Apotheosis of the Public Realm: Civic Classicism in New York City's Architecture

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APOTHEOSIS OF THE PUBLIC REALM: CIVIC CLASSICISM IN NEW YORK CITY’S ARCHITECTURE

by

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Abstract

Apotheosis of the Public Realm: Civic Classicism in New York City’s Architecture

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Adviser: Kevin D. Murphy

In the years around the consolidation of Greater New York in 1898, a renewed interest in republican political theory among progressive liberals coincided with a new kind of civic architecture. For the first time in American history, cities and the urban public emerged as crucial parts of democratic citizenship, at least for progressives such as Frank Goodnow, Frederic Howe, and Herbert Croly. At the same time, New York City was promoted as the nation’s cultural and commercial capital: the “American metropolis,” in Croly’s words. Architects, too, played a key role in articulating the city’s and the urban public’s new status and visibility. New York City was a site for the simultaneous reimagining of citizenship, the public realm, and architectural and urban form.

In this context, an informal school of architecture in New York that I call “civic classicism” developed three distinctive design modalities to reform the city’s public space: the ensemble of buildings in a garden-like terrace, the continuous street wall around a historic square, and the free-standing monument juxtaposed to the gridiron urban plan. By attending to issues of publicity—of public space and visibility—broadly considered, architectural works by Carrère & Hastings, Cass Gilbert, and others are shown to be linked to the civic, political
concerns of their time. The dissertation thus moves beyond the conventional biases in the
historiography of this architecture, which has treated the work in mostly pejorative terms.

Chapter one traces the course of the nineteenth-century American “architectonic public
realm”—that is, the ways in which political thought and architectural and urban form
conditioned one another— as a foundation for understanding the changes around 1898. In
Chapter two, Herbert Croly’s political theory and architectural criticism are studied together to
reveal the connections between his republican politics and his pragmatic architectural aesthetics,
which championed civic classicism’s suitability to the modern city. Chapters three, four, and five
examine the three architectural modalities at the Staten Island Civic Center, Bowling Green, and
the New York Public Library, respectively. The conclusion briefly suggests some reasons why
civic classicism declined in the 1920s and after.
To Pamela, for unstinting encouragement;
and Roy, for helping me see architecture as an architect sees it.
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Introduction

This dissertation reconsiders the significance of classicism in New York City’s architecture from the 1890s through the early 1920s. It examines the growing interest among some leading architects and political writers in the challenges and prospects of metropolitan cities, focusing on their emboldened vision for the urban public realm. This vision included the conviction that architecture and urban design could help make visible the modern democratic public—and could help vitalize its requisite civic virtues. Architects insisted that urban form conditioned the practice of architecture, and vice versa, and that judicious architectural interventions could reform some of the defects of the cityscape. Rather than trace the models and precedents for this architecture as many previous studies have done, this dissertation analyzes what I call New York City’s “civic classicism” in relation to the contemporary interest in publicity, the new metropolitan status of the city, and the concern for the visibility of the urban public. An optimistic urban image for New York City emerged out of these interrelated concerns in the years around the municipal consolidation of Greater New York in 1898. Thus, the city was a site for the simultaneous reimagining of citizenship, the public realm, and architectural and urban form.

Progressives such as Frederic Howe, Seth Low, Herbert Croly, and others grappled with the problem of how modern social, economic, and political conditions could help or hinder the cultivation of citizens concerned with the res publica. These reformers yoked long-standing
republican political concerns to the liberal politics of their day. They promoted cities—and especially the largest of all, New York—as “the hope of democracy,” to use the title of Howe’s influential book. This was the most sustained interest in the political possibilities of cities in American history up to that time—and possibly since. These political reformers, and some of the architects who imported Beaux-Arts formal design to New York, including Thomas Hastings and Cass Gilbert, imagined architecture as contributing in tangible ways to the enrichment of the public realm of American cities. In their view, buildings and city spaces helped organize and articulate modern citizenship and publicity. Although these architects were seldom explicit about any political underpinnings to their work, a close examination of the buildings and spaces they designed, including Staten Island’s civic center, the buildings around the historic Bowling Green, and the New York Public Library, indicates the extent to which the new political conditions informed the practice of urban architecture. Architecture contributed to the period’s “apotheosis” of the res publica. The civic classicism studied here is evidence of how New York City became the leading national site for a simultaneous reimagining of cities and citizenship around 1898.

1 By republican politics, I refer to the body of thought concerned with the quality and enduringness of the commonwealth and citizenship. Debates about republicanism in political philosophy have generated a large body of literature in the past few decades; the key works have rarely been explored by architectural historians. For a treatment of republican political theory in the American context, see William J. Sullivan, Reconstructing Public Philosophy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For a broader historical account, see Iseult Honohan, Civic Republicanism (London: Routledge, 2002). The impact of liberalism on architecture and urbanism has received some treatment recently. See John Archer, Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Patrick Joyce, The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City (London: Verso, 2003); and Maiken Umbach, German Cities and Bourgeois Modernism, 1890-1924 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Civic classicism, a distinct kind of urban architecture for public and institutional buildings in the metropolis, responded to and articulated the city’s new scale and status, and it addressed the duty of representing the new urban citizenship. The following chapters investigate these interrelated issues through analyses of three architectural projects and aspects of the period’s political thought in the writings of Howe, Croly, and others. Informed by recent scholarly interest in republican ideas about publicity and citizenship, and drawing upon traditional architectural and intellectual history methods, this dissertation goes beyond the usual concerns in the literature on this architecture. These concerns have included the translation and impact of French Beaux-Arts design principles in the United States; the patronage of the wealthy industrialists and financiers of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era; the development and expansion of cultural institutions; and the artistic expression of the nation’s burgeoning imperialism in the years around the Spanish-American War. Instead, this study brings the fields of architecture and political theory together, taking the city at the turn of the twentieth century as the mutual ground of interest.

My argument contests the entrenched dichotomy presented in the historiography: a division between so-called progressive architecture centered in Chicago and so-called conservative architecture centered in New York. The historiography often posits the New York

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architects as anti-modern historicists uninterested in contemporary ideas about the relation of architecture and society. Instead, this study reassesses New York’s civic classicism as part of a broader rethinking of and political realignment within the American public realm. New York architects responded imaginatively to the city’s growing status as a cosmopolitan center representing the nation comparable to major European capital cities such as Paris and London. Their understanding of civic classicism as a meaningful, articulate component of the public realm stands in contrast to the conventional view that has tended to see this architecture as impoverished vis-à-vis Chicago School modernism. Part of the problem is the tendency to link all classical architecture of the time with the urbanistic practices of the City Beautiful movement. From this perspective, civic classicism is seen as part of the larger pattern of nineteenth-century moralistic and paternalistic “uplift.” But at the turn of the twentieth century, architecture was seen as a significant constituent of what political theorist Ronald Beiner calls the common “horizon of civic experience” that is requisite in a liberal democracy. Adopting a

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less stridently polemical perspective provides an opportunity to reconsider the meaning of civic classicism in relation to the efforts to expand and articulate this common horizon of civic experience. This dissertation, then, contributes to the literature on the role of architectural and urban design in the understanding of the American public realm and to the ongoing reevaluation of “eclecticism” or “historicism” in turn-of-the-century architecture.8

Historiography

The most typical type of study of New York architecture in this period is the monograph that focuses on individual buildings or architects. While providing necessary documentation, these works have not consistently advanced compelling interpretations about the broader political significance of this architecture. Its purportedly problematic relationship to the vital questions of modernity relegated it to the historical sidelines in the interest of tracing the trajectory and intellectual impulses of more obviously modernistic architectures of the early twentieth century. Some recent studies, though, have begun to uncover the extent to which American architecture engaged the changing social and cultural dynamics of the time. While this has been achieved largely through monographs on individual architects or buildings, these studies have begun to carefully reconstruct the historical conditions affecting these architects’ work.9 Another set of studies on American and European architecture from the late nineteenth

century through the 1920s helps frame my arguments within the broader scholarly debates about the relations among architecture, politics, and the changing intellectual currents of modernity.\textsuperscript{10}

Still, many of the recent monographs have eschewed deeper interpretive or critical perspectives; they are often not much more than hagiography.\textsuperscript{11} While some of this writing is an understandable response to the animadversions previously heaped upon this architecture, a more nuanced understanding of the historic context affecting the production and reception of this architecture is possible. Like the monographs on individual architects, much of the recent work on New York architecture more generally has been either documentary, monographic, or anecdotal, although several recent works provide context for the architectural culture of the period by studying related institutions and genres.\textsuperscript{12}

In general, New York’s late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture has been interpreted along two lines: the “formalist” and the “culturalist” modes, to use shorthand labels.


\textsuperscript{11} This trend is especially true of those architects who specialized in the design of houses for the \textit{nouveau riche} industrialists and financiers. See Giberti, review of McKim, Mead \& White and Daniel H. Burnham.

In the formalist mode, civic classicism from the turn of the century is disparaged for its presumed failures to engage with the unique problems of building under the conditions of industrial modernity and for relying on academic aesthetic models, for which it is deemed nostalgic or even reactionary. This mode of criticism was first advanced by a number of “historian-advocates” of modern architecture: Lewis Mumford, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Sigfried Giedion, Reyner Banham, and others. The historian-advocates often had a personal stake in the development of avowedly modernist architecture and consequently saw “academic” architecture, particularly that stemming from the Beaux-Arts, as diametrically opposed to their new agendas.

