**City Beautiful, City Banal:**

*Design Advocacy and Historic Preservation in Pittsburgh*

by Roy Lubove

“And when the heavens rolled away and St. John beheld the new Jerusalem, so a vision of a new London, a new Washington, Chicago, or New York breaks with the morning’s sunshine upon the degradation, discomfort, and baseness of modern city life. There are born a new dream and a new hope. And of such is the impulse to civic art.” — Charles Mulford Robinson, *Modern Civic Art, or the City Made Beautiful*, 1903

“There is a New York lady who had a Tuscan father and an English mother and has been married to an American for most of 50 years. She has seen the old buildings go down and the new buildings go up. Observing a typical apartment house rising on York Avenue recently she asked a workman, in Italian, ‘How do you build them so fast?’ ‘Senza rispetto,’ he replied, ‘without respect.’” — Ada Huxtable, *Goodbye History, Hello Hamburger*, 1986

ONE of the great American pastimes of the late nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, was the Pittsburgh joke. In an issue of New York’s *Daily Graphic* in 1882, for example, we learn that “Pittsburgh is a place where the inhabitants breathe, move and have their being in soot and grime;” it is a city “where the smoke is so dense that a cyclone would only scare the people by making the sun visible for a few minutes.” Willard Glazier, in a volume entitled *Peculiarities*

Roy Lubove holds a joint appointment in social work and in history at the University of Pittsburgh. He has published more than two dozen articles and five books on topics in environmental studies and social welfare studies. A new, revised edition of his 1969 book, *Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change*, forthcoming from the University of Pittsburgh Press, will include an analysis of the rise of historical preservation advocacy and its significance in the post-steel era. Lubove is active in Preservation Pittsburgh. This article is adapted from his November 1991 presentation at the annual meeting of the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History.
The Sycamore concert hall was part of the Oakland district's civic center, which boasts magnificent turn of the century buildings. National Development Corp. razed the Mosque last fall to make way for a medical office tower.
of American Cities (1885), describes a night approach to Pittsburgh as a "scene so strange and weird that it will live in the memory forever. One pictures... the tortured spirits wraithing in agony, their sinewy limbs convulsed, and the very air oppressive with pain and rage;" in truth, he adds, "Pittsburg is a smoky, dismal city, at her best. At her worst, nothing darker, dingier or more dispiriting can be imagined." An article in the Century Magazine in 1901 speaks of the "smoke and steam that hang in a heavy black canopy close above the roofs of the city," "the dirtiest" in America. And the author of The Personality of American Cities (1913) relates the woes of a New York girl "who has been living in Pittsburgh for the last four years" and complained "that she had never seen but two sunsets there."

Finally, in this same spirit of defamation are the uncomplimentary portraits of Pittsburgh by H.L. Mencken, a subject that Edward K. Muller explored recently in Pittsburgh History. "There is good reason to doubt," Mencken asserted, "that pavis would flourish along the Monongahela, particularly within sight, sound or scent of Pittsburgh. The soil there is of a peculiar quality, being composed of almost equal parts of coal dust, grease and garbage, and is plainly too rich for small plants...."

I would not claim that the origins of advocacy for aesthetically pleasing architecture and design in Pittsburgh are rooted entirely in a reaction to such ridicule, but it surely played a part. In fact, one can date architecture and design advocacy to the first decade of the twentieth century and local defensiveness over the findings of the Pittsburgh Survey of 1907-08. The repercussions of that wholesale condemnation of Pittsburgh's social institutions included the creation of the Pittsburgh Civic Commission in 1909 by Mayor George W.Guthrie. A cooperative endeavor by the mayor's office and the civic elite, it was a kind of early version of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, with a mandate to "plan and promote improvements in civic and industrial conditions." What is pertinent to my analysis is that the 14 committees through which it operated included one on city planning, and a second on municipal art and design.

