The formative years of Orlando’s traditional neighborhoods were heavily influenced by leaders of the City Beautiful Movement, a period of American history that celebrated public life through the creation of signature parks, the preservation of lakeshores for public use, the planting of street trees that would later create a canopy effect and the bricking of streets.

The City Beautiful Movement, as it was labeled by architects, planners, civic promoters and writers, was the dominant trend and motivating force in American urban design from the 1890’s to the 1920’s. The City Beautiful Movement developed from a theoretical base that had been foreshadowed earlier in various sporadic stages throughout the nineteenth century. The movement reached its influential height in the first decade of the twentieth century and had largely spent its force by the time the United States entered World War I.

The City Beautiful Movement emphasized a reverence for natural beauty and its close relationship with the urban environment. It evoked yearnings for an ideal community and to the potential for good in all citizens. The City Beautiful Movement was an ambitious effort on the part of various civic-minded and aesthetically-oriented Americans to achieve for their own new cities something approaching a cultural parity with the great urban centers of older and grander European cities. Not surprisingly, the American movement used those cities as the models for its own planning efforts. In fact, the City Beautiful era spawned the American urban planning profession with the work of Daniel Burnham, Edward Bennett, Charles Mulford Robinson, Raymond Unwin, John Nolen, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.
The City Beautiful Movement had its earliest beginnings with the rebuilding of Paris by Napoleon III and his lieutenant, Baron Haussmann, which was perhaps the first major effort of urban renewal in the western world. Georges-Eugene Haussmann, the Prefect of the Seine, oversaw a three-decade-long transformation of Paris beginning in 1850 that transformed that city from a fairly unsightly place to a beautiful city that for many years after was the center of the world’s tourist trade. Perhaps the most important products of that effort were the great boulevards that opened the city up, making movement through Paris more efficient. These improvements also allowed for a rationalized and modernized water supply and sewer system, and demonstrated Paris’s stature as the center of economic, cultural and political power in France.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), an influential British writer, art critic and social reformer, also impacted the movement by inspiring such designers as Lewis Mumford, Patrick Geddes, and Ebenezer Howard. Ruskin’s idealistic vision called for a new organic architecture and a comprehensive planning process that would result in the creation of a beautiful urban realm, though mostly through the work of his many disciples. One of the key concepts prevalent in Ruskin’s writings was that of the greenbelt, where a hierarchy of villages and towns were set in a natural setting of green fields, orchards and woodlands. He spoke of the importance of balancing the city and the countryside, “when you know how to build cities...you will be able to breathe in their streets, and the excursion will be an afternoon’s walk or game in the fields around them”. By stressing that cities be surrounded by a greenbelt, Ruskin anticipated not only the City Beautiful Movement, but also the Garden City and New Town Movements.

**Garden Cities**

The prototype for today’s suburbs, with lots of jobs and lots of housing, can be found in Ebenezer Howard’s 1898 plan for relieving congestion in the city of London. Howard proposed creating self-contained satellites called Garden Cities, which would be an idyllic union of town and country. Howard imagined the virtues of this hybrid to be “beauty of nature, social opportunity, low rents, high wages, plenty to do, field for enterprise, flow of capital,” and somewhat naively, “no sweating.” Through the Garden City concept advanced by Ebenezer Howard in his 1898 book, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, the center or core area of a city, town, or neighborhood was considered organized and memorable when the space in the center was devoted to and maintained within a park like setting; and when the edge of a village or town was open and green, promoting a distinct contrast with the built environment. Howard’s advancement of the greenbelt concept was utilized by city planners and landscape architects throughout Great Britain and to a lesser degree in the United States. Howard’s ideas eventually led to the rise of the modern suburb. Unfortunately, what Howard did not imagine was America’s “unique” contribution to urban form: the explosive popularity of the automobile. Under Howard’s vision, Garden Cities would be limited to 32,000 residents surrounded by a greenbelt of agricultural land and open space. Individual Garden Cities were to be connected by rail, not eight-lane expressways. Howard, it seems, did not anticipate the far-reaching effect that the automobile would ultimately have on urban and suburban form.
The Parks Movement
Another related movement, the Parks Movement, was initiated in both Europe and the United States in response to the writings of landscape gardener Andrew Jackson Downing in the *Horticulturalist*. In 1848, 1849, and 1851, Downing wrote several articles advocating the creation of public parks in the United States patterned after European models. Downing's popular writings influenced civic leaders across America to consider how best to create meaningful parks and open spaces, including our great cities of New York, Chicago and Boston.