The historian-advocates in the middle of the twentieth century had, according to Panayotis Tournikiotis, three major aims in common, all of which conspired to set their agenda against New York’s civic classicism. First, they espoused a theory of architectural history in which their version of modernism was the inevitable outcome of earlier historical developments. Second, they argued for close parallels between social change and architectural form in response to what they considered the demands of industrial modernity and mass society. Third, they asserted a thesis about presumed architectural essences that legitimized certain abstract modernist design principles. According to Tournikiotis, these writings constructed a historiographical narrative about the past that led in a teleological path to the historian’s preferred mode of modernist practice.\footnote{Panayotis Tournikiotis, The Historiography of Modern Architecture (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 2-4. He writes, “Reading these texts one after another, it is difficult to distinguish between interpretations of events and phenomena in the recent past and a type of manifesto about the architecture of the immediate future. In general terms, the histories of modern architecture are based on a position about the being of architecture, on a theory that takes the more or less clear form of what-ought-to-be and usually projects what-ought-to-be-done.”} Regardless of the differences among the historian-advocates, their histories, which have greatly influenced the entire literature on this architecture up to the present, constructed the seemingly unassailable perception that the “historical forms” of
civic classicism were reactionary tactics against modernity and, therefore, of little consequence within the larger sweep of architectural history.

Henry-Russell Hitchcock put forward perhaps the most charitable version of this perspective in *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1958). In his view, classicism by the turn of the twentieth century was “primarily an instance of survival.” For Hitchcock, such cultural survivals are inevitably “sunk in inertia and conservatism”; their “static, not to say smug, assurance is their greatest strength; their greatest danger is that boredom resulting from excessive familiarity which they eventually induce.” In this view, McKim, Mead & White’s early Shingle Style and Colonial Revival work merited close study, but not the so-called “academic reaction” evident in their urban classicism. This reactionary architecture stemmed, Hitchcock argued, from Charles McKim’s adherence to the part of H. H. Richardson’s legacy “that related to his own French training and his dependence on various styles of the past, limited though that was, as also [to] his growing concern with architectonic order.” In Hitchcock’s scheme, the historian was to focus analysis on the “consequential” part of Richardson’s legacy that dealt with “his sense of materials, at once intelligent and intuitive, and his interest in functional expressions.” The characteristics of “consequential” classical work constituted for Hitchcock an architecture merely of “good taste,” which was “at best a negative rather than a positive criterion for architecture.” In this program, the historian should privilege architecture that appears to be heading into the future because any other kind of architecture is

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historically irrelevant, having traveled on “a road without a goal.” This assessment indicates the sense of vapidity attributed to the classicism of the turn of the century. The culturalist mode of interpreting late nineteenth-century architecture attempts to situate the architecture in broader contexts of meaning and production than the narrower architectural concerns dominant in the formalist mode. It sometimes celebrates architectural eclecticism, whereas in the formalist mode stylistic variety is most often condemned as “pastiche” or “nostalgia.” The culturalist mode began in the late 1950s and 1960s in studies by Carroll Meeks on nineteenth-century eclecticism and in Vincent Scully’s study of nineteenth-century domestic architecture. More recently, Richard Longstreth has coined the useful label “academic eclecticism” to underscore the architecture’s stylistic variety and its derivation largely from the French academy. Longstreth’s label recognizes that no one particular historical style dominated design, but rather that “eclectic” designers worked from certain shared assumptions and methods to produce heterogeneous traditional styles.

The defining source in the culturalist historiography is the Brooklyn Museum’s catalog of its 1979 exhibition, *The American Renaissance, 1876-1917*. The essays by Richard Guy Wilson, in particular, were the first comprehensive revisionist studies of this architecture, followed soon thereafter by Wilson’s and Leland Roth’s identically-titled monographs on

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18 Ibid., 409. The full quote runs as follows: “To pursue the subject of traditional architecture further would be merely to explore what can now be seen to have been not so much a cul-de-sac as a road without a goal.” These themes were developed earlier in Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929).
McKim, Mead & White, both published in 1983. Wilson’s perspective has done the most to shape the current understanding of this architecture, including use of the label “American Renaissance,” which had previously been associated primarily with antebellum literature. His argument posits that American architects identified with the Italian Renaissance in order to create a modern American renaissance endowed with the appropriated prestige of its historical predecessor. This connection to the past was linked ostensibly to a chauvinistic nationalism, a cultural and political program that “was intensely nationalistic. It appropriated images and symbols of past civilizations and used them to create a magnificent American pageant” of the United States as the culmination of what contemporaries called “civilizational progress.”

Modulating between attention to formal design and cultural context, the exhibition’s catalog essays interpret this architecture as a response primarily to its *nouveau riche* patrons’ sense of *noblesse oblige*. Wilson writes,

> The American Renaissance was by nature an art and architecture of capitalism, and this it celebrated publicly and privately…. Integral to the elitism was a spirit of *noblesse oblige* that found a release in the grand public gestures…. Messages of patriotism and citizenship were implicit in all of the public art and architecture. Frequently funded by the wealthy, the gestures can be interpreted cynically as a subterfuge by the elite to patronize the masses or idealistically as an acknowledgment of wealth’s responsibilities.

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22 An earlier study by Walter C. Kidney is largely impressionistic and pictorial, although its modest essay tracing the spread of the Beaux-Arts style is even-handed in evaluating the aesthetic merits of this architecture: *The Architecture of Choice: Eclecticism in America, 1880-1930* (New York: George Braziller, 1974). Kidney describes the entire period as one of eclecticism, recalling Meeks, and states that this eclecticism was “learnedly if selectively imitative of historic architecture in all aspects of its appearance, and [used] the historic styles as expressions of various cultural institutions.” This emphasis on the link between symbolic function and institutional programs fits it within the emerging scholarship on (primarily) European nineteenth-century architecture, also undergoing reevaluation beginning in the 1970s. For a revisionist overview of this architecture, see Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture, 1750-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).


25 Ibid., 16-21.
Wilson’s work associated this architecture with late Gilded Age industrial wealth in ways that mitigate, intentionally or not, any potential aesthetic or civic merits.

The culturalist mode of interpretation sometimes takes this critique further. Following the earlier arguments by Lewis Mumford in *The Brown Decades* and Michael Klare in his essay, “The Architecture of Imperial America,”26 its recent iterations see this architecture bluntly as a tool of the American imperial economic order. For instance, Molly Berger writes without qualification that the period from 1880 to World War I was “a time during which families with enormous industrial wealth communicated a forceful statement about power, status, and social organization through their architectural projects. The material world that they created served to shape, promote, and reproduce economic and social relationships and the values that underpinned them.”27 Her critical approach, like Wilson’s more moderate perspective, tends to obviate any positive qualities in this architecture.

Several recent studies, however, have forged new directions within the culturalist mode of interpretation, including David Scobey’s *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (2002) and Randall Mason’s *The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City* (2009).28 These works provide at least two new avenues of approach to this architecture. First, they allow us to appreciate the aesthetic ideas and stylistic diversity of New York’s late nineteenth-century architecture at a critical distance from the moralizing theme of progressive versus conservative tendencies. Second, they provide models for setting this architecture in broader and more complex contexts of economic, cultural, and

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political developments, excavating this architecture from narrower architectonic concerns that previously dominated the scholarship. Scobey’s concept of “bourgeois urbanism,” for instance, helpfully underscores the efforts of elites to construct a cityscape reflecting the metropolitan and cosmopolitan status of the city after the Civil War.

The design approaches in the buildings studied here suggest that their architects implicitly shared a concern for the role of architecture in constituting and defining the res publica. Such concern moves this architectural practice beyond the scope of a concept such as Scobey’s bourgeois urbanism, which, despite its more complex historical contextualizing, tends to instrumentalize all architecture as an element of the propagandistic machinations of elites (in his case, of property owners). However, an understanding of the public realm as requiring, in Ronald Beiner’s words, a “stable horizon of civic experience” provided in part by the built environment helps to cast this architecture in a different light. In the years around 1898, there was an emerging sense that architecture’s political role might be broader and more significant than had been previously assumed. Public and professional discourse emphasized the role of architecture in representing the urban public, providing appropriate settings for public life, and helping to fortify and expand the common horizon of civic experience.

Chapter Organization

In chapter one, I examine the American “architectonic public realm” from the Revolutionary period of the late eighteenth century through the first decade of the twentieth century.29 The chapter emphasizes the change at the end of the century toward an optimistic view

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of cities and the implications of the identification of the urban public for democratic citizenship. “Architectonic public realm” refers to the ways in which architecture and urbanism relate to forms of political and civic organization and to ideas about citizenship. It refers to how politics compels, implies, or fosters certain kinds of urban and architectural forms—that is, how the formal structures and conceptual understandings of the polity and res publica encourage certain urban and architectural forms and discourage others. It suggests how the built environment provides a ground for experiences of publicity and citizenship.30

The first part of chapter one provides a larger historical context for the developments in political thought in the late nineteenth century by briefly tracing the history of the architectonic public realm over the course of the century ending in the 1880s. Following a schematic historical trajectory suggested by political theorist Michael J. Sandel, it evaluates the historiographical debate on the relative importance of liberal and republican traditions of political thought to American history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.31 The second part of the chapter focuses on the political literature of the years around 1900. Much of this writing is narrowly focused on municipal governance; the formal political relations of cities to states and the federal government; questions of civil service, direct legislation, and public ownership of utilities; and the machinery of both local politics and constitutionalism. But in many of these studies there is

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an unmistakably new attitude to cities as vital political entities. So, while the political literature was in general technical and prescriptive, it presented a reformed, remarkably unified, and unusually optimistic view of cities. Frank Parsons wrote in the preface to his prescriptive book on municipal politics that cities are “the aggregation of all that is best in civilization, and all that is worst in the remnants of barbarism.” The latter part of his statement had been a typical American sentiment up until the 1880s, but in an earlier period the former part would have been a rare and controversial opinion. For the late nineteenth-century reformers, one of the chief political tasks was to remove those “remnants of barbarism” so that the city’s potential as bastion of democratic liberty could be realized, so that a liberal, progressive civilization could flourish. This was a new attitude, and it entailed a reformist view of architecture and urban space.