Civic Commission publications included a report on City Planning for Pittsburgh, published in 1910, whose three authors included the famous urban designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. Issued the following year was Olmsted's masterful study, "Pittsburgh: Main Thoroughfares and the Down Town District," which outlined both a philosophy of civic design and many proposals for concrete improvement. He condemned the indifference to Pittsburgh's waterfront potential "for recreation and as an element in civic comeliness and self-respect," and challenged the ethic behind that attitude: "One of the deplorable consequences of the short-sighted and wasteful commercialism of the later nineteenth century lay in its disregard of what might have been the esthetic by-products of economic improvement; in the false impression... that economical and useful things were normally ugly; and in the vicious idea which followed, that beauty and the higher pleasures of civilized life were to be sought only in things otherwise useless." Olmsted cited European cities as models for civic use of riverfronts; wherever people could sit and walk near the water, "the result has added to the comeliness of the city itself, the health and happiness of the people and their loyalty and local pride."

Olmsted also had constructive suggestions about another dramatic but ignored asset in the Pittsburgh environment. He complained that the area's steep slopes were neglected, unsightly, slatternly, and recommended that the city assume the burden of their maintenance, converting them from public nuisances to park assets of value to the community.

At this point one must move beyond Pittsburgh in order to understand why significant design advocacy emerged here in the early twentieth century. Other than Pittsburgh-specific considerations—the desire to rehabilitate the city's dismal image; the existence of an affluent middle and upper class whose self-respect would be enhanced by gracious or monumental architecture; municipal government not overwhelmed by human service obligations and thus able to support civic art and ornamentation—Pittsburgh was influenced by national developments. Most important was the vision embodied in the "City Beautiful" phase of American urban culture.

The City Beautiful which flourished in the early twentieth century was a compound of several environmental and cultural developments affecting urban life: the park, open space and boulevard planning of the post-Civil War generation of landscape architects; the long tradition of village and municipal improvement societies which encompassed betterment schemes ranging from tree-planting advocacy to underground wires and billboard control; the striking vision of Beaux-Art neo-classical architecture, civic centers and coordinated planning expressed in the Chicago World's Fair of 1893; the concrete embodiment of those visions in the McMillan Commission Plan for Washington, D.C.in 1902 (with Daniel Burnham a connecting link between the Chicago fair and Washington plans); the aspirations of architects and other trained professionals to exert greater influence in urban development.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the City Beautiful as
a superficial or cosmetic approach to urban design. One of its leading advocates, Charles Mulford Robinson, argued that “civic art” stood for more than beauty and ornamentation: “On how many sides — moral, physical, intellectual, political, and economic — does an effort for beauty in towns and cities touch the welfare of mankind!” The economic argument was “in the attraction of the wealth and culture of the leisure class and the transient trade of tourists;” the philanthropic “in the brightening of the lives of the poor;” the educational “in the instructive possibilities of outdoor art;” the political “in the awakening to civic pride.” Although elite-inspired and -directed, the City Beautiful was, nonetheless, an inclusive vision. Robinson, for example, argued that it was not enough to provide tenement districts with “clean and well paved streets and frequent playgrounds” in the name of hygiene: the spirit of “aesthetic renaissance” had to descend into the slums and nurture “artistic impulses.” Until then, the civic renaissance would be incomplete.

The inclusiveness of the City Beautiful vision extended to the past, thus linking it to what we now call historic preservation: “Splendid public structures and refined and costly private work give, of course, new glory to the visible city life; but we would not have our villages or cities merely new. There is a beauty of age hallowed by history, since art is undying. We must save what is good from the legacies of earlier days if we would secure the completest beauty and interest.” He praised the preservation of New York’s beautiful but outgrown City Hall, and the storm of protests in 1896 which thwarted destruction of the Bulfinch front of Boston’s State House. Robinson educated contemporaries on progress in historic preservation in Europe: the London Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; the French legislation of 1887 which required the minister of public instruction and fine arts to designate all ancient or classical remains it would be in the national interest to preserve and protect, and also in France, the municipal and national historical commissions including the Commission du Vieux Paris, established in 1897. There was also the Royal Commission of Monuments in Belgium which protected public buildings, while local voluntary historical societies attempted to protect privately owned dwellings.