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. - a contemporary of Ruskin, Howard, and Downing, and perhaps America's greatest landscape architect - was the inspiration and philosophical father of the City Beautiful Movement and the leading force in the Parks Movement here in the United States. Olmsted, along with architect Calvert Vaux, designed and oversaw the development of New York’s Central Park in the mid to late 1800’s. Olmsted was also the master-mind behind the Boston Park System, often referred to as Boston’s “emerald necklace”. Olmsted pioneered the synthesis of horticulture, civil engineering and architecture into landscape architecture, viewing the landscape as a setting that could profoundly influence human beings and their behavior.

“What artist, so noble...as he, who with far-reaching conception of beauty and designing power, sketches the outline, writes the colours, and directs the shadows of a picture so great that Nature shall be employed upon it for generations.” — Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, 1852
Following their work on Central Park, Olmsted and Vaux prepared a series of imaginative and farsighted city and suburban designs, including the design of Riverside, Illinois. All of these plans had the same or similar objectives. First, Olmsted urged a comprehensive approach; that is, the plan should always be seen as part of the larger whole, taking into consideration the entire surrounding city, town, or region and its probable future growth. Second, he advised laying out streets in accordance with natural topography. Last, Olmsted was intensely concerned with providing a comfortable environment for residents, recommending lot and street layouts that favored the pedestrian and the provision of substantial open space to soften the urban edge. Olmsted stressed the importance of tree-lined avenues and parkways as a complementary element to the promenades and parks he sought for “receptive” recreation and the playfields needed for “exertive” activities.
For Olmsted, parks and open spaces were never an ornamental addition to a city but an integral part of its fabric and a force for future growth on several levels: geographic, economic, social, and cultural. He believed every large city should have a variety of public grounds, including but not limited to, a large “country park”, all integrated systematically into the greater city or town.

Olmsted’s agenda was to civilize American cities, suffusing urban design and planning with the benefits of healthy natural systems, providing access to high quality open space for all citizens – young and old, commuter and resident. His ideas of creating networks of parks, playgrounds, parkways, natural preserves, great civic spaces, and environmentally sensitive suburban development (such as Riverside, below) have largely been taken up by the entire landscape architecture and park planning professions. Olmsted’s views and his works throughout the United States were instrumental in the earliest stages of the City Beautiful Movement.

**The Columbian Exposition**

The World’s Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893 to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of America, was the single most important physical catalyst in the launching of the City Beautiful Movement. As Director of Works, architect Daniel Burnham pushed the Exposition forward with great power and determination, creating what came to be known as the “White City”, a truly monumental city in classic style and organization, using sweeping vistas, wide park-like boulevards, grand civic buildings and greenspaces as focal points (see insets, right and below).

The results of his team’s work were remarkable. American urban reformers received from the White City a suggestive vision of things to come. Olmsted, Sr., a major contributor to the design of the grounds of the Exposition, had feared that the architects’ decision to make the buildings “perfectly white” would create a blinding, overpowering effect. Yet the whiteness of the Fair became an important symbol of purity and freshness in the moral crusade against the dark ugliness of the actual urban landscape at that time.
A journalist, Henry D. Lloyd, noted that the White City revealed to people “possibilities of social beauty, utility, and harmony of which they had not been able even to dream. No such vision could otherwise have entered into the prosaic drudgery of their lives,” he believed, “it will be felt in their development into the third and fourth generation.” The success of the White City foreshadowed Burnham’s own later exhortation to “Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men’s blood”. Burnham, along with Edward Bennett, would later greatly impact America’s second city, Chicago, with the creation and implementation of the Chicago Plan of 1909, which many consider to be the most important single work of the City Beautiful movement.

