Rice

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Institute. Together, these three represent the expression of City Beautiful in Houston. However, while no grand plan came together to improve the urban center of Houston, additional examples of City Beautiful influences can be seen in such buildings as the 1911 federal building, which was built in the Second Renaissance Revival style; and the 1910 Harris County Courthouse, built in the popular Beaux Arts style.

Much like Houston, Dallas was reaping the benefits of a new economy and had much land upon which to expand. Unlike Houston, however, Dallas had a urban center that needed much work to improve. Into the 1890s, Dallas had taken many of its architectural clues from the Midwest as evidenced by hotels and business buildings designed by St. Louis architects, a train station influenced by the Columbian Exposition, and an ambitious master plan by Kansas City landscape architect George Kessler – who was also instrumental in the plans for Houston’s Hermann Park, as mentioned earlier.

In Dallas, advocates for city improvement did come from the business community, namely, the City Plan and Improvement League, which invited Kessler to Dallas in 1910 to begin work on a master plan for the city. In 1904, Kessler had produced a plan for the city’s state fair park, but found many new challenges facing Dallas, including flooding from the Trinity River, poor streets, numerous railroad tracks, no boulevards, parks or other public amenities.

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15 Mavis P. Kelsey and Donald H. Dyal. The Courthouses of Texas (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 131.
16 Wilson, 254-257
However, Kessler was known for being both pragmatic and a visionary. He could solve complex engineering problems paired with grand plans that transformed ugly American cities through City Beautiful ideology and aesthetics. In 1912, Kessler proposed for Dallas building massive earthen levees along the Trinity River, removing all railroad tracks from the downtown commercial district, and centralizing freight and passenger lines in one location. Further, he proposed the construction of boulevards that would run along existing creeks and link downtown to emerging suburban developments. A new train station would provide a “gateway” to the city replete with open plazas, fountains and monuments to greet travelers. To the east of the station would be the pinnacle of City Beautiful improvements – a civic center that would include city hall, a library, post office and other public buildings.\textsuperscript{17}

Coming late in the City Beautiful Movement, Kessler’s plans met up with an emerging planning philosophy called City Efficient, which placed expediency and utility over long-term vision and beauty. Improvements were slow. It took over a decade before the railroad tracks were removed from downtown, and fifteen years before the river levees were completed. Dallas did get its gateway train station, Union Station, which opened in 1916, but with a much smaller plaza and no link to a civic center, which did not come to fruition, albeit, in a more modern form for another 65 years. Plus, only one of Kessler grand boulevards was completed. Dallas planners would commission additional master plans but adopting none of them throughout the twentieth century. The failure of City Beautiful in Dallas, first, has been attributed to a lack will on the part of its leadership. Probably, more important to understanding the lack of comprehensive planning can be seen in a deeper respect for individual property rights – as is the case throughout Texas.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 261-266
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 269-271
One case where property rights trumped a comprehensive vision for a city is Fort Worth, just thirty miles west of Dallas. Here, an individual proponent of City Beautiful, John C. Ryan, set out to create a model residential district on land he had purchased in 1911 about three miles south of downtown Fort Worth. Named Ryan Place, the subdivision featured a marble entranceway and featured some firsts for residential building in Fort Worth, including employing landscape architects, like George Kessler, to lay out streets and lots; putting utility lines in alleyways; and purposefully including landscaped entrance ways and façade lines. Respecting individual homeowners tastes at the time, the subdivision filled with homes in a variety of architectural styles, including Italianate, Tudor, Spanish, Georgian, Colonial, Dutch, Federal Revival and Prairie Style. Following World War II, more modest homes were built in Ryan Place, altering the character of the subdivision.¹⁹