In the City Beautiful vision, every detail of the built environment had to be judged by the test of civic art: “If drinking fountains, for man or beast, band stands, or laboratories have the conspicuousness in site of a public statue, their artistic character should be scrutinized as rigidly. Util-

The Masonic Temple is part of an historic district proposed for Oakland in the wake of the Syria Mosque sale.
American city as a work of art. The controlling insight, expressed by Robinson and quoted earlier — "utility should not excuse ugliness" — inspired improvement-minded Pittsburghers of the period and, not least, its architects: "The ugliness of the majority of American cities is the first thing which strikes a foreigner. The ugliness is not only offensive to the eye, but it is repellent to the soul. Its influence upon education is disastrous to the last degree. Men need beauty precisely as they need fresh air and clear skies. To condemn them to live among ugly surroundings, under skies blackened with smoke, is to deaden their sensibility to the beautiful and to rob their lives of one great element of interest and dignity."\(^\text{13}\)

For exponents of the City Beautiful, high quality civic architecture and design, in all aspects of city life, was not a mere cosmetic over a leper's sores. Environmental comeliness was endowed with moral and social significance, and in this sense was supremely practical or utilitarian. Surveying the Oakland Civic Center, one is transported back to a time when creative architecture and design in every detail — civic, commercial, residential — were endowed with a moral and social mission. They were to be an antidote to the squalid industrial city, and would be life enhancing. The people would translate into their own lives the values and ideals expressed in their civic environment: aesthetic and cultural achievement, discipline, rationality, harmony, order, pride and self-respect.

Clearly, there is a tradition of design advocacy in Pittsburgh, one which is rooted in the national urban culture of the early twentieth century. This context makes comprehensible the creation of a municipal Art Commission in Pittsburgh in 1911. The act creating the commission provided it with authority to approve any work of art, ornamentation, or commemoration involving the city. This included the design of any municipal building, bridge, lamp; the commission could also volunteer advice to private property owners. The kind of submissions upon which the commission acted included, for example, in 1912, the Murray Avenue bridge, the pumping station at Aspinwall, the Bloomfield Bridge, a U.S.S. Maine Memorial Monument (disapproved), and the Municipal Tuberculosis Hospital. The commission also addressed itself to broader issues akin to city planning, like advocating a plan for Point renewal, zoning and districting regulations, and need of a design for the section of Schenley Park between the Carnegie and Forbes Field.\(^\text{14}\)

I had an opportunity in 1966 to interview George Baird, then a senior research analyst with the City Planning Department. He had been executive secretary of the Art Commission from 1920 to 1933. Baird maintained that the Art Commission saw in bridges the opportunity to make its mark, encouraging the county as well as the city to submit bridge plans for evaluation. He believed that its outstanding contribution to civic design in the 1920s involved the ten major river spans and the land bridges built in the decade.\(^\text{15}\)

Another manifestation of the City Beautiful vision, incorporated into city government, was a Shade Tree Commission. It was established in 1909 and included the formidable director of public works, E.M. Bigelow (as one of the three commissioners). Its view of Pittsburgh's future was quintessential City Beautiful: "The coming generation will behold the wonderful transformation of the desiccated scarred hills of Allegheny County reverting to their former glory of forested crown of green, and traversed not by wagon roads of former days but by miles of boulevards and broad avenues lined with symmetrical rows of fruit and shade trees."\(^\text{16}\)

Programmatically, the Shade Tree Commission assumed a surprisingly broad mandate for civic betterment and beautification — again a reflection of the City Beautiful agenda. It determined that since its jurisdiction extended from curb to property line, then all sidewalks would be laid in place as specified by the commission. It intended to have ornamental lights placed upon residence streets, to oppose unsightly poles and signboards along streets where trees had been or would be planted, and it favored taking over small, ugly unused plots where convergent streets met and beautifying them with trees and shrubbery.

There was significant design advocacy in the interwar period, but it was advocacy by example. There was no national cultural or design movement comparable to the City Beautiful. In Pittsburgh, handsome structures like the Grant, Gulf and Koppers buildings perpetuated the revivalistic tra-
dition and incorporated a mix of gothic, neo-classical, and art-deco style. The most important design advocacy of the era is embodied in Chatham Village on Mt. Washington. Here a group of creative architects and landscape architects blended architectural, ecological and social considerations in its planning. Design objectives were viewed in social as well as technical or narrowly economic terms. At Chatham Village, a sophisticated superblock subdivision enabled the architects to group space (usually wasted or diffused among roads, alleys, small private plots, parking spaces) into large interior parks, upon which the fronts of the homes faced. A differentiated road system was created for purposes of economy and protection of the residents, especially children, from the hazards of through traffic. The Chatham Village plan exemplified a commitment to ecological values: the natural topography was regarded as a precious asset, one to be protected and utilized for scenic and recreational purposes, among others. And consideration was given to the incorporation of civic as well as recreational facilities for the projected population.17