**Urban Writers**

Raymond Unwin’s 1909 book, *Town Planning in Practice*, aptly described the role of civic space and green space as the form-giving element of towns and neighborhoods. Unwin recommended planning towns, villages and neighborhoods with common open spaces, mainly in response to the overcrowding and squalid conditions found in larger cities at the time, such as London. His call for cities, towns and neighborhoods to incorporate fresh air, light, and visual relief was echoed by other planners and social reformers, largely for public health reasons, but also for civic and aesthetic reasons as well. His idea of providing discipline to the space used for civic and recreational purposes – carefully considering the arrangement of parks and other greenspaces to create an attractive balance and contrast – contributed to the town planning tradition that now allows us the extreme pleasure of discovering a vest-pocket park or small plaza.

The writer whose work had the greatest actual impact on the theory and the achievement of the City Beautiful era was Charles Mulford Robinson. He was able to popularize the concept for a much broader audience than the previously mentioned planners and architects. As a professional journalist, he was one of the first architects to assume an important role in the new profession of what would come to be called town planning. Concerned with the importance of civic amenities for the poor and the working classes as well as the rich and “cultivated”, Robinson struck an early note of social consciousness.

In 1899 and 1900, *Harper’s* magazine sent Robinson abroad to report on civic developments. From the experiences and materials gathered in researching a number of articles produced for *Harper’s*, he wrote his first book, *The Improvements of Towns and Cities* (1901). The book was an effective summary of the most valued and vital contemporary material on
“municipal art” and “civic improvement” – the how-to-do-it introductory guide both for the layman and professionals. Robinson’s book was also persuasive on matters of motivation and practice. “Something very like religious fervor,” he argued, “can be put into the zeal for city beauty, sustaining it through long patience and slow work.” Yet he was equally certain that motives other “than religious enthusiasm may give strength to the desire for city beauty.” He recalled, “the economic argument, in the attraction of the wealth and culture of the leisure class and the transient trade of tourists…the philanthropic argument in the brightening of the lives of the poor; the educational in the instructive possibilities of outdoor art; the political in awakening civic pride.” Finally, he asserted, “the greatest work of the past has always been that produced to meet a public demand, or that, at least, which was done for the people…In the world-wide civic battle between Ugliness and Beauty, consider what allies have now been gathered to Beauty’s side.” This “record of the combat,” had been written, he concluded, “to spur on these allied forces to new confidence and endeavor.”

In the follow-up Modern Civic Art; or The City Made Beautiful (1903), Robinson developed many of the themes he had introduced in his first book, though emphasizing, as the title suggested, specific objects of “civic art” such as street design and street furnishings, the relationship of buildings to the street, comprehensive planning (he actually coined the term), including park and open space planning.

So, what is civic art? Robinson stressed that civic art is first of all municipal in the sense that it is communal. Civic art is not sought for art’s sake, but for the city’s. Interestingly, Robinson stated that the concept of the City Beautiful has been around since the beginning of civilization,

“Thus is civic art first municipal, and has ever attained its largest victories when cities were mightiest. For in so far as it is art, its principles are eternal as the truth, and its conquests must be at least as old as cities. Down through the Middle Ages, poets and painters dreamed of the “city beautiful”; the Irish Gaelic poets sang of it; barbaric Nero strove to realize it; the inspired apostle transcribed his vision in its terms; Greek philosophers drew inspiration from the measure of Athens’s attainment of it, and the great prophet named Babylon as “the glory of kingdoms.” As anciently as the dawn with its golden radiance has transformed cities, there has been a dream, a sigh, a reaching forth, with civic art the goal.”

