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### **A Work In Progress:**

#### **Elitism, Exploitation, and Beauty in American City Planning**

William H. Wilson. *The City Beautiful Movement*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Jane Jacobs. *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961.

M. Christine Boyer. *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983.

City Planning is both an academic discipline and a component of municipal governance. As such it is subject to criticism from both scholars and the citizens whose lives are affected by planning decisions. M. Christine Boyer, in her book *Dreaming the Rational City*, charges city planning with serving the needs of capitalism at the expense of the people. Saturated with academic jargon and references to Marx and Foucault, Boyer clearly wishes to do battle with her fellow scholars. Jane Jacobs provides a more pedestrian attack. Writing from the perspective of an urban resident and to an audience of educated laymen, Jacobs critiques the origins and ideology of city planning in her influential book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. Jacobs is not interested in winning theoretical battles; she wants to preserve and develop the

diversity of urban America. City planning has its defenders as well. William H. Wilson defends an oft-maligned aspect of planning in his book *The City Beautiful Movement*. Together these books provide insight into the tension between democracy and an emphasis on experts. Boyer and Jacobs demonstrate the error of leaving city planning in the hands of businessmen and well-intentioned bureaucrats. Wilson argues there was at least a tenuous balance of citizen and expert influence in city beautiful. Without addressing race and immigration, however, the authors ultimately provide an incomplete analysis.

William Wilson is a professor of history at the University of North Texas. His book *City Beautiful* won the Lewis Mumford Prize of the Society for American City and Regional Planning History and was named Outstanding Book in Architecture and Urban Planning by the Association of American Publishers. The book is unabashedly revisionist. According to Wilson “in planning no less than in other activities, history belongs to the winners” and the city beautiful movement has been misrepresented by the engineers that comprised the victorious City Practical (Wilson, 3). In the first part of *City Beautiful* Wilson offers an alternative perspective on the origins and ideology of the movement. The subsequent chapters are case-studies of different cities Wilson that demonstrate utility and democracy were a much larger influence on the movement than has been traditionally recognized.

The origins and ideals of city beautiful are rooted in the legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted. Wilson argues that Olmsted contributed three primary principles to city beautiful: comprehensive planning, the social and economic justification for urban nature, and the importance of consulting. Olmsted’s negative view of the city, however, separated him from city beautiful. Therefore he is an important antecedent to the movement and not a founder.

In 1893 the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition provided another important contribution to the formation of the movement. The fair's combination of neoclassical architecture with landscape design would come to define city beautiful for many observers. This influence has led many to claim the exposition was the origin of city beautiful. Wilson believes that Daniel Burnham, the director of the exposition, created that misconception to obtain power for himself and his colleagues. The falsehood continued to be perpetuated by city beautiful advocates who wished to legitimize their movement by the success of the exposition. In fact, the exposition was a culmination of earlier developments, not the start of one. The Olmsted vision had been enriched by "over twenty years' activity in the sanitary and aesthetic improvement of cities" (Wilson, 57).

The city beautiful lasted roughly from 1900 to 1910. During this time, critics claim, the movement pursued ornamental design through undemocratic channels in an attempt at social control. These charges are false. First, city beautiful believed beauty and utility were inseparable. "Beautiful" works in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania included "filtered water, intercepting sewers, and flood control." (Wilson, 139) In Seattle, Washington the plans revolved around a civic center that featured an efficient train station and governmental buildings—hardly frivolous uses. The charge of undemocratic planning stems from the unique cases of Washington D.C and the Chicago World's Fair. In both circumstances planners benefitted from expanded authority. But these projects don't mean city beautiful is inherently undemocratic. In each of the cities studied in *City Beautiful* there was a long political process shaped by compromise and popular support. In Kansas City grassroots organization and newspaper editorials generated enough voters to carry "every precinct of ever ward." (Wilson, 117) The last charge, city beautiful as social control, is a misunderstanding of environmentalism, the widely-

held belief that a person's situation affected his behavior. It is true the proponents of city beautiful wanted to use natural landscapes and imposing buildings to change urban society. But they intended their planning to inspire, not control people.

Wilson's *City Beautiful* is an excellent book. What minor flaws do exist are outweighed by the contribution to the historiography of city planning. The best part of the book is part one, where he develops his ideas about the origins and ideals of the movement. After an insightful look at the contributions of Olmsted, municipal improvement, and the Chicago World's Fair, the reader has a nuanced understanding of the factors that led up to and defined city beautiful. Wilson is convincing in his argument that utility was an important part of city beautiful. The battle with city practical was more "about vocational and professional dominance" than "two distinct approaches to planning." (Wilson, 3) Also, he does an excellent job invalidating the standard claims made against the movement. The biggest flaw of this work was its narrow focus. Using only a handful of case-studies, Wilson presents city beautiful as a minor episode and not the national movement that it was. Further, the era of city beautiful was heavily influenced by immigration. Ignoring immigrants at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is like ignoring Russia's role in the Cold War. You can't make sense of urban planning around 1900 without acknowledging the immigrants and the nativist response.