Modernism, or the international style, made limited progress during the inter-war decades, but it would define a new architecture and urban design system after World War II. And in reaction to the architecture and design principles of modernism, which I would characterize as urbanicide, contemporary historic preservation emerged as a counterforce.

Renaissance I in Pittsburgh possessed an implicit design philosophy: it was international style architecture combined with Corbusier’s nightmarish Radiant City, executed through the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s large-scale clearance projects. In another context, I described the modernist ideal of architecture; at the outset, perhaps, modernism as promulgated by figures like Loos, Mies, Corbusier, and Gropius, was liberating and innovative. It aspired, at its inception, to liberate the architect and designer from the constraints of the past, encourage the use of new materials and technology, and to express this liberation in new environmental forms appropriate to the life of contemporary society. But modernism degenerated into a suffocating formalism and radical reductionism. The first generation of modernists, in the initial flush of enthusiasm and idealism, revolted against history, nature and organic continuity: no traditional styles, no ornamentation, no complex social fabrics to consider and, most pertinently, no sensitivity to the cultural dimensions of nature and open space in the urban fabric. Life, in effect, would adapt and, live up to a conception of art and form-language rooted in a machine-inspired, puritanical architectural aesthetic. The straight line, right angle, cube, barren and non-ornamented facade, and concrete, windswept plazas were endowed with moral properties: they expressed the architect’s and society’s liberation from historicism and nature. Ultimately, disastrously, the reductionist aesthetic of modernism was all too well suited to the needs of the most banal contemporary development.18

So defined, there is a fundamental conflict between modernism and preservation. This conflict, sadly, was intensified in Renaissance I because Pittsburgh’s redemption was conceived in terms of liberation from the past, including an unsavory environment: liberation from smoke, from floods, from blighted residential and commercial structures, from a top heavy, aging industrial economy. In essence, Pittsburgh’s very survival was dependent upon disassociation from its history, including an architecture which no longer symbolized progress but instead, clutter, which had to be eliminated.

The last chapter in the original 1964 edition of Lorant’s Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City, was entitled “Rebirth” and was presumably by David Lawrence as told to John Robin and Stefant Lorant. The
following passage does capture the essence of Renaissance I as it concerned the past and preservation values:

Pittsburgh's great effort has been to remake itself, to change as fast as it can from the environment of the old nineteenth-century technology into the sleek new forms of the future. The city is racing time. It has no inclination to look back; it has no nostalgia for the past. The city welcomes tomorrow, because yesterday was hard and unlovely. Pittsburgh likes buildings that glisten with stainless steel and aluminum, and it has little time for the niceties of architectural criticism when it compares what it gained with what it lost. The town has no worship of landmarks. Instead, it takes its pleasure in the swing of the headache ball and the crash of falling brick. It will tear down bridges without a second thought....

This anti-historical, anti-naturalistic bias and the Radiant City pestilence of Corbusier would find expression in such projects as Gateway Center, East Liberty, Lower Hill and the Lower North Side (notably Allegheny Center), and ultimately the concrete spaghetti of I-279 slashing through the East Street Valley. Boulevards and parkways usurped the riverfronts in the Golden Triangle region and generally the rivers, as sources of recreational or cultural or residential development, were ignored. The problem continued up to the era of the Convention Center and Three Rivers Stadium which might as well be situated in the Mohave Desert as in a city defined by its rivers.

