Review Essay: The Origins of Practical Planning

Edward K. Muller
University of Pittsburgh


To the casual observer, the American urban landscape is largely the product of private sector developments. With the exception of post-World War II urban renewal schemes and public housing projects, governmental contributions have been limited to transportation projects and other public works, financial cooperation and leveraging, regulatory oversight of land use, and modest planning frameworks. Grander visions of city development embedded in comprehensive plans have borne little relationship to reality. Since the late 1970s the consensual disparagement of post-War, publicly inspired redevelopment has encouraged an increased role for private developers and a diminished one for government. Perhaps the low profile of planners is both understandable and appropriate in this nation that celebrates private enterprise and the entrepreneur. But it is curious that among the most successful and admired features of the modern American cities are the physical legacies of the City Beautiful movement, especially the parks, boulevards, and civic centers conceived by planners, landscape architects, and municipal engineers and built under public auspices during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the American planning profession was in its infancy. With such auspicious origins and some notable exceptions, one must wonder why planning has played only modest roles in shaping the development of American cities.

Exploring the origins of planning at the turn-of-the-century from different perspectives, historians Stanley K. Schultz and William H. Wilson shed considerable light on the issue. In *Constructing Urban Culture,* Schultz examines the transformation of urban life and expectations during the nineteenth century, which in his view underlay the emergence, acceptance, and character of planning by the century’s end. Wilson narrows his sights on the City Beautiful movement of the 1890s and early 1900s, which he believes has been unjustly judged, and even dismissed, as superficial by most planning critics. Although these authors address different historiographical problems and at times disagree when they do entertain similar topics, their arguments are complementary. In
an era that espoused the wonders of technology, the primacy of private enterprise, and a laissez faire philosophy, the public ultimately supported the practical, less costly solutions to environmental, health, and social problems which were proposed by municipal engineers and pragmatic planners. More ambitious, comprehensive and controlling plans that emerged from the City Beautiful movement commonly floundered during the political process, running counter to widespread fears of too much governmental power and inefficiency and crashing upon the shoals of city sectionalism. As a result, the city planning profession was launched with a problem-solving bias familiar to its engineers and the municipal bureaucracy and with a suspicion of the grandiose concepts of its more visionary members.

The complementarity of these two books warrants their being read in tandem. Schultz's sweeping account of efforts to grapple with urban problems during the nineteenth century, which ends with the triumph of municipal engineers, only briefly discusses the important Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the City Beautiful movement despite their close association with the emergence of the planning profession. He argues convincingly that the Fair and City Beautiful were the "culmination and crystallization of ideals and activities over the previous seventy-five years" (p. 213). In doing so, Schultz agrees with Wilson's view of City Beautiful as not merely an aesthetic and physical vision springing from the Fair's inspiration, but rather a more broadly encompassing movement embedded in the era's environmentalistic and reformist ideology. However, when Wilson explores the origins of the City Beautiful movement, especially with respect to Frederick Law Olmsted, he understandably focuses on the last two decades of the century, acknowledging earlier mid-nineteenth century roots. Naturally, Schultz's more extensive exploration of nineteenth century urban thought and reform activities provides a more satisfying, though less specific, description of its ideological heritage.

Like other critics Schultz charges that City Beautiful planners too often valued "aesthetics over substance" (p. 211) and in the end lost out to the practical solutions of the City Efficient. This assessment is familiar to urban historians, but his brief presentation oversimplifies the decline of the City Beautiful movement and underrates its significance in these formative years of the city planning profession. Wilson's thorough study of the City Beautiful movement illuminates its demise after 1910, refuting the simple aesthetic critique and placing the movement in the broader political arena of city affairs. Naturally, Wilson's readers do not learn much about the origins, power and appeal of the triumphant City Efficient, while Schultz's emphasis on the municipal engineers provides the missing perspective on the ascendance of practical planners. Thus, Schultz's long view of urban change and evolving
planning thought and practice with the emphasis on the problem-solving engineers nicely frames Wilson's more focused study on the two decades of the City Beautiful movement.

Schultz argues that rapid urbanization during the nineteenth century spawned physical, social, and moral problems, which demanded solution if the American city, and indeed the nation, were to fulfill its promise. Concomitantly, urban dwellers (primarily the upper and middle classes) raised their expectations for an improved quality of life in light of wondrous mechanical innovations, increasing medical knowledge, and tremendous economic growth. Led by writers, social reformers, and new urban professionals, the public came to believe that the deteriorating physical environment, notably worsening congestion, slums and tenements, caused the city's health and moral problems. In this view, efforts to improve the physical environment would attack these ills. While the social, medical, and technical understanding of the problems and their solutions evolved slowly during the century, progress encountered at every turn overwhelming urban growth and the public's espousal of capitalism, the sanctity of private property, and a suspicious laissez faire view of government, which were partially responsible for the problems and inhibited public sector solutions. He writes that by the early twentieth century the public not only wanted expanded municipal services developed by experts and administered by an efficient bureaucracy, but also accepted the necessity of some planning of future growth to build a better city.