Jane Jacobs shares Wilson's belief in the influence of city beautiful on city planning. But for Jacobs that influence has been catastrophic. In *Great American Cities* she hopes to expose the error of planning today's cities based on the values of previous generations. Setting the tone early, her first sentence declares "this book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." (Jacobs, 3) Jacobs is writing as a resident of Greenwich village who has witnessed the folly of

planning first-hand. Also, her experience as associate editor of *Architectural Forum* allowed her to witness the machinations of city planning from a professional perspective. The result is “perhaps the most influential single work in the history of town planning.” (NYTBR) With page-turning prose, Jacobs critiques planning’s abstract ideology, describes what truly makes a city work, and provides solutions for ending the cycle of blight and dullness.

The introduction to the book is focused on the ideology of city planning. According to Jacobs the English court reporter Ebenezer Howard is the intellectual patriarch of planning. Unfortunately for cities and those who live in them, Howard “hated the city and considered it an outright evil.” (Jacobs, 17) The Garden City movement, which emphasized small populations and open spaces, was the result of his influence. It was intended more as a substitute to cities than a means of improving them. Subsequent developments in planning, city beautiful among them, accepted the anti-city bias. In the 1920’s European architect Le Corbusier followed this line of thinking to its logical conclusion. His Radiant City demonstrated the result of “decentrist” thinking in urban planning: a collection of skyscrapers spread out in a Great Park. The tragedy is that city planning in the 1960’s—the time Jacobs was writing—continued to be influenced by an intellectual tradition clearly opposed to modern cities. The utopian theories about how people should be living prevented planners from dealing with cities as they were.

The first and second parts of the book deal the social and economic behavior of cities. Indicative of her common-sense approach, Jacobs starts with several chapters on sidewalks. It is here that most urban citizens spend interact with others, spend money, and get around. Jacobs argues that sidewalks provide other, less obvious, functions as well. Functioning sidewalks provide safety. Violent or criminal acts are prevented by the presence of so many people to act

as witnesses and protection. In a modern take on the concept of “it takes a village to raise a child,” sidewalks also serve to assimilate children. The variety of activities and adult role-models provides a far richer adolescence than suburban or ghetto living. The numerous people who participate unknowingly in neighborhood safety and child rearing are naturally in the area due to the diversity of the area. In fact, diversity is the key to Jacob’s argument. In addition to the social benefits listed, the economic vitality of the city is dependent of diversity as well. Small blocks, high concentration, aged buildings, mixed primary uses are the four essential factors in the diversity that sustains a city neighborhood. The “Great Blight of Dullness” that results from an absence of one of these factors is what is ruining cities today. (Jacobs, 34)

The third and fourth parts of the book deal with the problems of modern cities and how to solve them. The problem is primarily a lack of diversity and is caused by both public and private planning. Private planning results in dullness due to the self-destruction of successful neighborhoods. Jacobs voices the common sense that “hip” areas become sterile as moneyed interests move in to capitalize on the popularity. As the diverse elements are driven out the atmosphere that created the success is driven out with them. Public parks and projects accomplish the same result. Because these massive works are single-use commerce is unsustainable and therefore no viable neighborhood can develop. Jacobs’s different strategies for rebuilding the slums and planning vibrant cities all boil down to her four factors for urban diversity. With creativity and micro-projects, planners can invigorate cities using these four factors as guidelines.

*Great American Cities* has left a big imprint on city planning in America and deservedly so. The emphasis on mixed-use neighborhoods was the greatest contribution. Also of

importance, Jacobs successfully involved the American people in the discussion. This involvement has strengthened city planning by removing it from abstraction and scholarly journals. The journalistic prose which captured so many readers, however, limits the book as well. Many of Jacobs's claims are unsubstantiated by evidence. Does high density result in lower crime? Do kids really prefer streets to parks? We don't know. The lack of citation and bibliography forces the reader to accept Jacobs on faith. Another failing of the *Great American Cities* is its narrow focus. Jacobs explicitly aims her argument at only the largest cities. By limiting the focus to only a handful of cities, Jacobs renders her analysis irrelevant to the overwhelming majority of city planning. Many of Jacobs's arguments would work well in smaller cities and she should not allow her big-city chauvinism to eliminate them from consideration. Her admitted bias towards big cities is the last weakness in an otherwise excellent book. Jacobs's description of "very nice towns if you were docile and had no plans of your own" reveals a prejudice that undermines her status as a serious author. (Jacobs, 17)