It was in this inhospitable environment that the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation was established in 1964. The immediate stimulus came from the Urban Redevelopment Authority, which apparently viewed the North Side as a laboratory for the realization of Corbusier's sterile u-topia — the city of high-rise concrete slabs set in a wasteland of sterile open space and highways. Thus the Allegheny Market House was destroyed in 1965 for the apartment high-rise in Allegheny Center. Nor could Landmarks save several Greek Revival homes in the area, or the spectacular Fourth Avenue Post Office (demolished in 1966), or the Pennsylvania RR engine roundhouses at Liberty and 28th Street, or Pittsburgh's only example of the model tenement era — the Phipps apartments on General Robinson Street. On the other hand, it not only saved the 1300 block of Liverpool Street (where it all started in the course of a stroll taken by Arthur Ziegler, Jr. and Jamie Van Trump one winter day in 1964) but played a significant part in preventing a URA rampage in Manchester, the Mexican War Streets and Allegheny West. Along with the North Side neighborhoods, Landmarks in its early years concentrated upon creating a historic preservation consciousness among the South Side Carson Street merchants through a facade restoration program.

The character of Landmarks was largely shaped in these early half-dozen or so years, when urban renewal was doing to American cities what bombs and artillery did to European cities during World War II. Some key elements of Landmarks's preservation strategy included:

- A concept of itself as a local preservation agency which was all-inclusive. This was partly a matter of necessity. There was no other preservation-minded organization; it was Landmarks or nothing in Pittsburgh. One should remember also that no machinery of municipal landmarking would exist until the creation of the Historic Landmarks Commission in 1979. Under the circumstances, a multi-dimensional strategy was necessary. It would encompass advocacy and negotiation, often with the URA; preservation projects funded and managed by Landmarks; educational programs in the
schools; membership recruitment, publicity and tours in the interests of consciousness raising; surveys such as the original (and first ever) countywide survey of historic structures in Allegheny County, published in 1967; and through its architectural historians — Jamie Van Trump, originally, then Walter Kidney — a continuing series of attractive publications which can only enhance preservation consciousness in the community.22

- Within this framework of an all-encompassing preservation organization, Landmarks signified a vital shift in the character of preservation theory and practice in the United States. The 1960s marked a transition from the older tradition of pietistic preservation to advocacy and developmental preservation. By pietistic preservation I mean preservation’s long association with house museums commemorating social or political notables, patriotic sentiment expressed in military parks and memorials, historical restorations such as Williamsburg, Sturbridge or Deerfield, and a partiality for the colonial era. By advocacy I mean all activities which promote preservation consciousness as well as efforts to protect buildings and districts under the auspices of municipal legislation.

- Landmarks’s emphasis on developmental preservation signified a radical innovation in preservation theory and practice. Never really a conventional advocacy organization, Landmarks always favored an economic strategy of preservation (too much so, some now claim): recycling of buildings for new commercial uses, as in Station Square; continued viability of old neighborhoods through preservation-oriented rehabilitation, as in the North Side neighborhoods where Landmarks acquired, remodeled, sold and rented property; East Carson Street facade improvements; and the many preservation projects assisted over the last quarter-century through the loans and subsidies provided by its revolving fund. Although Landmarks accepts the necessity of city imposed preservation, it has always been most comfortable with developmental and market-oriented preservation. In its 1975 publication, “Revolving Funds for Historic Preservation,” one finds this revealing analysis: “[A]rchitecture is an art wholly based upon continuing utility, and that utility is in turn grounded in the market place. When you accept that circumstance and apply the techniques of finance, real estate, and construction to the problems at hand, you compete on equal terms with the forces that destroy buildings... You must demonstrate that the buildings are workable as well as beautiful.”23

Although Landmarks’s Station Square is a large-scale demonstration of developmental preservation, Pittsburgh has benefitted from smaller recycling projects. Combining economic vitality with quality of life enhancement, these include the Allegheny Brewery and Priory on the North Side, the Pennsylvanian apartments (the former Pennsylvania Railroad station), the store front facades on Carson Street, and the group of commercial structures fronting the Monongahela River downtown known as “Firstside.” The historic Bank Building downtown is currently being recycled for Carnegie Museum and Point Park College library facilities. These projects exemplify the Landmarks concept of preservation: buildings "must be made to operate consistent with the requirements of economics before they can help to revitalize human beings, to give

The 1960s brought an end to preservation efforts associated purely with house museums, military parks and memorials, historical restorations such as Williamsburg, and partiality for the colonial era.