Robinson provided the following definition of civic art,

“as the taking in just the right way of those steps necessary or proper for the comfort of the citizens – as the doing of the necessary or proper civic thing in the right way…As an art that exists not for its own sake, but mainly for the good of the community, first for the doing of the thing and then for the way of doing it, there can be only one successful civic art. This will be one which joins utility to beauty” (emphasis added).
Robinson wrote about the principles of civic art, namely unity, variety, and harmony. He noted that if civic art cannot pass the civic test, as to the urban good it does and also the aesthetic test, it fails. Robinson stated that civic art,

“cannot stand alone, to be judged without its environment – and the field in which it stands is so broad to have unity, so varied to have harmony, so much the same in parts to have variety. Consider how easily civic art may fail with this test applied: a thrilling statue on an unkempt street is not successful civic art, because its surroundings are not harmonious; a park, lovely in itself, may fail, from this broad standpoint, for want of that unity in the city plan which would lend to its location seeming inevitableness. Building restrictions designed to insure harmony, but made too severe, may lose their artistic effectiveness by the repression of variety to the verge of monotony. But if it is easy to fail, as surely it is, success is better worth the winning; and where a city, or part of a city, is built up from the ground plan to the street furnishings and construction with regard for these three principles of art, how beautiful, consistent, and intellectually satisfying is the result!”

Robinson stressed that in wise city-building, we should not consider the next five or ten years, but posterity, and that to do this is cheaper in the end. Robinson also stated that the best and most effective way to achieve the civic art ideal is through the adoption and implementation of a complete and comprehensive city development and improvement plan with the underlying concept being that “every step should be a step of progress.” This sentiment has been echoed by one of today’s most influential architects and planners, Christopher Alexander, who stated that, “every increment of construction must be made in such a way as to heal the city.”

It was inevitable that Robinson, the author of so many pages on the theory of planning and civic art, should ultimately be invited to prepare reports on the “improvement” and then the “planning” of actual American cities, including Buffalo, Denver, Oakland and Los Angeles. Unfortunately, few of his plans were ever completely realized, at least not as Robinson had envisioned them. Years later, when Gertrude Stein returned from a visit to her native Oakland, California, the subject of one of Robinson’s most neglected plans, and was asked by a friend what she had found, she replied that she “found no ‘there’ there.” That’s a phrase we hear repeated far too often in relation to much of our development today. Luckily, many of Robinson’s ideals were incorporated by others such as John Nolen and Harland Bartholomew in the design of cities and towns well into the twentieth century.

“If there is a reasonably high standard in providing the useful improvements of a town or city, it will be found that utility and beauty are virtually inseparable…A city plan worthy of the name would tend to check haphazard drift which is apt to make a city commonplace. It would hold up a worthy and distinctive ideal toward which all improvements, no matter how small or unimportant themselves, would ultimately contribute.” – John Nolen, New Ideals in the Planning of Cities, Towns and Villages, 1919.

Part of the thrust of the City Beautiful Movement was to put more “there” into American cities. In both its actual and its theoretical achievements, the City Beautiful touched the consciousness of a rapidly urbanizing time. It was a literary and an architectural crusade to make the urban more urbane. It encouraged Americans to care about their cities. It stressed the idea that cities and urban life could and should be beautiful and that sensitive
Orlando’s “Beautiful” Heritage

architecture and urban design were crucial components of both a healthy environment and what a certain founding father, architect and writer, Thomas Jefferson, had called “the pursuit of happiness”.

**Orlando Enters the Picture**

While none of the more well-known practitioners contributed directly to Orlando’s identity and maturity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a number of local residents and leaders were very much aware of the work being done by Olmsted, Burnham, Robinson, and the others. In Eve Bacon’s book *Orlando, A Centennial History* (1975), it was noted that Orange County sent a number of agricultural exhibitors to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and so we know that Orlando residents had a first hand look at Burnham’s White City.