North of Ryan Place, nearer to downtown Fort Worth, is an example of later efforts to continue bringing City Beautiful ideology and aesthetics to Texas. Fort Worth’s Municipal Rose Garden was constructed in 1933 with funds from relief programs of the Herbert Hoover administration and Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Considered to be one of the best examples of a municipal rose garden from the “classic period” (1927-1937), the garden was developed over 25 years by Kansas City, Mo. landscape architecture firm Hare and Hare. Translating City Beautiful fondness for classical and Renaissance forms, the garden’s design was influenced by Italian and French formal gardens of the 16th through the 18th centuries, featuring a water cascade and terraces, natural groves of trees, naturalistic fountains, and an 800-yard vista that

culminates in a small shelter whose view over a terrace and a water cascade was inspired by Versailles.\textsuperscript{20}

Throughout the rest of Texas, improvements that were made based on the principles of the City Beautiful Movement were not as grand as those proposed and carried out in larger cities like Houston and Dallas. However, two expressions of local attempts to improve the image of towns across Texas and to instill civic pride may be found on the courthouse grounds. It is no exaggeration to say that Texas is big. Among Texas’ 254 counties, many were so far away from state government in Austin – not to mention federal government – that the local county government held greater importance in the lives, both personal and public. County clerks, judges, sheriffs, tax assessors and, even, school superintendents played vital roles in the lives of county residents. The focal point for all county business was, of course, the county courthouse, usually, the largest, most ornate building in many counties. During the era of City Beautiful, Texas saw an explosion of courthouse building and improvements to courthouse squares. Here, on the courthouse square, one can see a form of the civic center ideal. So important were the courthouses that they were featured on literature produced by land speculators and railroad promoters to entice settlement in new towns.\textsuperscript{21} Much of that settlement and the first boom in courthouse building occurred after the Civil War, but a second building boom occurred in the same era as City Beautiful that is often called \textit{Texas Renaissance}. As mentioned earlier, the period from about 1900 to the Great Depression saw rapid expansion of transportation, including railroads, shipping, automobiles, paved road and early mass transit. Likewise, new wealth from

\textsuperscript{21} Kelsey and Dyal, xv-xvii
cotton, cattle, timber and oil pushed the growth of cities and the settlement of the Plains and Panhandle regions of the state. Courthouses built during this time were designed in many of the familiar City Beautiful styles, including Beaux Art, Renaissance and Classical Revival, but also in some Mediterranean and Mission styles. Whatever the style, counties vied to outdo their neighbors, spending as much as they could to embellish their courthouses with the name of the county, mottoes, domes, columns, and colonnades all carved from native stone.22

While the courthouse served as offices and repository for legal documents and proceedings, the courthouse square served many functions from ceremonial to economic, including patriotic celebrations and picnics, farmers markets and cotton exchanges. Along with building parks in some towns, the courthouse square is where one may find the contributions of women to city improvement in Texas, namely, through the placing of Civil War monuments. Also found in cemeteries and public parks throughout Texas, these monuments served to emphasize specific civic virtues and values all in keeping City Beautiful ideology. For the primary advocates of the monuments, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the monuments were the best way to combine the themes of beautification, civic lessons and social cohesion. Women lobbied for the monuments, raised money, and planned celebrations for the monuments’ dedications that might include fancy dress balls, parades, speeches, and formal dinners honoring veterans. While the women saw the monuments as means “to beautify their communities and remember the fallen soldiers,” men saw the celebrations as an economic boom with people

22 Ibid, 18-20
coming into town from throughout the county and spending money. Whatever the motive, everyone gained from the addition of a monument.\(^ {23} \)

Symmetry, order, proportion, beauty, environmentalism and civic art were all staples of City Beautiful Movement’s ideology and aesthetics. Whether in the hands of progressive city governments or concerned businessmen or women wanting to contribute to their communities, the City Beautiful Movement came late to Texas and was translated in new ways and forms unique to the smaller urban centers and great untamed spaces of the state. Much open space still remains, but Texas, now, faces many of the same urban challenges as any other city – deteriorating downtowns, suburban sprawl and transportation, to name a few. For some towns, like Tyler, Texas, planning for ways to address these challenges has been a community effort. For other cities, like Beaumont, Texas, natural gas revenues from city-owned property, are fueling improvements to older sections of town, including new streetlights, paved sidewalks, landscaping and improved traffic controls. All improvements that would make any City Beautiful advocate of the past very proud.

Bibliography