them more pride or more pleasure.”24

- The success of Landmarks in developmental preservation, climaxed by Station Square beginning in the late 1970s, is rooted in a combination of audacity (co-founder Ziegler staked the reputation and future of PH&LF on a project many considered a likely failure), the creation of a revolving fund in 1966, converted in 1985 to a so-called Preservation Fund, linkage with the social and economic elites of the community and, especially in Pittsburgh, the ability to win the confidence of the powerful foundation sector — increasingly important in the post-steel era compared to government or the corporations as a source of social and cultural funding. Ziegler and his associates recognized this at an early date. It was Sarah Mellon Scaife Foundation money which established the Revolving Fund in 1966, Richard Scaife’s Allegheny Foundation which provided the millions to support Station Square at the outset, and Scaife Foundation funding is now the basis for the proposed Riverfront Park for Station Square.25 This ability to win the confidence and support of the foundations through evidence of concrete and successful development has enabled Landmarks to dominate the preservation agenda in Pittsburgh.

- Landmarks recognized at an early date the neighborhood organization and revitalization potential of preservation — what I would call the communitarian potentialities of preservation. Although one might differ on details of Landmarks’s role in the North Side neighborhoods, there is no doubt that Landmarks believed that it was pioneering in a new kind of urban renewal, using architectural preservation as a means to neighborhood social revitalization and cohesion. Ziegler, in 1972, for example, explained that the neighborhood work was designed to develop "in all these people a new sense of neighborhood, with restoration of the houses as the unifying denominator.”26 Preservation, in essence, becomes the basis for a new strategy of community organization: “The old architecture will be an attractive and binding element that brings people from different backgrounds and income groups together in the quest to create a special neighborhood.... Their only common
denominator will be their devotion to their historic buildings.”

This was an important insight in the early years of the modern phase of historic preservation, in Pittsburgh and nationally. The objects of preservation elicit considerable affection and commitment. This nurtures a greater sense of identification with a neighborhood or community. In essence, through historic preservation, a citizen’s sense of commitment and loyalty are intensified. He cares more about the community and its future precisely because he cares more about its past. A source of urban decay in American life is the sense of alienation many have come to feel. There is little identification with the community. Historic preservation can play a vital role in countering this alienation. Thus preservation is not just about old buildings; it is equally about the sense of community which they nurture.

An intriguing example of the potentialities of preservation to create a community, so to speak, is Calvary United Methodist Church in alliance with the Allegheny Historic Preservation Society (AHPS) on the North Side (Allegheny and Beech). Built in the mid-1890s, and an official Pittsburgh landmark, the church boasts several Tiffany windows. It is involved in a $3 million restoration project, and seeks support (far beyond the congregation) based upon its architectural, not its religious significance. In April 1991, the AHPS acquired Susan Brandt to serve as Preservation Director in collaboration with Calvary Church. She had previously directed the restoration of the Carnegie Library in Braddock.

Despite the comprehensive program of Landmarks, which includes a variety of advocacy tactics, there is a niche in Pittsburgh for a preservation advocacy group divorced altogether from development responsibilities — like Preservation Pittsburgh, organized in the fall of 1991 in response to the demolition of the Syria Mosque in the Oakland Civic Center. Landmarks is obliged to sustain an equilibrium between any advocacy role and its strength as a national model of practical preservation — preservation conceived as recycling and reuse of properties on a sound economic basis. There might be circumstances, however, where vociferous advocacy might conflict with the determination of Landmarks to avoid any taint of romantic impracticality. As Ziegler explained in the early ‘70s: preservationists somehow “frequently become identified as starry-eyed idealists without a notion of practicality, or as contrary minded, progress stopping intranquil, or at best well meaning but uninformed and vaguely dizzy Romantics.... Preservationists always have enough obstacles to overcome without conveying an image of general perversity and light-mindedness.”

The issue, I think, is the greater flexibility of a pure advocacy group and, particularly, its willingness to politicize the issue (as did the Committee to Save the Syria Mosque in winning the support of City Council). If not for the fluke of a demolition permit being issued two hours before the Mosque’s nomination as an historic landmark, that political action would have saved the building.