Schultz develops this argument by examining four topics: intellectual perceptions of the city, the evolution of legal control over private development, public health concerns and reform efforts, and finally large public works and their impact on municipal administration and planning. Each of these topics forms a separate part of the study; each part is explored in two chapters. Schultz's syntheses of secondary and primary sources offer a wealth of material, which is beyond the scope of this essay to summarize. They will become basic references for teachers of urban history courses.

Three themes cut across the four parts of the book. Moral environmentalism informed the analyses of and prescriptions for urban problems, whether advanced by visionaries of utopian cities or reformers dealing with everyday issues. Unlike religious, cultural, or class explanations, environmentalism opened avenues of direct action for solving social problems. Improvements in the condition of streets, water and air quality, waste disposal, and congestion, especially tenements and slums, would promote good public health and moral behavior. Education of the public, new technologies, and expertise offered the means to achieve these goals. As commonly recognized in the scholarly literature, urban parks were seen as the primary method to ventilate the city by
lowering densities, enhancing light and air quality, providing recreational and contemplative opportunities, and encouraging a democratic mixing of different and often spatially segregated social groups. Other public works such as adequate water supplies, comprehensive sewage systems, and paved streets were also enlisted in the reform crusades.

The proper analyses of problems, formulation of effective solutions, and political campaigns for public acceptance required technical expertise and the dedicated leadership of numerous individuals. Although volunteerism and civic organizations characterized these reform decades, Schultz underscores the importance of new urban professionals, particularly sanitarians, landscape architects, and municipal engineers, and their professional associations for the promotion of municipal responsibilities and public works solutions. He emphasizes the primacy of municipal engineers in shaping the new urban culture because their technical solutions especially appealed to desires for efficiency and expertise, appeared to be nonpartisan, and aided urban growth. Thus, in contrast to some reformers and visionaries whose ideas sometimes challenged the basic tenets of society or interests of business groups, the engineers' programs fit comfortably with the cost-conscious, practical, and conservative inclinations of the middle classes.

As the century wore on, both the public and urban professionals demanded greater involvement by municipal government in the solution of urban problems. Parks and other large public works necessitated more municipal planning and the development of a bureaucracy to administer them. According to Schultz, the central role of engineers in developing and administering the public works "helped shape the directions of city planning thought and practice, and laid the groundwork of modern municipal administration" (p. 184). The culmination of this process was the emergence of city planning and city management as vigorous professions in the early twentieth century.

Schultz also recognizes that the augmented role of municipal government in urban development depended on the evolution of a supportive legal environment. In a section at times tedious and confusing, he tries to untangle this dense and unfamiliar "legal landscape" (p. 35) that is generally ignored or superficially noted by urban historians. Schultz begins with the development of broad municipal legal control over land use through eminent domain and nuisance and police powers during the initial half of the century. The laissez faire inclinations of the decades after the Civil War fostered a retrenchment in local legal control, narrowing the public purpose and supporting the state's sovereignty over cities. However, the Progressives' active concerns for health and moral problems successfully challenged the strict construction of urban power and led to the ultimate victory of municipal zoning and regional public
works planning in the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, the zoning triumph of the 1920s, when the Supreme Court established the legality of municipal control over development, only exacerbated racial and class segregation in later decades, demonstrating the superficiality of moral environmentalism for understanding and addressing social problems in the city.

Just as Schultz hopes to revise traditional views of the origins of planning in the United States, Wilson wishes to redress the prevailing narrow and negative historical judgement of the City Beautiful movement by reassessing its roots, content, and contributions. Rather than a limited planning program dwelling merely on urban aesthetics, Wilson argues that it was a broad cultural and political movement for the improvement of urban life. The movement’s advocates were primarily middle class males from business and the professions, though women active in civic organizations also participated. Wilson acknowledges that beautification of the city was a central tenet of the movement; but the conception was embedded in the broader ideology of the reformers’ moral environmentalism. Beautification of the environment promised improvements in public health and morality. Since they envisioned the city as a functional whole, they advocated comprehensive planning as the way to achieve extensive and lasting results. Wilson also argues that the movement’s proponents shared the public’s affinity for efficiency, utility, and expertise. Thus, in concert with the era’s environmental perspective, the City Beautiful movement advocated professional planning, landscape design, and public works projects as the means to reshape and improve the city and to awaken civic pride in the community.