While radios and televisions were years away, we can imagine a woman living near Lake Davis or Lake Cherokee in the early 1900’s, reading the newest issue of *Harper’s*, learning about the value of beauty in the design of cities, and being inspired. We can imagine a resident traveling from Orlando to New York or Boston, and seeing Central Park or Boston’s “emerald necklace” park system for the first time, and wondering if such an Olmsted-like park system could happen in his little town of Orlando, and being inspired. We can imagine a previous Public Works Director or Parks Commissioner sitting at his desk late at night reading from Robinson’s *Modern Civic Art*, and being inspired. Through a multitude of such small events, some real and some imagined, and with enough inspired people, the notion of civic art and beauty took hold in Orlando.

Orlando’s now treasured tree canopy got its first jump-start when Albert Gallatin Branham planted approximately 400 oak trees in 1885. In the early 1900’s, the City inaugurated a plan for the systematic beautification of its roadways, lakeshores and open spaces, including the planting of over 5,000 live and water oak trees, and hundreds of palms, azaleas, and flowering shrubs. According to Bacon’s history, in 1908, the citizens of Orlando decided to find a more suitable name for Orlando (other than the previous “Phenomenal City”). A contest was sponsored, and a number of names were submitted, such as “The Queen City”, the “Magic City” (Mickey Mouse would likely have approved), “the Picturesque City”, and “The Health City”. However, it was Mrs. W.S. Branch Sr. who won the prize with her title “The City Beautiful”. Wouldn’t it be interesting to know if Mrs. Branch had subscribed to *Harper’s*? In any event, the new name inspired a wave of interest in beautification that would soon make Orlando a fitting setting for its new name. In 1908, the Orlando City Council, with Braxton Beacham as Mayor, officially designated Orlando “The City Beautiful”. The name stuck and appeared on all types of promotional literature describing Orlando, most notably on millions of postcards that wended their way north in hopes of attracting winter visitors to an area becoming increasingly known for its warm weather and gorgeous tropical and semi-tropical foliage.
Later, in the 1920’s, at least in some picture post-cards, Orlando boasted of being “The Automobile City”. The question must be asked, was this description a matter of justifiable pride by new car owners or was it an ironic harbinger of the automobile-dominated suburban landscape that would develop in the last half of the 20th Century?

With that aside, over the last century, the City Beautiful concept has been implemented in countless ways in Orlando, most notably by the planting of many thousands of hardwood trees along the City’s streets. Today, that mature tree canopy is one of the most distinctive features of Orlando’s traditional neighborhoods; a resource that must be protected and enhanced.

The importance of the tree canopy as basic urban infrastructure cannot be over-emphasized. Tree-lined streets are more than shaded passageways linking buildings, parks and neighborhoods. They give us a chance to bring nature into the heart of our community, while linking us to Orlando’s past. Street trees are an absolutely essential component of the traditional streetscape – perhaps the single most important element in the composition. Scientists have also come to find a rational beauty in trees. Trees can significantly reduce temperatures in town and city centers, thus reducing air-conditioning costs and countering the “urban heat island” effect. This is accomplished not only through the shading effect of trees, but also through trees’ ability to store large quantities of carbon – a key factor in global warming. If this weren’t enough, the leaves and branches of trees slow the movement of raindrops, lessening soil erosion and storm sewer system overload. Trees have also been found to reduce air pollution, by removing particulate matter from the air, while restoring oxygen to the atmosphere.
Donald Appleyard, in his book *Livable Streets*, states that the reasons people give for liking trees on their street is revealing, and provides a basic “top-ten list”: “1) they provide shade; 2) they make the street more alive by their movement and richness; 3) they are soothing to the eyes; 4) they purify the air and increase the oxygen content; 5) they hide buildings; 6) they add a sense of privacy; 7) they provide contact with nature and give warmth as opposed to the hardness of cold concrete; 8) they cut down on noise; 9) they can make the streets look neat and provide residents with an opportunity to show they care for them; and 10) they provide an identity of they are unique…” Orlando’s earliest leaders realized that trees are not just frills or cosmetic add-ons. They are basic infrastructure and a major factor in contributing to community pride, quality of life and economic development. Street trees are important not just because they absorb noise and air pollution, lower utility costs, and provide a habitat for birds and other wildlife, but because the roadway and its frontages are a community’s major public arena or ordering device. Trees growing along a street visually tie a neighborhood or a development together and make it a cohesive unit.