3. Pittsburgh Civic Commission, “Plan and Scope” (undated). Somewhat resentfully, the commission stated that the Survey had ignored the “civic progress” already achieved in Pittsburgh, but hoped that its findings could become the basis for the “most fundamental and comprehensive future advance ever yet made possible in America.” The Civic Commission’s chairman, H.D.W. English (1855-1926), had a significant influence in Pittsburgh’s civic betterment efforts in the early twentieth century. He operated a successful life insurance business in partnership with his brother and, later, his nephew. English had been president of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce in the years preceding his appointment to the Civic Commission. See “H.D.W. English, Past President of the Commission Dies,” Pittsburgh Post 7 (April 3, 1926), 4.
4. Pittsburgh Civic Commission, “City Planning for Pittsburgh. Outline and Procedure,” a report by Bion J. Arnold of Chicago, John R. Freeman of Providence and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Boston, June 1910. Adopted by the commission, Dec. 1909. As defined by the authors, city planning in Pittsburgh “as undertaken by the Pittsburgh Civic Commission, means the city useful, convenient, economical and healthful, as well as the city beautiful.” (p. 5) Issues examined in the report included steam railroads; water transportation and flood protection; electric railroads; street systems; public lands and buildings; water systems; sewerage systems; public
control over private property development; smoke abatement. It also included a special report on revision of the Building Code.

This planning document led to city-commissioned studies of rapid transit, water supply and sewerage disposal. Arnold’s sweeping analysis of past and present transit issues recommended that the present generation “arrange the more or less haphazard combination of streets and transit facilities that have grown up within the city and... substitute therefore a comprehensive plan for both the city and its transportation.” Bion J. Arnold, “Report on the Pittsburgh Transportation Problem, Submitted to Honorable William A. Magee, Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh,” Dec. 1910, 73.


6 Ibid., 109-111. Despite their limited possibilities for recreation, Olmsted thought that slopes of lesser gradients could be furnished with seats and terraces so that neighborhood people could “stroll and rest” and enjoy the view. (111) Olmsted’s report included advocacy for both large “rural” parks and neighborhood playgrounds, recreation facilities and parks.

7 A recent overview of the antecedents and aspirations of the City Beautiful is William H. Wilson, The City Beautiful Movement (Baltimore, 1989).

8 Charles Mulford Robinson, The Improvement of Towns and Cities, or The Practical Basis of Civic Aesthetics (New York, 1913), 4th ed. rev., originally published 1901], 210, 211, 289, 292. Born in Ramapo, N.Y., in 1869, Robinson grew up in Rochester, graduated from college there and lived there. A journalist and a writer, Robinson became the leading apostle of the City Beautiful despite lack of technical training in architecture, planning or engineering. Indeed, he became the first to hold the University of Illinois’s Chair of Civic Design, in 1913.

9 Ibid., 200.

10 Ibid., 212. And in their American Skyline: The Growth and Form of Our Cities and Towns (New York, 1956), Christopher Tunnard and Henry Hope Reed paid tribute to the City Beautiful era as a time when “Americans made amends for past errors.... Without it we would not have had our great libraries, museums, terminals and civic centers.... It was the age in which the businessman made his greatest contribution to American culture and the government followed his lead.” (136)

11 Majority report of the Committee on Civic Improvement appointed by the Pittsburgh Chapter, American Institute of Architects, 1904, “A Plan for the Architectural Improvement of Pittsburgh,” sixth annual convention of the Architectural League of America, pages not numbered.

12 Montgomery Schuyler, “The Building of Pittsburgh,” Architectural Record 30 (Sept. 1911), 229, 243. The Syria Mosque, added in 1915-16, was demolished last fall by National Development Corp. at the behest of the University of Pittsburgh Health Center. The Mosque had accommodated many of Pittsburgh’s greatest cultural institutions over the decades — symphony, opera, ballet — as well as leading jazz and popular music performers. This desecration of the historic civic center, following the demolition in recent years of two architecturally significant churches, and the construction of a banal Holiday Inn and office building across the street from the Syria Mosque, aroused intense opposition from a broad spectrum of citizens, including many preservationists.

13 “A Plan for the Architectural Improvement of Pittsburgh.”