These political theorists—especially Frank Goodnow, Delos Wilcox, and Frederic Howe—were liberals in both the classical and newer (progressive) senses: they were concerned with formal structures of power and constitutional order as well as distributive justice. But their form of liberalism—what has been called “progressivism” since the early twentieth century (and partly though not entirely coterminous with the Progressive Movement)—was inflected by the republican tradition of political thought. As Sandel explains it, philosophical liberalism concerns itself primarily with a theory of individual rights and republicanism primarily with a

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theory of good citizenship. The progressive political theorists brought these two traditions together, arguing that liberal individualism needed the corrective of an abiding concern for the public good and rich experiences of citizenship.

Frank Parsons joined these distinct political traditions clearly when he wrote, “Combination, integration, union are the most excellent if their benefits are justly distributed—integration plus diffusion, or union for the good of all, is the problem of the 20th century” [emphasis added]. A “union for the good of all,” or a sense of citizenship defined not merely in technical or formal terms but in relation to substantive goods that are of common concern, was widely understood by progressives as the basis of a new politics. As Parsons defined it, progressivism was “the movement toward a more perfect democracy or self-government in political and industrial affairs.” Crucially, the city was increasingly central to this new understanding of citizenship and politics: it was understood to be a substantive good of common concern to the republic. Whereas in earlier American republicanism, the city had been considered detrimental to republican liberty, in republican progressivism, the city was reconceived as a modern polis. The sheer physical presence of the res publica was newly visible and too palpable to ignore. Not only was architecture a representation of the political order, it was also seen by some progressives, at least implicitly, as an agency of collective political life

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39 Parsons, The City for the People, 9.
and of the urban public. Architecture in New York, a city recognized by Herbert Croly, for instance, as the centripetal axis of American culture, had the dual burden to represent both the urban public and the status of the city as the nation’s metropolis.

Chapter two turns to Herbert Croly’s political and architectural interests. By considering his political theory and architectural criticism together, we gain a better understanding of the connections progressive theorists sought to make between politics, citizenship, cities, and architecture. Croly’s singular body of work has been often treated as anomalous, and his dual interests as discontinuous with one other. But an examination of his writings on architecture and politics demonstrates the potential connections between the two fields as a consequence of their shared urban focus.

According to Theodore Roosevelt, who represented the nationalist branch of the Progressivism, “The prime problem of our nation is to get the right type of good citizenship.” His choice of words was deliberate: right and good citizenship were historically among the major aims of republican politics; a Progressive’s recapitulation of the theme was no novel departure. However, Roosevelt’s linking of this citizenship with his call for a “new nationalism”—a program to invest federal authority with greater powers to confront the new scale of urban, industrial, and corporate consolidations—was original. But, as Sandel argues, both Roosevelt’s nationalism and the opposing vision of decentralization maintained republican faith in the “formative project” of democratic citizenship.

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43 Ibid., 218. Decentralization of political power was promoted by Louis Brandeis, among others.
If Roosevelt was the bullhorn for robust nationalism, Herbert Croly was its chief publicist. National citizenship for Croly meant “a higher type of individual and associated life.” The best means for achieving this higher type of citizenship was the metropolis, which, in the United States at the time, meant chiefly New York. Croly’s republicanism, even though it differed fundamentally from the earlier American emphasis on dispersed power and agrarianism, is clear in much of what he wrote. Democratic citizenship was a “formative project” because, Croly maintained, “democracy cannot be disentangled from an aspiration toward human perfectibility…. The principle of democracy is virtue.” Or, to be more specific in terms of republican thought, civic virtue. While Croly attended to the aims of republican nationalism, he was aware of how the metropolis must serve as a venue, indeed as the most conspicuous public platform, to channel and direct this virtue. Urban citizenship constituted an important part of national citizenship for progressive thinkers such as Croly.

In his frequently cited essay from *Architectural Record*, “New York as the American Metropolis,” Croly made the connection between urbanism and national citizenship more explicit than anywhere else. According to Croly, a great metropolis “must not only reflect large national tendencies, but it must sum them up and transform them”; it must “do something to anticipate, to clarify, and to realize the best national ideals in politics, society, literature and art.” It was in this sense that New York’s civic classicism had the duty not only of responding to the city’s new metropolitan scale after the 1898 consolidation but also to the larger understanding of urban citizenship in relation to national citizenship that was emerging at the same time. For

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46 Ibid., 454.
47 For broader considerations of these themes, see Frank Cunningham, “The Virtues of Urban Citizenship,” *City, Culture and Society* 2 (2011): 35-44.
Croly, “modern art must of its nature be national in spirit.” As an examination of his architectural criticism makes clear, he found the civic classicism of New York to be a largely successful effort toward shaping an art of national scope and one commensurate with the new understanding of citizenship.

Chapters three, four, and five turn to architecture proper to examine New York’s civic classicism in practice. The civic classicists developed at least three architectural modalities for the urban scenography of New York. These modalities visibly dramatized the urban public within the city’s spaces.49 Each of the three chapters is a case study of one modality: the creation of an ensemble of civic monuments in a conspicuous, landscaped setting; the enclosure of a historic square by a continuous street wall and methods to direct visual attention to individual buildings within it; and the setting of a public building in conspicuous juxtaposition with the gridiron street plan of Manhattan. The civic classicists’ scenographic devices magnified the visibility of public buildings within the cityscape, giving shape and definition to civic space. In each chapter, buildings are treated as parts of a larger urban whole, their design informed by and responding to the new sense of the city’s scale and the importance of the urban public that the city incubated and encompassed. Above all, it was the urbanistic impact of civic classicism that constituted its distinctive contribution to modern architecture.

Chapter three examines an instance of the first modality—the ensemble of civic monuments in a landscaped setting—at the Richmond Borough civic center on Staten Island, designed by Carrère & Hastings shortly after the 1898 municipal consolidation. The chapter begins by considering the nineteenth-century perception of the island as New York’s romantic suburb, which, for instance, informed Frederick Law Olmsted’s vision for its development in the

49 The idea of different modalities within urban scenography is adapted from Daniel Savoy, *Venice from the Water: Architecture and Myth in an Early Modern City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).
1870s. I then examine the 1898 consolidation as the impetus for the borough’s first president, George Cromwell, to reimagine Richmond spatially and symbolically in relation to Greater New York. His plan for a civic center at the island’s closest point to Manhattan, offering sweeping views of the metropolis over New York Bay, exemplifies conspicuous visibility as one of the defining feature of civic classicism. Although only part of Carrère & Hastings’ civic center plan was built, it demonstrated the adaptability of civic classicism to the contingencies of site: it could be a civic architecture of the periphery as well as the central city.

Chapter four examines the second modality—the continuous street wall—at Bowling Green. It considers the development of skyscrapers in relation to the streetscape as well as the placement of Cass Gilbert’s U.S. Custom House, a building with national significance, in that same space. Bowling Green’s national symbolic significance had been established during the Revolutionary period due to associations with George Washington. And as the oldest part of the city with high visibility from the water, it had historical and spatial significance that seems to have directly influenced the architects who worked at the square. As Walter B. Chambers wrote when redesigning an earlier building there in the late 1910s, architects worked both consciously and intuitively with the knowledge of “certain obligations” at such a historically and geographically sensitive location. Civic classicism at Bowling Green exploited and enhanced the distinctive urbanistic conditions of the site.

Finally, chapter five considers the New York Public Library and the adjacent Bryant Park as responses to the gridiron plan of Manhattan. Two factors were especially crucial to the library’s design: the burgeoning interest in libraries as agencies of publicity and the site’s uniqueness as a double-block, giving it special visibility within the cityscape. Just as they had done at the Richmond civic Center, Carrère & Hastings adapted the language of French
classicism to the special demands of the site, designing the library on a platform to enhance the visibility of the urban public and, at the same time, proposing a subtle critique of grid-plan urbanism.

Although this dissertation addresses a particular moment of the past, it is informed by recent debates in architectural and political theory regarding the problem, as George Baird puts it, of “how urgently we yearn for worldliness at the same time that we fundamentally lack confidence in it.” Moreover, as Susan Bickford writes, our postmodern physical environment “is being constructed, quite literally, in ways that adversely affect how we regard politics and who we recognize as fellow citizens.”

The confidence of the civic classicists in the “worldliness” of the public realm is startlingly clear to observers today relative to our own constricted and diminished vision of it. This dissertation examines how the architects, political theorists, and reformers who developed civic classicism and its underlying ethos around 1900 confronted changes to the architectonic public realm and to democratic citizenship, concerns bearing similarities to those of today. New York’s civic classicism helped to make visible the new urban public at the turn of the twentieth century, contributing to the apotheosis of the public realm that was a central achievement of progressivism. This alone is a strong argument to better understand the political dimensions of this architecture.


Chapter One

The Architectonic Public Realm in the Nineteenth Century

After the Civil War, American liberals optimistically imagined a new direction for the nation. James Russell Lowell, the Harvard poet and literary critic, explicitly tied this optimism to a forecast of a nation of great cities. As he wrote in 1867, the “great metropolis” would be a spur to “an undivided national consciousness”:

Things do really gain in greatness by being acted on a great and cosmopolitan stage, because there is inspiration in the thronged audience and the nearer match that puts men on their mettle…. [But] we [Americans] have never known the varied stimulus, the inexorable criticism, the many-sided opportunity of a great metropolis, the inspiring reinforcement of an undivided national consciousness. In everything but trade we have missed the invigoration of foreign rivalry.¹

Lowell’s conception of public life as a “great and cosmopolitan stage” offered, crucially, by the “opportunity of a great metropolis” to rival those of other nations indicated a new direction for American political thought.² Far from being alone in using this rhetoric, Lowell was one among many ardent champions of this new urban outlook in the postbellum years. Although his perspective was, nationally speaking, still in the minority in the 1860s, by the 1890s it


constituted the basis of a new understanding of American political life: the American commonwealth as constituted by the urban public.