City Beautiful plans usually entailed an assemblage of large multifunctional parks, connecting Boulevards, neoclassical public buildings often clustered in an imposing civic center, grand union railroad stations, street landscaping, civic clean up projects, billboard and smoke control, and a variety of related public works involving traffic, water and sewage. The dependence on public funds and new or reorganized municipal powers and agencies for implementation engendered legislative approval and public referendums, both of which required political organization, coalition building, and extensive campaigns. Consequently, writes Wilson, the City Beautiful evolved into a local political movement wherever extensive plans were proposed. Although public officials sometimes took the initiative, more commonly private business groups and civic activists contacted professional consultants, forged coalitions with political leaders, newspaper editors, and civic organizations, and persistently pursued their goals in the public arena.

Aesthetic principles common to most City Beautiful plans reflected the inspiration of the Chicago’s Worlds Fair for the movement. Wilson insists that the Fair did not generate the movement. The Fair brought together and
showcased years of engineering and design experience. Its hallmark design features of neoclassical architecture, spatial axiality and formality, and the grouping of public buildings had appeared in earlier projects, particularly in the East. The Fair's sanitation and engineering feats were also rooted in extant public works projects. According to Wilson, the Fair's architect Daniel Burnham proclaimed the link between it and City Beautiful after the presentation of his successful and influential plan for Washington, D.C., the 1901 McMillan Plan that demonstrated the spirit and design elements of the movement in one grand plan. Wilson traces the origins of the movement to the work and writings of Frederick Law Olmsted, the evolution of landscape architecture and nineteenth century urban thought (as Schultz makes clear) and the civic organization and activities of the municipal improvement movement of the 1890s. These roots support his presentation of the City Beautiful as a cultural and political movement broader than the narrow aesthetic concerns charged by its critics.

After exploring the origins and content of the City Beautiful movement in the initial four chapters, Wilson turns to eight case studies in five mostly western commercial cities, where there were some successes and to date little scholarly examination of the movement. He begins with Kansas City's development of a park and boulevard system in the late nineteenth century, which by preceding the City Beautiful movement demonstrates Olmsted's importance for it. Of particular interest to Pennsylvania readers is the following chapter on Harrisburg's experience, where the phrase City Beautiful may have been first employed for a plan. Inspired by a female activist, Mira Lloyd Dock, Harrisburg's movement recommended extensive parks, boulevards, and public works; that is both an aesthetic and utilitarian plan. The ensuing political campaign not only achieved the implementation of many elements, but also propelled local advocate Horace McFarland into a national leadership position for the movement, from which he praised the Harrisburg model across the nation.

In these chapters and those on Seattle, Denver, and Dallas, Wilson elaborates his argument for the comprehensive and political aspects of the movement, as well as for its lasting contributions and failures. While in each local context he carefully delineates the design plan, he also describes the roles of citizen activists, the political campaigns, and the utilitarian features of the plans, which reached beyond aesthetic concerns. In these cities and elsewhere, Wilson avers that the City Beautiful movement not only left a physical legacy and design heritage in its parks, boulevards, public buildings and civic centers, but also produced the first comprehensive plans and inspired an optimistic, citizen-based tradition for reshaping our cities. The movement failed or achieved only limited results when local advocates misplayed political sectional-
ism in cities, advanced overly ambitious and expensive schemes, and affronted important special interests or bureaucratic agencies. City Beautiful’s momentum diminished after 1910 due to its opponents’ telling charges of impracticality and excessive aesthetic emphasis, the rise of engineering and planning professionals, and the nation’s embrace of practical and efficient solutions.

Short-lived, misunderstood, and challenged by the more prosaic methods and goals of planning’s practical types, the City Beautiful movement did nonetheless profoundly affect our cities and how we address them. Besides the physical contributions, Wilson believes the movement left “a legacy of civic activism” (p. 302), a momentum to improve the big city rather than reject it as the Garden City movement advocated, a recognition of the importance of landscape beautification, and the tradition of comprehensive planning. On this last point, Schultz disagrees, for he identifies remarkable comprehensive plans for Boston and New York City published by Robert Fleming Gourlay in 1844 and avers that he “was only one of many nineteenth-century dreamers and planners who promoted a comprehensive vision of what the American city could and should become” (p. 214). The disagreement partially depends on different definitions of comprehensive plans, but it also indicates a current healthy and vigorous reassessment of planning history and urban development, of which these authors are part.