“In the mental picture of a beautiful city or village, the tree has an inseparable part. Tree-lined avenues, tree-arched streets, the background of foliage to well-placed sculpture, the softening of stern facades, the play of light and shadow on the pavement, the screening of the sun’s glare upon walk and window, the lovely chronicle of the season’s progress as it is written on the tree where all can read it – these are factors of beauty thrusting themselves at once upon the mind as requisite to success. They are universal in appeal. They speak not only of the beauty of all trees, they record the aesthetic dependence of the town upon its trees…” – Charles Mulford Robinson, *The Improvement of Towns and Cities*, 1901
Orlando was successful in consciously celebrating the importance of natural lakes as key components of the public realm. Orlando’s affection for the lakefront dates back to the early 1900’s, when the city’s street pattern was first established. Preserving the lakefront as public realm was standard practice at that time, so many of Orlando’s historic neighborhoods are focused on one or more lakes. Today, names like Lake Adair, Lake Cherokee, Lake Lawsona, Lake Ivanhoe and Park Lake command immediate recognition as being among the finest and most desirable neighborhoods in central Florida.

The importance of preserving the lakefront was officially recognized by the City of Orlando in the 1926 Orlando City Plan, a land use, transportation, recreation and open space plan prepared by Harland Bartholomew & Associates, one of the most important city and town planners of the early to mid-twentieth century. The 1926 Orlando City Plan described Orlando’s lakes as “being perhaps the principle attraction in the City.” The plan recommended that the lakes “be owned, developed and maintained with the object of adding to and conserving their notable beauties.”
The 1926 Orlando City Plan also called for the creation of a Great Park concept that included a system of large parks connected by pleasure drives (see map below). The Plan focused on connecting our lakes and parks with pleasantly landscaped streets and emphasized the need to integrate quality parks and greenspaces into Orlando’s newly developing neighborhoods. Bartholomew’s parks proposal showed great foresight in recognizing the need for a network of open spaces for public recreation and connectivity.

By 1939, these and other beautification efforts had proven so effective that the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a scenic road route through Orlando. This route showcased twenty three miles of brick, tree-lined streets, numerous neighborhoods and eighteen of the more aesthetically pleasing lakeside greenspaces. Many of these amenities remain evident today, and are considered by many to be some of Orlando’s most valuable assets.

Conclusion

Since the incorporation of Orlando in 1875, there have been innumerable improvements to the public realm made by the City and by its residents, providing for an evolving City Beautiful. Starting with the bricking of streets and the landscaping improvements of the early twentieth century, and the acquisition, development and renovation of signature parks and open spaces such as Lake Eola Park, Leu Gardens and Dickson Azalea park in the intervening years, the City has long held the value of the public realm. Added to that effort, the City’s residents have planted trees and improved their properties not only for their benefit but for the community as well. Private developers and builders have created residential neighborhoods, businesses, and other community assets along with parks and open spaces and other improvements as growth as occurred, again adding to the value of the public realm. Orlando has a proud heritage of creating civic beauty...a heritage that must be preserved and enhanced as we transition from a small southern town to an international city.
SOURCES:

Books (By Year of Publication)


Charles Mulford Robinson, *Modern Civic Art or The City Made Beautiful*, 1903.


Articles (By Year of Publication)


Plans and Codes