The ubiquity of this perspective is a crucial but largely overlooked element in understanding the political and urban transformations that took place in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Urbanism and architecture were newly imagined as contributing not just to the reform of society, as scholars of the “environmental behaviorist” or “social control” perspectives have emphasized, but also to a fundamentally new conception of the public realm and American citizenship—in other words, of politics in the broadest sense. New thinking about cities and their architecture became part of the critique of the atrophy of the public realm under the conditions of liberal, industrial political economy in the late nineteenth century. The practice of a “virtuous” civic architecture could be part of a stand against the ossification of virtue as mass society developed and the old agrarian-individualist virtues became unmoored from modern experience. For some influential critics and theorists, architecture was seen as a complementary or even active component of urban politics and citizenship. In their view, the civic classicism of New York was not elitist idealism mystifying the power of capital and imposed upon the unsuspecting urban masses as a form of social control; it was a more complex manifestation of late-nineteenth-century efforts to rethink the public realm and American citizenship as intrinsically tied to the fate of cities. Civic classicism developed in a milieu of

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5 In modern mass society, according to Hannah Arendt, individuals “are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come when it seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective.” The expanding of “perspective” in metaphorical and spatial-visual terms to suggest the visibility of public things, including the urban public itself, is a recurring theme in the urbanism and architecture studied in chapters three to five. Arendt, The Human Condition, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58.
intellectual ferment that saw the architecture of cities as providing a common ground for the expression and experience of citizenship.⁶

**Changing Understandings of the Public Realm and Citizenship**

Understandings of the architectonic public realm—the relation of architecture, cities, and the ideas and institutions of citizenship and politics⁷—were not static during the first century of the American republic. From the Revolution to the Gilded Age, abstractions such as “the public,” “public realm,” and “commonwealth” underwent conceptual changes that drew upon both republican and liberal political theory. By the time of the Civil War, political thought was immersed almost completely in what is now considered liberal theory.⁸ A significant turning point was the 1880s and early 1890s. With the rise of corporate industrialism and a booming population fueled by increasing immigration, among other factors, political thought concerned with what constituted the public and public life in America confronted a new set of questions.⁹ This late-nineteenth-century transformation returned to some of the central concepts of the republican tradition, including civic virtue and the common good, though in modified form.

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⁶ The particular kind of publicity implicated by this architecture could be seen, as it was by many modernists, as incompatible with liberalism's professed ethos of autonomous individualism. This was, in part, Lewis Mumford’s critique. See Mark Linder, “Mumford’s Metaphors: Sticks and Stones versus Ships and the Sea,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 46, no. 2 (Nov. 1992): 95-103.


Political theorist Michael J. Sandel has offered an expedient if schematic outline of the political thinking on American citizenship and the political order. He traces a transition from traditional republican rhetoric, infused with new liberal ideas, in the late eighteenth century to what he calls the “procedural republic” that has been dominant since the end of World War II. Sandel’s sketch provides a useful guide to our particular concern about the place of urbanism in the “architectonic public realm.” Taking Sandel’s historical sketch as a framework, we can trace the development of thought about the architectonic public with specific attention to the role of the city and urbanism within the shifting permutations of republican and liberal thought over the course of the nineteenth century.

In the earliest period of Sandel’s historical sketch, during the mid- to late-eighteenth century, a distinct type of republican rhetoric was predominant. There were two significant elements. First, liberty was considered in a political rather than a personal sense. It was, as Sandel says, “a function of democracy” and not “an individual’s guarantee against what the majority might will.” Second, the relation between the individual and the state was mediated

“by decentralized forms of political association, participation, and allegiance.” Sandel points to the fact that the Bill of Rights, a strikingly liberal addendum to the Constitution, applied only to the federal government until the ratification in 1868 of the 14th amendment, which held states ultimately accountable to the federal constitution through its citizenship and due process clauses.\textsuperscript{14} Unlike earlier historical republicanism—from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, in particular—which had been associated with independent city-states, late colonial and early American republicanism was uniquely tied to agrarianism and conceived entirely without reference to cities or any conceptual equivalent to the city-state.\textsuperscript{15} As the nineteenth century progressed, a more utilitarian vision of political economy took hold, developing eventually into the ideology of \textit{laissez faire} by the middle of the century.\textsuperscript{16}

Sandel identifies a third stage of the history as unfolding after the Civil War and gaining momentum toward the turn of the century. Nationalization of markets precipitated a nationalization of politics: the decentralized governmental forms of the early republic became outmoded and political thought turned to national concerns in order to counter the power of economic concentration with a similar concentration of political power at the federal level. Reaching its zenith in the New Deal, the “national republic,” as Sandel calls this period, resulted in a new politics of the common good focused on the nation-state as a formative community rather than on local loyalties that had characterized the earlier agrarian republicanism. It was during the “national republic” that “liberalism made its peace with concentrated power.”\textsuperscript{17} This was the period of progressivism, and the late nineteenth century witnessed a concerted effort to reconcile republican virtue and concern for robust conceptions of citizenship with the new urban

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{15} Murphy, \textit{Civic Justice}, 256-66.
industrial society of liberalism. This city-based republicanism fully embraced the political possibilities of the urban public. Rooted in the city, and above all in the metropolis, republican progressives such as Frederic Howe and Herbert Croly dismissed as nostalgic, even reactionary, the effort to discount or bypass the urban public in political theories of American citizenship and politics at the end of the nineteenth century.

Finally, according to Sandel, since the end of World War II, but with its roots in the nineteenth century, there has been a widespread conviction that the nation-state is too vast and abstract “to cultivate the shared self-understandings necessary to community in the formative or constitutive sense.” Politics operating with this conviction, which Sandel calls the “procedural republic,” radically transforms earlier relations between liberty and democracy and the individual and the state. Liberty is now conceived primarily as an individual right held against the wider polity while institutions have become bureaucratized, intended to be “insulated from democratic pressures” in order to be “better equipped to dispense and defend individual rights.” This has resulted in a “vision of the unencumbered self that animates the liberal ethic.”

Because the “procedural republic,” or the liberal-individualist ethic, has been the effective paradigm for understanding politics for the past sixty or so years, the historiography of earlier American political history has been filtered through the particular biases embedded in this paradigm. However, Sandel’s framework for the trajectory of political thought and institutions

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18 A recent account of this development, though flawed by incomplete and unfocused analyses, is John D. Fairfield, *The Public and Its Possibilities: Triumphs and Tragedies in the American City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).
gives historians of urbanism a potentially fertile approach to the differences between republican and liberal rhetoric and politics and their implications for the architectonic public realm. Before turning, then, to the reformation of attitudes toward cities, citizenship, and political organization in the late nineteenth century, we should briefly consider the preceding history of political thought in light of Sandel’s distinctions.

As historians Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson write, “The creation of the American republic is a decisive site for understanding how republican themes and ideas turned in a liberal direction.” Many of the most influential political thinkers and actors of the time shared a desire to discover and implement the essential features of republicanism modified for modern conditions and democratic citizenship. This quest resulted in a unique form of political theory that retained significant elements of republicanism at the same time that it turned toward a liberal ethos regarding the problems of modern governance and citizenship. The prevailing view is that between the Revolution and the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791, the American political system had coalesced into a “hybrid mixture” of liberalism and republicanism. Thomas Jefferson provides confirmation of this in his 1825 letter about his sources for the Declaration of

22 A different but overlapping framework for understanding the American constitutional order and citizenship is posited by Rogers M. Smith in “The ‘American Creed’ and American Identity: The Limits of Liberal Citizenship in the United States,” *Western Political Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1988): 225-51. Smith identifies three conceptions of “American identity” in a more synthetic approach than Sandel’s, seeing distinctive attitudes he labels liberalism, republicanism, and “ethnocultural Americanism.” He sees in the ascendance of liberalism an approach to rights that excludes “specific political membership,” as opposed to the collective approach of republicanism (230).


Independence. “All its authority,” he claimed, “rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.” The fact that Jefferson explicitly pointed to “harmonizing sentiments of the day” and singled out two ancient and two modern writers provides important evidence for historians who argue for the synthesis—whether rhetorical or substantive—of republicanism and liberalism in the founding period.

It should be noted that an important element inflecting the American engagement of the liberal and republican traditions of political thought was Puritan-Calvinist asceticism. For the Puritans, display, “in the sense of drawing meaning from public appearances,” was nearly sacrilege. At best, display was highly circumscribed. The Puritan political ethos had only grudging regard for the embellishment of the public realm as such. Private money could be spent in charity or investment in private enterprise but not in immoral public display. Although virtue had a role, this political theology was different in kind from the classical tradition of civic virtue in which private wealth was expected to contribute to the glorification of the city-state or republic, especially in the Hellenic and Roman worlds of antiquity. In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American colonies, ostentation and conspicuous consumption were often proscribed as against the public good. In large part this proscription flowed from the Puritans’ sense of mission: their settlement in the New World was a sacred journey into the wilderness, a

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27 Murphy, Civic Justice, 257.
29 Murphy, Civic Justice, 257. See also Jason LaFountain, “The Puritan Art World,” Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2013.
plan having been ordained by God as deliverance from bondage into a promised land. Thus, their deep-seated aversion to public display took on a more ideological cast as it became associated with despotism and empire—British despotism and the British empire. As Peter Murphy observes, even long after the heyday of Puritan Protestantism in New England, its theology retained enormous cultural prestige “and its ascetical undertow helped stiffen resistance to the British.” Throughout the eighteenth-century, proliferating Protestant sects appropriated this moralistic sense of virtue by wrapping themselves “in the robes of a classical republicanism of an ascetic kind.”