M. Christine Boyer provides another scathing attack on city planning in *Dreaming the Rational City*. Instead of making an appeal to the common man, however, Boyer challenges traditional academic perspectives on the historiography of planning. Currently a professor at the school of architecture at Princeton University, *Dreaming* is the culmination of her dissertation while a student at MIT. The book focuses on the years 1890-1940 and is heavily influenced by Foucault and Marx. Boyer's thesis is that city planning has always been a tool for capitalist interests.

The "closing of the frontier" marked the birth of city planning. Frederick Jackson Turner's speech at the Chicago World's Fair forced Americans to metaphorically look behind

and see what they had accomplished and what they had left behind. The view was not pretty. Unchecked capitalism had created poverty, class divisions, the destruction of nature, and chaotic, unsafe cities. But the profits were too high to make any real, systemic changes. Foreign imperialism was one solution. Further disciplining the domestic workforce was another. With an extremely cynical eye, Boyer explains how superficially beneficial programs were really serving capitalism. Parks were built to “sustain the physical endurance of the workforce” and schools designed to “produce a labor force diversely skilled and disciplined.”(Boyer, 7) Municipal improvements like sewage and roads were built to facilitate commerce. Even public relief was instituted, not to help the poor, but to grease the wheels of the economy. In the end, all this was not enough to “mask the problems of social unrest” inherent in an exploitative society.

The answer was more discipline. Earlier efforts had been naïve in their dependence on environment’s ability to inspire morality and good character—in other words, a good worker. The creation of an institutional authority with broader powers would be necessary to plan an efficient city. The first step was the Pittsburgh survey of 1907. This standardized, comprehensive analysis enabled greater surveillance and control. Concrete measures like zoning and eminent domain exemplify the move away from influencing the working class to directly controlling them. Regional development provided a greater sphere of control as well. However, with the growth in governmental power a dilemma formed: how to exercise control over the public while not interfering with private business interests. Eventually the solution was found. The government would take over projects that were necessary but not profitable, leaving the private sector in control of profitable projects. The result has been a disaster. City planning is now an institution of professionals who exercise no real benefit to the people.

*Dreaming* has many shortcomings. Boyer's loyalty to Foucault and Marx undermines the integrity of the whole work. The reader gets the impression she is imposing a theoretical model on a complex situation and the model just doesn't fit, try as she might. Her blind acceptance of the evil bourgeoisie prevents her from seeing the humanity of Progressivism. True, there was a sense of elitism in the middle-class leaders of the movement. But playgrounds as an evil? Boyer's overzealous adoption of class battle has removed her perspective past cynicism to just unbelievable. *Dreaming* is also limited by its ignorance of race and migration to the cities. These two crucial factors exerted tremendous pressure on city planning. By not mentioning either race or migration in her analysis, Boyer weakens her position. Last, but not least, *Dreaming* is poorly written. Boyer's prose is repetitious and confusing. What useful contributions she has are lost in the mess.

Race and immigration are integral aspects of city planning. The Progressive Era's efforts to improve the cities were a direct response to the massive immigration of Europeans looking for industrial jobs. Nativist chauvinism wished to somehow mitigate the influence of the undesirable, but necessary, newcomers. The Great Migration into northern cities forced the North to confront its underlying racism. The result was the creation of racial ghettos that "contained" the black Americans. Understanding the confrontational origins of city planning movements is essential to presenting an accurate picture of city planning. The top-down management that Boyer and Jacobs attack was heavily influenced by prejudice. The authors' silence on race and immigration removes the legs that their arguments stand on.

Because city planning is relevant to so many people it is vulnerable to attack. The criticisms evaluated here were incomplete. However, their insistence on a more democratic city

planning is an important voice to be heard. Business interests and large governmental projects have not served the needs of urban citizens. Wilson's advocacy of city beautiful is useful for today's planning as well. His insistence that beautiful is not incongruent with practical is a refreshing perspective in the era of suburban sprawl. Many of America's most cherished urban spaces—the mall at Washington D.C, Central Park, and countless university campuses—were designed with an emphasis on architectural and natural beauty. A new national focus on urban planning could result from the growing awareness of the inefficiency of the suburbs and increasing transportation costs. Allowing for considerations of race, immigration, democracy, utility, and beauty will be our challenge.