These two books also reflect the renewed historical interest in a variety of topics that might be collected under the rubric of the urban landscape. Broadening the traditional emphasis on social, economic, and political dimensions of the city, historians and scholars from several disciplines have been exploring urban planning, formal and vernacular architecture, infrastructural systems, and even alterations of the natural environment. The interest partially derives from renewed public alarm over environmental pollution and the future of the earth, which in turn kindles a concern for the look of the land around us. Publishers are quick to spot such trends, and both books are published as part of new series. Temple University Press published Schultz’s *Constructing Urban Culture* in its “Technology and Urban Growth” Series. Wilson’s *The City Beautiful Movement* is the second in The Johns Hopkins University Press’ new series entitled “Creating the North American Landscape.” It received the Lewis Mumford Prize for the best book in American planning history between 1986 and 1989 awarded by the Society for American City and Regional Planning History and the Association of American Publishers award for the most outstanding book of 1989 in architecture and urban planning.

The landscape is a fundamentally visual and geographical phenomenon. Discussions of the changing landscape involve social, economic, technological, political and perceptual matters familiar to historians, but invariably they
include visual features and spatial relationships. Consequently, illustrations become an essential means of communication. Readers need them in order to follow detailed descriptions of spatial patterns, as for example in Wilson’s dense discussions of extensive park and boulevard plans in various cities, and to understand the closely argued implications of such patterns. Without adequate illustration, the text takes on an abstract quality, which weakens the impact of the argument. In contrast, more tangible slide lectures and documentary films make profound impressions on an audience.

Publishers of landscape series incur the responsibility of using illustrations for the most effective communication; however, the expense of printing photographs, contemporary line drawings, and maps restrains the publishers’ enthusiasm for abundant illustrations. Temple University Press clustered 20 illustrations on 16 pages near the center of the book. They are mostly reproductions of utopian plans and specific design proposals, which work well despite their being removed by as much as 60 pages from the relevant text. They are clear and complement the visual images that Schultz strove to create in his text. The clustering of illustrations is an awkward, but cost effective solution commonly adopted by publishers. For the most part, Schultz’s text did not require illustration, and the infrequent necessity of searching for an illustration was only mildly distracting.

The Johns Hopkins University Press faced a more daunting task, for Wilson deals heavily with planning designs, urban geography, and the spatial implications of proposals. His descriptions of locations and patterns in the case studies tend to bog down with unfamiliar place names, becoming at times tedious and remote. By presenting nearly 70 photographs, plans, and maps, the publisher made a substantial effort to help the author and the reader. The results are mixed. Without question the illustrations of buildings, civic centers, parks, and some plans are critical to the success of the book. Even the portraits of some important personalities enhances the historical imagination. At the same time, the dark quality of the photographs diminishes their effectiveness, and the reliance upon severely reduced reproductions of original maps and plans often fails to relieve the confusion of detailed spatial descriptions and to convey the advantages or disadvantages of City Beautiful proposals. Besides the incomprehensibly small scales, they simply do not display the place names used in the text. Where there are clear cartographic representations that relate closely to the text, such as those of Denver’s several civic center plans, the reader can more readily follow and appreciate Wilson’s interpretation.

Reduced reproductions of maps and plans make interesting historical documents, but too often poor illustrations. Historians are notorious for presenting poorly executed maps. Original cartography is expensive and
operates in a communication terrain unfamiliar to most historians. Nevertheless, well conceived and properly executed maps are essential to topics that involve a discussion of place. Illustrations are no less important to the effectiveness of historical argumentation than the quality of writing is. As more historians and publishers entertain landscape topics, they must engage more seriously the visual dimensions of their presentations.

Like most Americans, Pennsylvanians are concerned in the 1990s as never before about the environment and have an inkling that solutions involve the structure of their metropolitan areas, in which four out of five of them live. They are anxious about the efficacy of automobile-driven suburban developments that keep sprawling across the landscape and consuming pastoral acreage, but they have little vision of acceptable alternatives. They also recognize the failure of massive modernistic, urban renewal solutions to central city blight. Nevertheless, in the go-go 1980s cities courted the entrepreneurial magic and financial resources of large developers, who often had little sensitivity to local needs and traditional landscapes. Historical preservation scored some successes in softening the hard lines and sterile textures of new construction, while maintaining human scales, but it is suspected to be both elitist and anti-growth and hence against jobs. A few heralded planners advocate a return to traditional small town concepts as a way to replace the suburban subdivision, though their plans stir the real estate industry’s fears of excessive regulatory control and public interference. No profound change in the structure of America’s urban areas seems imminent; nevertheless, the fallout from the environmental and energy crises in the way we live and work may be the catalyst for a transformation.

Lewis Mumford, Roy Lubove, and Jane Jacobs, to mention some important figures, established the importance of understanding the past for criticizing American planning practices and philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s. The historical perspective of Schultz, Wilson, and other authors concerned with the urban landscape is no less important today in helping American leaders, planners, and intellectuals appreciate the complex relationships between our society and urban growth and to craft workable visions of our future.