Ascetic Protestant virtue in conjunction with a distinctive reading of classical sources produced an anti-urban thrust to early American political theory. As many commentators have noted, political and moral-theological readings of ancient authorities by American politicians, ministers, and other writers had the goal of finding “suggestive historical examples” rather than static guidelines. Perhaps most important for the theme of anti-urbanism and disdain of the material public realm is the agrarian reading of classical sources. Jefferson is today the best-known exponent of this view from the founding era, but he simply articulated in an enduring way what was common currency of thought. A particularly cogent articulation of American agrarianism as a response to perceived European (urban) decadence was Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer, published in London in 1782. Crèvecoeur, even more consistently than Jefferson, stressed how the American farmer, in the paraphrase of Lienesch,

lived naturally in a state of perfect liberty and equality, existing independently on the production of their own lands, holding property essentially equal to one another…. In this New World utopia there was none of the political and economic

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30 Ibid., 262.
31 Ibid., 258.
32 Lienesch, New Order of the Ages, 10-14.
oppression of feudalism…. Americans were settled, sociable yeomen, simple without being base or vicious, civilized to a degree but not corrupted. In short, they were representatives of a perfect middle state.  

The “middle state” or “middle landscape” was considered a “perfect” societal form, a pastoral form existing between the “rudeness of primitive life” and the decadence of advanced urban civilization. By the Revolution, this pastoral ideal was located in American agrarianism. For Jefferson, the association of agrarianism and individual virtue was self-evident: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue…. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phaenomenon [sic] of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.” This statement, from Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), ends by contrasting this virtuous agrarianism to its opposite vice, urbanism. Husbandry, Jefferson believed, keeps men independent, while manufacture and commerce produce dependency:

Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition…. [F]or the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe…. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.

Such faith in the intrinsic virtuousness of agrarianism took root in the soil of eighteenth-century republican theory which held that landowners, independent and virtuous, formed the solid

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33 Ibid., 86. Crèvecoeur called this life, in his exaggerated fashion, “the most perfect society now existing in the world.”
36 Ibid., 165.
foundations of a republic. Any economic structure that promoted dependence would corrupt
morality and, thus, could not sustain the virtues necessary for representative government.37

As Lienesch emphasizes, the rhetoric of agrarianism focused on the cultivation of
industrious and virtuous citizens rather than the accumulation of wealth or property per se.38 For
Jefferson and those who shared his brand of republicanism, the move from self-sufficient
husbandry in an agrarian economy to urban market capitalism was a sure plan for corruption and
the eventual downfall of the republic. To Jefferson and others, European cities were the seedbed
of corruption as centers of dependence-producing manufacturing and industry. However, cities
qua cities were not the problem; they were merely its platform or outlet of public expression.
The eighteenth-century agrarian economy, yoked to a distinctive reading of classical sources on
republican corruption, is what made them loathsome to modern American republicans.39 This
attitude changed dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century, and during the Gilded
Age important voices were arguing exactly the opposite of Jefferson: virtue—now considered as
a civic or collective type—was not cultivated through agrarian pastoralism but instead was to
found in cities, where the drama of civic life was on display and cosmopolitanism flourished.
This was the idea James Russell Lowell tentatively expressed right after the Civil War, and it
gained more and more vocal adherents through the end of the century.

In the late eighteenth century, however, even those who did not espouse agrarian
republicanism, such as Noah Webster, did not locate the virtuous foundations of the polity in
urban citizenship but in the ownership of land, whether cultivated by its owners or not. Equal
ownership of land was considered requisite for republican virtue because it was “the very soul of

37 Lienesch, New Order of the Ages, 87.
38 Ibid., 88.
39 Ibid., 89.
the republic," as Webster wrote.\textsuperscript{40} This view of the compatibility of virtue and commerce was still premised on a primarily agricultural economy, but it was seen by its proponents as a sensible, pragmatic alternative to the agrarian-republican view.\textsuperscript{41} As industrialization advanced through the first half of the nineteenth century, the agricultural component lost relevance and urbanism was foregrounded. However, despite the expansion of cities and a growing recognition that the future economy would be increasingly based on urban commerce and industrial production, antebellum political thought put little stock in the political prospects of cities.

For Peter Murphy, the early American version of republicanism, no matter how we might categorize it (as radical or traditional, classical or modern, etc.), constituted a cohesive moral and legal structure that systematically excluded cities from considerations of public goods and the commonwealth. Murphy writes, "Moral condemnation and legal remedy always were more attractive to the Americans than the kosmopoietical and city-building sides of historical republicanism."\textsuperscript{42} What the American republican vision lacked, in this view, was precisely what occupied a central position in republican thought at its origins in antiquity and in the Renaissance: the polis as the architectonic core of the polity.\textsuperscript{43}

Related to the agrarian-republican synthesis, though partly at odds with it, was a strong aversion to extensive empires or large polities of any kind, which were seen as detrimental to republican politics. Evidence for this popular view is found, for instance, in one of the political theorists frequently cited by late-eighteenth-century Americans, Montesquieu. In \textit{The Spirit of the Laws}, Montesquieu wrote that monarchy was the proper political form for a territorial state.

\textsuperscript{40} Noah Webster, \textit{An Examination into the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution} (Philadelphia, 1787), quoted in Lienesch, \textit{New Order of the Ages}, 93.
\textsuperscript{42} Murphy, \textit{Civic Justice}, 260.
\textsuperscript{43} For the centrality of the polis or city-state, see Maurizio Viroli, \textit{Republicanism} (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); and Honohan, \textit{Civic Republicanism}, 18-29.
Conversely, “It is natural for a republic to have only a small territory; otherwise it cannot long subsist…. In an extensive republic the public good is sacrificed to a thousand private views; it is subordinate to exceptions, and depends on accidents. In a small one, the interest of the public is more obvious, better understood, and more within the reach of every citizen ….”44 While American readers recognized the importance of Montesquieu’s argument, they tended to downplay its applicability to the conditions of the American republic. Jefferson, among others, confronted Montesquieu’s theory by proposing a ward system of representation so that elected bodies would be close to the populace they represented. This proposal, along with the system of population-based representation spread over large geographical areas that ultimately was established by the Constitution, relied on Lockean contractual ideas rather than those of Montesquieu.45 Thus, the American polity was habituated to an extensive, agrarian republic that treated any but the smallest cities with skepticism and hostility. The conceptual core of citizenship was decisively located in the land—both cultivated and wild—rather than in cities.

The continental expanse as a central element conditioning American political thought is hard to exaggerate. As Murphy writes,

Providence was more attractive to the American soul than the peras [limit or edge] of the ancients. Providence drew Americans away from the shoreline and the coastal seas of the ancient topographical imagination on a journey into the wilds of the vast American interior. It drew them into an uncharted Continental expanse. While the roots of this journey were religious, its idea was quickly absorbed into popular mythology.46

46 Murphy, Civic Justice, 263.
This absorption in the continental expanse, later to be associated with the ideology of “manifest
destiny,” was inherently at odds with classical ideas of citizenship and the public realm. Though
the outward forms of the American political system in many ways reflected Roman republican
tradition—the Senate’s powers pitted against the House’s, separation of legislative and executive
functions, state and federal balances—these did not serve a specifically civic purpose. The
purpose of these institutional structures, as political theorist Ronald Beiner insists, served no
ultimate ends or telos except for the maximization of individual liberty (construed as freedom
secured through a contractual agreement in which government assures citizens’ “inalienable
rights”) and the perpetuation of the liberal state itself. Although Jefferson and others may have
retrieved aspects of republicanism from their favorite historical sources, the political structure
created by the Constitution was predominantly a liberal one.

Thus, the liberal state, as it developed at the end of the eighteenth century, was a political
regime of institutions and laws. As Hannah Arendt has written, “Under modern conditions, the
act of [political] foundation is identical with the framing of a constitution, and the calling of
constitutional assemblies has quite rightly become the hallmark of revolution ever since the
Declaration of Independence initiated the writings of constitutions for each of the American
states.” The problems of the constitutional order in France since the Revolution, however,
illustrated for Arendt that “the very notion of constitution came to be associated with a lack of
reality and realism, with an over-emphasis on legalism and formalities” (emphasis added). This
institutional and legal framework for politics lacked reality—that is, a tangible and visible

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47 See Carl J. Richard, The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment (Cambridge,
49 On liberalism’s legalistic bases, see Ronald Beiner, What’s the Matter with Liberalism? (Berkeley: University of
50 Arendt, On Revolution, 116-17.
focus—precisely because it was not based in a city-state but rather was projected spatially across
the continent. In other words, the political structure was not grounded in a telos concerned with
some defined social goods and located in an identifiable place, as it had been historically. It was
a polity without a concrete res publica—that is, without a polis or urbs as its center and focus.51
Rather than the polis as the object of politics, “the people” were objectified. In the American
constitutional model, citizenship became associated with enumerated rights, the election of
representatives who had no duties geared specifically toward enriching the public realm, and
residence anywhere within the territorial expanse of the nation-state. In these ways, the public
realm was peculiarly devoid of signifying attributes of common concern.52 This political order
was not only non-urban; it explicitly located the public realm outside of cities and was
constituted by the liberal regime of individualistic rights and the constitutional framework of
power checked by power—perpetually renegotiated confrontations of interests designed to
administer an expansive nation-state.53

With passion ruling political relations, as the Federalists strenuously argued, public
enthusiasms would rush and subside quickly because of the continental scale of the republic with
its many and competing individual enthusiasms.54 But these passions do not leave lasting traces
of material signification. As Frederick Jackson Turner argued at the end of the nineteenth
century, the true “signifying core” of the American polity was the continually expanding frontier,

51 Murphy, Civic Justice, 264-65.
52 Ibid., 265-66.
53 Ibid., 274-76. Murphy provocatively distinguishes classical reason as a foundation for virtuous action among
citizens in a city-state regime and Enlightenment passion as the motivation for modern individuals in an expansive
nation-state. The framers of the Constitution thus turned to the idea of a system of checks and balances for the power
structure of the American state in order to keep passions under control. John Adams and James Madison, in contrast
to Jefferson, believed that a checks-and-balances system for the passions would foster “a great multiplicity of sects”
that would “dissipate the force of sectarian zeal.” They believed that “the larger and more extensive the republic, the
greater its scope and scale, the more these passionate concerns would be multiplied, so that no one concern could
dominate the ... national psychology” (275-76).
54 See, for instance, The Federalist Papers nos. 10, 48, and 51, available at
not the *polis* or capital city.\(^{55}\) As Peter Murphy suggests, the fact that the great American mythic figure is neither a statesman nor a heroic citizen but the frontiersman “who lived in the liminal zones of the frontier between civilization and wilderness, city and sublimity,” reveals the depth of the continental-frontier ethos.\(^{56}\) In the Gilded Age, this theme was recognized even before Turner’s more famous articulation of it in 1893. For instance, in his widely read book *Progress and Poverty* (1879), economist Henry George explained how the continental expanse had molded national character and politics.\(^{57}\)

