

A Case for Beautiful Cities

The desire for beautiful cities was arguably the genesis of city planning in the U.S. Specifically, the “White City” of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893) launched the City Beautiful Movement, which led to the *McMillan Plan* for Washington, D.C. (1902), the first National Conference on City Planning (1909), and so on. Though city planning today is far broader and more robust than the City Beautiful Movement, the profession now tends to overlook its roots. Case in point: the American Planning Association’s guidelines for Great Places in America contain no references to civic beauty. Neither is the topic given any prominence in APA’s foundational book, *Planning and Urban Design Standards*. This lapse is a mistake and must be remedied.

Making cities more beautiful should once again be a priority for planners. Research studies continually underscore the importance of urban aesthetics to the general populace. Two recent surveys well worth reviewing are “Beautiful Places: The Role of Perceived Aesthetic Beauty in Community Satisfaction” and “People and Places: Public Attitudes to Beauty.” Survey respondents consistently ranked civic beauty as an essential quality-of-life factor and called for public officials to place a higher priority on aesthetics in governmental activities.

But why? What do our individual concepts of beauty reveal about our perceptions, our motivations, and even our enjoyment of life? The answer is far more profound than most people realize.

My research on “common threads” in theories of beauty from Plato to present-day thought leaders reveals that beautiful objects—including cityscapes—prompt feelings well beyond simple appreciation. We say “beautiful” when we experience a spontaneous, deep connection between our true inner selves and our surroundings—physically, emotionally, intellectually, and soulfully. It is no wonder that civic beauty matters!

Civic beauty also brings substantial tangible benefits to communities. Tourism is a major contributor to the world’s most beautiful cities. San Francisco’s 17 million annual visitors generate \$10 billion in revenues to local businesses and \$600 million in tax revenues. A study by the Federal Reserve Bank has shown that beautiful cities are especially attractive to high-skill workers, who in turn stimulate significant employment and population growth. Likewise, elements of civic beauty such as parks often provide essential environmental, aesthetic, and recreational benefits to city dwellers. To quote Daniel Burnham, the father of the City Beautiful Movement: “Before population had become dense in certain parts of the city, people could live without parks, but we of today cannot.”

No less a sage than Lewis Mumford in *The City in History* warns of the perils of not pursuing beautiful cities: “We must give as much weight to the arousal of the emotions and to the expression of moral and aesthetic values as we now give to science, to invention, to practical organization. One without the other is impotent.” With this professional responsibility comes a wonderful opportunity for the planning profession to once again lead the crusade toward ever more beautiful cities.

Given the importance of civic beauty to the preferences and local economies of the communities we serve, our own professional responsibilities, and even our self-enlightenment, we must give higher priority to all things beautiful in land-use policies, capital improvement programs, development regulations, and beyond.

The time has come for the planning profession to reclaim its birthright and renew its beautiful cities legacy!



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