14 Art Commission, annual report, 1913, 3-4; Art Commission, annual report, 1912, 209; Art Commission, annual report, 1915, 8; The Art Commission reports were issued as part of the combined annual reports of the departments and offices of the City of Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh Civic Commission, through its Art Committee, had initiated the movement, early in 1910, to create an art commission akin to those in Boston and New York. The effort was supported by such civic agencies as the Pittsburgh Art Society, the Civic Club of Allegheny County, and the Beautification Committee of the Greater Pittsburgh Association. See, “An Account of the work of the Art Commission of the City of Pittsburgh, From its Creation in 1911 to January 1st, 1915.”

15 According to Baird, the City Planning Commission accomplished little in its early years outside the zoning ordinance of 1923. Disenchantment with its performance, Baird maintained, precipitated the creation of the Citizens’ Committee on City Plan in 1918.

16 Shade Tree Commission, annual report, 1912, 843 (in “Annual Reports of the Executive Departments, City of Pittsburgh, Year ending January 31, 1913”).

17 The origins, financing and design of Chatham Village are examined in Roy Lubove, Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change (New York, 1969).


19 Stefan Lorant, Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), 373.

20 Corbusier’s design philosophy is examined in Robert Fishman, Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer

Some meritorious proposals for riverfront uses appeared in "A Master Plan for the Development of Riverfronts and Hillsides in the City of Pittsburgh, July, 1959," prepared by Griswold, Winters, and Swain, under the direction of the city's parks and recreation department. These included a north shore walk and drive along the Ohio River, and the conversion of Herr's Island (now Washington's Landing) in the Allegheny River into an island recreation park akin to Skansen in Stockholm or Tivoli in Copenhagen. But the fundamental premise of the report was flawed: "Most of the flat land adjacent to the rivers must continue to be occupied by the industry and commerce which support the city. However, the rivers can provide an additional opportunity for recreation without detracting from industry." (5)

An analysis of design flaws in Pittsburgh development noted that "not a single street in Pittsburgh, nor building for that matter, is effectively designed to recognize the proximity or significance of water, and few therefore receive the reflective benefits which are the rewards of water consciousness." Patrick Horsburgh, "Contrast in Urban Design," Landscape Architecture 53 (April 1963), 197.


Many of the preservation recycling efforts in Pittsburgh received assistance from Landmarks's revolving preservation fund.

The 52-acre (originally 41-acre) Station Square project adjoins the Monongahela River on the South Side. Originally the property of the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie RR, Station Square demonstrated on a large scale that a community's history did not have to be destroyed in the name of economic progress — one could have both in the form of creative recycling.


According to Brandt, AHPS membership increased from 19 in April to 150 by November 1991. The estimated $3 million restoration, she points out, will include interior renovations in the spirit of 1895. Susan Brandt letter to author, Nov. 16, 1991.

Calvary Church seeks to stimulate interest and support for the preservation project through a newsletter, Calvary Spirit, pamphlets describing the church's architecture and history, and a wide variety of activities. Paralleling these is the newsletter of the AHPS.

Despite the presence of many academic institutions, there is no academic support for preservation in Pittsburgh — a significant liability. In New York City, for example, an effective institutional base for preservation advocacy and training is the Historic Preservation Program of the Columbia School of Architecture.

Ziegler, Historic Preservation in Inner City Areas, 1.

The Committee to Save the Syria Mosque was a small, informal, under-financed but stubborn group which kept the Mosque issue and the importance of preservation to Pittsburgh's future alive week after week, month after month in 1991. We testified at hearings before the Historic Review Commission, City Planning Commission and City Council, employed a lawyer to contest the demolition permit, tried to arouse the interest of the media, and ultimately convinced a majority of City Council that the Oakland Civic Center was a vital part of Pittsburgh's history and identity. Jim Ferlo, chairman of the council's Committee on Planning, Housing and Development, took the initiative (including nominating the entire Civic Center as a historic district) and was supported by councilmen Dan Cohen, Duane Darkins, Gene Ricciardi, and Bernard "Baldy" Regan. Subsequently, Ferlo assumed the initiative in the organization of Preservation Pittsburgh, which seeks to establish itself as an advocacy and preservation liaison group without development aspirations. If preservation is vital to a community's identity, cohesion and economic development, it surely belongs on the political agenda (in a reasoned, not rabble-rousing, manner).