The decline of the agrarian-republican ethos in the nineteenth century has by now been well documented. But Europeans after the French Revolution expressed openly and with greater disdain their aversion to classical republican thinking. Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), the Swiss-French theorist and politician, succinctly expressed the nineteenth-century liberal ethos in starkly anti-republican terms as part of a broad contrast between two types of liberty, the “liberty of the ancients” and the “liberty of the moderns”:

> We are no longer able to enjoy the liberty of the ancients which consisted in an active and constant participation in the collective power. Our liberty for us consists in the peaceful enjoyment of private independence…. The purpose of the ancients was the sharing of the social power among all the citizens of the same fatherland. It is to this that they gave the name liberty. The purpose of the moderns is security in private enjoyment, and they give the name liberty to the guarantees accorded by the institutions to that enjoyment.\(^{58}\)

Yet even into the middle of the century, currents of intellectual republicanism remained. A prominent example is Alexis de Tocqueville, whose writings were widely read not only in his native France but throughout the nineteenth-century by cosmopolitan Americans eager to

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\(^{56}\) Murphy, *Civic Justice*, 276.


\(^{58}\) Benjamin Constant, quoted in Honohan, *Civic Republicanism*, 113.
assimilate an outsider’s perspective into their own understanding of the unique qualities (and shortcomings) of their republic. Against the classical corruption thesis of eighteenth-century republicans, Tocqueville substituted the apathy of the polity under commercial conditions. These, he thought, would trump ambition or sectional self-interest. As he wrote in On Democracy in America (1835-40), “Individualism is a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and his friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself.” Such individualism “proceeds from an erroneous judgment rather than a depraved sentiment,” but it is also “of democratic origin, and it threatens to develop as conditions become equal.” On the contrary, under aristocratic, non-democratic conditions,

institutions have the effect of binding each man tightly to several of his fellow citizens…. Men who live in aristocratic centuries are therefore almost always bound in a tight manner to something that is placed outside of them, and they are often disposed to forget themselves…. In democratic centuries, … the bond of human affections is extended and loosened. In democratic peoples, … the fabric of time is torn at every moment and the trace of generations is effaced…. Thus not only does democracy make each man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants from him and separates him from his contemporaries; it constantly leads him back toward himself alone and threatens finally to confine him wholly in the solitude of his own heart.59

Tocqueville saw in the U.S. a counterweight to this atavistic individualism in the form of participation in township politics and through various forms of “free institutions” and “the associations that are formed in civil life” that today we could call the voluntary associations of civil society.60

60 Ibid., 485-92. Honohan comments that for Tocqueville, through such engagements American “citizens identify with the law, and know they are capable of changing it…. Civic spirit is inseparable from the exercise of political rights…. The abundance of associations of all kinds is the key to the American solution to the atomizing threat of
Despite Tocqueville’s interest in civil society, he was adamantly anti-urban in his assessment of the prospects of American republicanism. In an extraordinary footnote to the section, “On the principal causes tending to maintain a democratic republic in the United States,” he wrote,

America does not yet have a great capital, but it already has great towns…. The low people who inhabit these vast cities form a populace more dangerous than that even of Europe. It is composed first of freed Negroes, whom law and opinion condemn to a state of hereditary degradation and misery. One also encounters within it a multitude of Europeans whom misfortune and misconduct drive toward the shores of the New World each day; these men bring our greatest vices to the United States, and they have none of the interests that could combat their influence. Inhabitants of the country without being citizens of it, they are ready to take part in all the passions that agitate it….

He notes contently that the riots that he observed or heard about in Philadelphia and New York “are unknown in the rest of the country” and expresses relief that metropolitan “disorders” have had little influence in the country. Nevertheless,

I … regard the greatness of certain American cities and, above all, the nature of their inhabitants, as a genuine danger that threatens the future of the democratic republics of the New World, and I do not fear to predict that it is through this that they will perish, unless their government comes to create an armed force that … is still independent of the people of the towns and can reduce their excesses.  

Tocqueville’s analysis of American society thus focused on its formal and informal institutional and social structures but disregarded its cities as menaces potentially destructive of the civil order. For Peter Murphy, in this perspective “what a republic without the res publica promised was republican governance without civic ethos, and public institutions without public equality. The character, or moeurs, of citizens, based in broadly common religious beliefs rather than shaped by government, is as important as law in sustaining a free society. This kind of civic virtue is different from the heroic action of the past; it is less a matter of disinterested self-restraint than of rational, ‘enlightened self-interest’. … Yet equality tends also to encourage conformity to social opinion. If ostensibly sovereign citizens are more interested in prosperity than glory, lose their drive to participate, and converge towards a mediocre public opinion, they may be governed tyrannically, if benignly, by a bureaucracy.” Honohan, Civic Republicanism, 115-16.

Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 266.
life.”62 In the American system, “sacred texts” provided common cause for the polity—that is, founding documents such as the Constitution. As Murphy comments, “The American image of the republic was different from that of the classical humanist image of the republic. The difference lay in the urbanity of the humanist ideal.” In that ideal, citizenship was not premised on reading and disseminating a sacred text, but rather “on a love of the world and of public life.” In this classical humanism, the republic was a definite place, not a text, and “its ‘common’ was an architectonic public, not a religious culture.”63 The country as the signifying core of the American republic evolved, then, out of several conditions of its founding: as an outpost of empires; as a continental nation-state rather than a city-state; as a bastion of liberal individualism; as a federal, constitutional government bound by a “sacred text”; and as an expansive agrarian, rather than urban, territory. These conditions conspired to direct political thought away from cities and, even more, to see in cities social and political arrangements considered antithetical to individual liberty and democratic independence.

A crucial distinction that is typically ignored in debates about citizenship and the public realm is that despite the massive historiography concerned with the sources of early American political and social thought and its recent reorientation towards republican ideas, the classical and Renaissance sources on which Americans relied were all concerned with city-states, not territorial states like the American republic. As Murphy notes, “The character of the American states was defined by their territorial extent and land borders, whereas the character of the city was defined by its center—or in the case of the port city, by its littoral or riverine location (and its primary affiliation to liquid networks rather than to a territorial expanse).”64 As the foregoing discussion has suggested, the classical republican tradition was centered on reason, justice, and

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62 Murphy, *Civic Justice*, 282.
63 Ibid.
64 Murphy, *Civic Justice*, 260.
civic virtue focused on a city-state, whereas the modern republican-infused liberalism was concerned with passion, rights, and distribution of powers in a continental nation-state. The result was a formal institutional framework, the Constitution, “but no great architectonic places in which reason and justice (and meaning) might reside.”\textsuperscript{65} Even Jefferson’s tombstone at Monticello, Virginia, can be taken as evidence of this lack of architectonic signification. It commemorated what Jefferson considered his three greatest achievements: in the first two instances political and legal texts (the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom) and in the third an act but also a physical place, his founding (and building) of the University of Virginia (fig. 1.1). The university, of course, was a work of architecture and ensemble planning, but significantly it was not modeled as a \textit{polis} but as a retreat from the city, an “academical village,” and thus a manifestation of the civilized pastoral landscape.\textsuperscript{66} Jefferson chose not to mention his role in planning the national capital, Washington, D.C., arguably a more important signifying place in the American public realm than the university.

The Architectonic Public Realm in the Late Nineteenth Century

According to the revisionist study of Leslie Butler, who attempts to recover the reputations of mid-nineteenth-century and postbellum liberals such as E. L. Godkin, Charles Eliot Norton, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson from the charge of elitist gentility heaped upon them in the existing historiography, there was a strand of liberal reform that understood the limits

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 277.
of the liberal-constitutional model. Godkin, for example, favorably compared what Butler calls his advocacy for “print-based discursive politics”—an approach reflecting the idea of “educative citizenship” championed by John Stuart Mill—with the Greek *agora* and *polis*. In Greek antiquity, the *polis* provided for face-to-face exchange and public debate, but Godkin understood that in a continental republic without a polis-based social or political life this kind of political deliberation was impossible. Godkin, echoing Jefferson’s earlier concern for literacy and education for the practice of democratic citizenship, wrote in 1865 about the importance, therefore, of literacy for expanding the franchise:

> A people who cannot read in modern times becomes the blind tool of an educated few, as naturally as sheep become the prey of wolves. The ability to read is not only the best attainable indication of general intelligence, but the only proof, constituted as society now is, which a man can offer of his fitness to follow or take part in various political discussions of the day, and to possess himself of the facts and arguments necessary to the formation of anything worthy of the name of a judgment on any public measure or public man.  

This focus on literacy as a prerequisite to meaningful political participation was, in Butler’s contrarian view, not a “tool of disempowerment” but the indispensable path to an authentic democratic polity.  

James Russell Lowell eloquently remarked on how the emerging discursive print culture premised on expanding national literacy brought a “metropolitan air” to national politics:

> One man sitting at the keyboard of the telegraph in Washington sets the chords vibrating to the same tune from sea to sea, and this simultaneousness, this unanimity, deepens national consciousness and intensifies popular emotion. Every man feels himself a part, sensitive and sympathetic, of this vast organism, a partner in its life or death…. It is no trifling matter that thirty millions of men should be thinking the same thought and feeling the same pang at the same moment of time, and that these vast parallels of latitude should become a neighborhood more intimate than many a country village…. [The] newspaper and telegraph gather the whole nation into a vast town meeting, where every one hears the affairs of the country discussed, and where the better judgment is pretty sure

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to make itself valid at last…. It is this mental and moral stimulus which gives us the alertness and vivacity, the wide-awakeness of temperament, characteristic of dwellers in great cities …. 69

The “sensitive and sympathetic” feeling of being part of a larger “vast organism” is, as we will see, quite similar to the way in which architecture would later be characterized as a mode of bringing together the citizenry of the city into a single polity animated by civic spirit. This would be a turn, as well, from the virtual publicity of the public sphere of print to the physical public realm of city space.

Political thought after 1880 went “beyond the reification of constitutions and institutions,” according to Michael Frisch. 70 As the political theorist L. S. Rowe argued, “For every evil, not matter what its nature, we recur to the statute book. There is a widespread belief throughout the country that for every abuse there is a legislative remedy. This belief in the moralizing power of law is one of the most insidious as well as one of the most corrupting influences in our public life.” 71 Recognizing that the silence of the Constitution on issues of urban governance meant that cities were “by definition invisible in orthodox theory,” political commentators attempted to make visible the role and functions of urban government and the ways in which citizenship could be grounded in city life. The lack of attention to urbanism in political thought before the end of Reconstruction, however, had a parallel in architectural thought. Before about 1880, architectural writing, in terms of treatises and pattern books, was predominantly focused on one of two themes: domestic architecture and the suburban or rural

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69 Lowell, quoted in ibid., 126.
landscape. Public buildings and the urban landscape were virtually absent from the major publications of the antebellum and immediate postbellum periods.

Andrew Jackson Downing is perhaps the paradigmatic mid-century architectural figure in this regard. In his numerous publications of the 1840s and 1850s, Downing stressed the complementarity between virtuous country living and the development of the individualist democratic temperament (figs. 1.2-1.3). Not only should a dwelling in the country indicate the character of its inhabitants, but authentic architecture itself grew out of the landscape—not the urban landscape, but the country. Throughout his writings, the suggestion that urban architecture has little relation to democratic citizenship and is possibly immoral because of its detachment from the landscape is palpable. For Downing, houses in the country, and the landscape surrounding it, “ought to be significant of the whole private life of man—his intelligence, his feelings, and his enjoyments.” He began his best-known work, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850), by positing three “excellent reasons” why Americans needed good houses in the country. First, “a good house is a powerful means of civilization.” In an environmental-determinist fashion, he insisted that “when smiling lawns and tasteful cottages begin to embellish a country, we know that order and culture are established…. It must follow that the interest manifested in Rural Architecture of a country like this, has much to do with the progress of its civilization.” Second, the home was the measure and expression of the nation’s “purity” and its “intellectual powers.” For Downing, “the individual home has a great social value for a people. Whatever new systems may be needed for the regeneration of an old and enfeebled nation, we

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are persuaded that, in America, not only is the distinct family the best social form, but those elementary forces which give rise to the highest genius and the finest character may, for the most part, be traced back to the farm-house and the rural cottage.” These country dwellings establish character and mark the place “where individuality takes its most natural and strongest development.” Cities, by contrast, are associated with the “battle of life.” Third, Downing insists that “there is a moral influence in a country home—when, among an educated, truthful, and refined people, it is an echo of their character.”

Adna Weber argued in his 1899 study of nineteenth-century urban development that the low population density of the average American urban area was due to “the American penchant for dwelling in cottage homes instead of business blocks after the fashion of Europe.” The penchant for individual housing spread out over the land developed over the course of the nineteenth century, fueled, as Kenneth Jackson and others have documented, by a host of social and ideological factors, including the agrarian-nature ideal, the cult of domesticity, and recoil to the ill effects of urban industrialization. Thus, through the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the architectonic public realm was based on the individual home in the country or suburb as the “signifying core” of the polity. Cities were, at best, economic engines; at worst, “sores on the body politic” that threatened to undermine the full development of individual character and democratic temperament. The garden suburb, where “the bourgeois dwelling could

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76 Ibid., v-vi.
maximize the potential of the nineteenth-century individual for self-fulfillment.” was the alternative to a conception of cities as crucibles of the public realm.79

Cities and Citizenship around 1900

The new attention to the prospects of the urban citizenry and res publica mark the late nineteenth century as the period of intense civic consciousness and urbophilia. The intellectual construction of this urbophilia by social and political commentators and its concentrated intensity in New York is an overlooked but vital aspect of late nineteenth-century urbanism. In recent decades, a barrier to understanding the urbophilia of the late nineteenth century has been the conceptual apparatus that frames thinking about cities and urbanism. To a large extent, urban scholars have abandoned a place-centered approach to the study of cities. Despite the so-called “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences of the last few decades, much of the literature has in fact moved away from material conceptions of the city toward abstract conceptions of a “placeless urban realm.” In this view,

urbanity—the essence of urbanness—[is construed] not as buildings, not as land use patterns, not as large, dense, and heterogeneous population aggregations, but as a quality and as a diversity of life that is distinct from and in some measure independent of these other characteristics. Urbanity is more profitably conceived as a property of the amount and the variety of one’s participation in the cultural life of a world of creative specialists, of the amount and variety of the information received.80

While this view may be sociologically adjusted to the reality of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century society, it does not readily account for the distinctiveness of cities that is implied by

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79 Archer, Architecture and Suburbia, 203.
more traditional conceptions of urbanism. What was new in the late Gilded Age was the conceptual link between urban form and understandings of publicity.

Richard Hofstadter wrote in his influential *Age of Reform*, “The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city. From the beginning its political values and ideas were of necessity shaped by country life.” Political theorist Francis Rourke understood that the agrarian interest had “uncontested philosophical justification” by Jefferson and the entire early American tradition and that “no such fervent ideological support was to crown the power of either of the other major groups who were in time to lay claim to supremacy in American politics—the business elite which came into prominence in the period following the Civil War, or the popular coalition which has sustained the broad outlines of the welfare state since the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt,” both of which he saw as primarily urban constituencies. In this still dominant view, American cities are outsiders to the mainstream of the American political scene; they are grudgingly acknowledged but are not seen as vital centers of American citizenship. The changing thinking about the public realm and citizenship at the end of the nineteenth century suggests that this long-standing perspective captures only part of the picture. The late nineteenth century witnessed not just a material growth in cities and urban population but also a political rethinking of their significance and centrality to the republic.

Broadly speaking, in the Western political tradition until at least the seventeenth century, citizenship was associated very closely—at times exclusively—with membership in the city-state. The Greek *polis* and the Roman *civitas* were the two paradigmatic forms of the city-state’s political structure. Notwithstanding their differences, both political types were materially

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characterized by definite urban limits and objectively clear urban centers. Citizenship consisted in the active participation in the political life of the city-state, and there were no larger entities such as the nation-state to make claims on the citizen’s identity or attention. The autonomy of the city-state, as Richard Dagger writes, “meant that there was no superior authority to overshadow the city-state and render its politics trivial by comparison.”

In antiquity especially, this participation had an ethical component in that it was a sign of the rejection of the citizen’s status to withdraw from the community into privacy and to disassociate from active public participation. In contrast, within the dominant liberal framework, citizenship tends to be conceived in passive and legalistic ways. The citizen in the modern mold acts as a representative of personal or narrowly sectarian interests rather than in the name of the polity as a whole.

Dagger identifies three impediments to the modern understanding of urban citizenship: size, fragmentation, and mobility. These are three of the critical areas in which late nineteenth-century urban theorists sought remedies to the problems of modern democratic citizenship. As Dagger explains, as the size of a city grows, its residents come to feel more remote from political life, both “mathematically and psychologically.” Citizens in large centers feel that their participation is either unwanted or unimportant, and in a representative electoral system they understand that their single vote is unlikely to be decisive. Fragmentation, by which political authority is divided among numerous agencies and seemingly unaccountable bureaucratic procedures and functionaries, contributes to undermine a sense of political agency. When

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84 Dagger, Civic Virtues, 155.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 722.
citizens are also highly mobile, or a city is composed of a rapidly changing population, the sense of permanence and stability on the part of the polity contributes also to a loosing of the “ties that bind individuals into a community.”

In response to these challenges of modern urbanism to a robust conception of citizenship, Dagger offers three areas in which civic virtue can be fostered: education, participation, and city life. Together, these three factors help cultivate civic memory.⁸⁸ Randall Mason has recently argued for the significance of civic memory in the early preservation movement in New York City.⁹⁰ For Dagger, civic memory “helps to constitute the city—to give it shape and meaning in the minds of its residents.” This type of memory ensures that “the city will not be seen as a curious or an incomprehensible jumble, but as something with a story … [and as] something enduring and worthwhile.”⁹⁰ The concept of civic memory has been implicated in various ways in recent political and urban theory.⁹¹

More broadly than even civic memory, emphasis on the shared, communal, or public nature of city spaces has been a common theme in recent political theory and some urban history. Public space has been construed in two ways in this literature. First, it is seen as a metaphorical space in which “the public” deliberates and engages in common activities, or simply in the pursuit of individual interests but necessarily in cooperation with others. This is Habermas’ view of the public sphere, for instance. This metaphorical conception is also sometimes described as

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⁸⁸ Dagger, Civic Virtues, 6.
the “discursive model” of public space. Second, but less often, it is treated literally as the shared physical spaces of the city which either represent to the public the publicness of the city or embody its shared purposes. One useful conception along these lines states that “public space should … celebrate traces of cultural continuity. It should also involve the inhabitant’s participation in the site, gathering a potential recovery of communal purpose and human solidarity.” Similarly, for architectural historian Alberto Perez-Gomez, public space is a “poetic proposition disclosing collective order.” This involves considering the city as “articulations of ritual places [rather than] mere circulation,” which has been an increasingly dominant view of the city since the eighteenth century. In Perez-Gomez’s view, urban space can be likened to narrative as “a structure of human life, a poetic vision realized in space-time” where “individuals may exercise, with their freedom, a reciprocal responsibility to participate in the recreation of a communal project that is no longer dependent on a shared cosmic order.”

This last point is critical, since the modern liberal regime admits of no “shared cosmic order” as is presumed to be the case in pre-modern society. For theorists and architects in the late nineteenth century, urban space could be articulated in a narrative way by referring to the “natural and cultural horizons embodied in their sites.” It is a narrative in the sense of a “projection grounded on recollection” and supported by the fact that human beings “remain fundamentally embodied consciousness.” Thus, city spaces can be “where one can walk and experience reality synesthetically”—places that articulate civic-ritual purposes and the

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95 Pérez-Gómez, “Public Space,” 51.
conditions of urbanity which privilege public priorities and the sense of being at the center of something important.96

The role of urban space in articulating narratives of civic-ritual purposes is amplified by political theorist John Parkinson, who argues for the preeminence of public space in a literal sense rather than in a metaphorical one.97 Parkinson distinguishes three ways in which physical space can be thought of as “public”: spaces that are openly accessible, spaces of common concern which may or may not be openly accessible, and “space used for the performance of public roles.” This last point again implicates civic memory and representation, for this is the space “where the demos represents itself, anchoring identities and memories.”98 By the late nineteenth century, the buildings and spaces of the city would be seen as fulfilling these functions of publicity.

**Municipal Theory**

One of the intellectual transformations of the late nineteenth century in terms of political thought involved an understanding of the shortcomings of the legalistic, “sacred text” understanding of constitutional citizenship. Although theorists and commentators in the nineteenth century did not use the same terminology as Dagger, Parkinson, Beiner, or Arendt, their categories and themes are remarkably compatible. Michael Frisch schematically identifies two positions in the post-1880 municipal theory literature. The first was what he calls the “cultural-organicist” assumption

96 Ibid., 52, 49.
that cities constituted “a corporate organism” or a “cultural core of civic spirit.” This position was associated with a strong form of advocacy for autonomous local government, or “home rule” as the language of the time called it. For political commentators espousing this position, the city was “a free-standing political community, morally if not quite legally prior to the claims of the State.”

This was a romantic, even nostalgic position which sought to make cities compatible with early American agrarian republicanism and its emphasis on small local community as the focus of civic ties.

The second position Frisch calls “academic-realism.” In this perspective, cities are seen as agents of the state that lack authentic legal and political autonomy, which is reserved for the nation-state (and less so, the individual state governments) because of the centralized, or at least nationalized, conditions of the modern economy. However, political theorists in this camp understood that citizens’ loyalties could not be tied only to the abstract nation-state because that concept lacked a tangible focus; its abstraction was too far removed from everyday reality. The city, by contrast, provided a focus for citizens’ loyalties, and political theory sought to justify giving cities authority to direct their administrative affairs even while formal citizenship was vested in the individual states and the nation-state. This view aimed at a definition of the city as a “pluralistic polity, one that is effective in serving its own needs, but also, by virtue of integration in a larger political and administrative system, capable of providing a modern democratic example of wider applicability.”

Thus, one of the major factors that laid the groundwork in the late nineteenth century for an architectonic understanding of urban citizenship was that urban intellectuals became engaged

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100 Ibid., 312.
in specifically urban issues and saw cities in a new light.101 This understanding was developed particularly strongly in political science. Columbia University’s Frank Goodnow, for instance, was an influential theorist who brought the city to the forefront of academic political discourse. In his *City Government in the United States* (1904) he wrote, “The city must be studied not merely from the sociological point of view, but also from the political point of view: the city is not merely an urban community, a social fact; it is also a political organization, an organ of government.”102 For political theorist Delos F. Wilcox, ancient history validated the connection between politics and city and provided a model for modern America:

The unit of political science during the prime of ancient civilization was the city-state. The city with its outlying territory was the unit of commerce, of civilization, of war, and of law and political organization. Under Roman influence the political unit came to be the military empire dominated by the capital city at first and then by the imperial legions. Local institutions were neglected and Europe plunged into the Dark Ages. It was the development of new vigor in the political life of the localities that heralded the dawn of modern times.103

Even if, as Goodnow strenuously emphasized, “it is nevertheless impossible under modern conditions that city-states should exist,” political thought in New York was redirecting itself back to the city as the focus and origin of citizenship.104

Within a year of each other, two major books on the political theory and practice of municipal government appeared: *The American City: A Problem in Democracy*, published by Delos F. Wilcox in 1904; and *The City: The Hope of Democracy*, published by Frederic C. Howe in 1905. Both unabashedly proposed a close relationship between cities and democracy.

However, these books did not appear out of a void. For some time before their publication,

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104 Goodnow, *City Government*, 23.
political thought had turned to the problems of municipal or civic government and its relationship to the practices of democracy and citizenship. That both should pose their theme in a similar way attests not only to the pressing practical matters that were involved but also to the growing power of the conceptual understanding of the city’s relationship to democratic citizenship. It is worth noting, in this light, that both titles pose the city as a given and assume the legacy of placeless citizenship—Murphy’s empty res publica—in American democracy. These books proposed that the city is not a problem for democracy, but within it. Howe, not trained as a political scientist but actively engaged in municipal and social reform movements, had liberty to openly express unabashed optimism toward the role of the city in American political life.

Wilcox, being a leading figure in the new political science field in American academe, struck a more “scientific,” objective tone by posing the city as a problem within the field of democratic theory. Yet the objectives of both books were largely the same. In Wilcox’s terms, echoing the Greek ideal, “The man who is not also a citizen is an outcast. He has no heaven…. It is the sum of the shadows enveloping these men who are in no real sense citizens that makes the twilight in which the American city is now groping. What we must have at any cost is light, a civic conscience.”

Both books were efforts to bring this light to bear on questions of political practice and urban citizenship and to cultivate among the urban public a civic consciousness.

Speaking of the changed attitudes toward the city, Frank Goodnow commented that “we may congratulate ourselves, at this, the beginning of the twentieth century, that we have abandoned the hopeless resignation which was so marked one hundred years ago.” It is important to recognize that such works are not simply isolated expressions of a new sympathy for the city within academic political science and among the elite of Progressive reform but are

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106 Goodnow, City Government in the United States, 21.
indicative, rather, of a broader sentiment among political observers at the time. Sociologist Ira Howerth discovered in city life a vital new direction for sociology, writing, “Municipal sociology … projects from the best discoverable elements in municipal life a civic ideal which serves as a criterion and standard of judgment…. The civic problem … is the problem of general civic well-being; not a problem of wealth but of weal. It is the problem of utilizing all the powers of man and nature for the good of all the inhabitants of the city.”107 The urban public realm was embraced for its positive qualities and the ills of urban society were considered structural failures in two senses: first, in the design and execution of citizenship based on legalistic structures (the “sacred text” paradigm), and second, in the overweening reach of the private realm, a concern more typically identified with Progressivism. The problems of the cities were deemed to be the result of structural or institutional designs that denied full citizenship rights and experiences to urban residents and unjustly privileged private over civic or common goods.

Several themes emerge from the urban and political commentary of Wilcox, Goodnow, Howe, and the larger field of contemporary popular and academic studies of cities. First, these commentators were adamant that political virtues are rooted in the experience of place. Second, they believed that over the course of the nineteenth century, material progress had outstripped moral and ethical progress, but they were optimistic this trend could be reversed. Third, they held some variation of the belief in the power of “civic education” as one of the foundations of robust citizenship. Fourth, they used history to explain their concepts and in some part to justify their optimism toward urban life. Fifth, they all advocated stricter limits (of various kinds and to different extents) to the advance of private interests and privileges. In each of these areas, public goods and the priority of the urban public realm moved to the forefront of American political and

social thought to an unprecedented degree. This progressivism, anchored in the city, was liberal in its adherence to the efficacy of laws and institutions and republican in its concern for the quality of citizenship.

The importance of place, a naturally architectonic concern, was perhaps the least elaborated theme of the five, but it underpins all of the municipal theory of the 1890s and early 1900s. Wilcox was adamant about the importance of place to politics, writing in *The American City*, “It is of the nature of political government to be founded upon place, and man in local relations is most subject to political control…. Men must have a footing somewhere. They cannot get off the earth, and it is in this primitive relation to land and locality that citizenship largely consists.” Acknowledging that modern society had become characterized by “fluidity of movement,” Wilcox laments the rise of interests over place, asserting that “the principles of this reorganization run counter to political forms and habits.” There are, he insists, “many reasons to believe that our boasted independence of space will, in the long run, prove a costly luxury.”

Later in the book, under the heading of “civic cooperation,” Wilcox beats on the drum of place even harder, criticizing the basis of industrial society’s rootlessness. “For industrial society,” he wrote, “distance has been annihilated and space overcome. For political society, under civilization, place and territorial limits are fundamental.” This antagonism between industrial society’s victory over space and political society’s necessary rootedness to place has “resulted in conditions that make civic cooperation necessary.” In a characteristic passage, he makes his case for the greater need of civic cooperation under the conditions of industrial society:

The growth of a city creates new place interests and enlarges the functions of government. It is no longer possible for every man to chop his own road through

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109 Ibid., 200.
the wood, but all the citizens must combine not only to make streets, but to grade and pave them at great expense. The householder can no longer tap the earth in his front yard for a supply of drinking water, but must unite with the other householders to construct aqueducts and reservoirs and lay an elaborate system of pipes in order to bring water to his door. He can no longer raise and slaughter his own swine and chickens, or depend upon his neighbors to do it, but must unite with them to establish a market where all may buy their meat from strangers under guarantees of sanitary conditions. The city dweller can have no field, and perhaps no dooryard, in which his children may play, but must unite with his fellow-citizens to establish public parks and playgrounds for the use of all in common. Urban citizens may even be unable to get fresh clean air without putting their heads together to devise and enforce building regulations or to abate the smoke nuisance.  

His argument goes on to detail ways in which a municipal monopoly, which “requires for its very existence the use of permanent fixtures in the streets and alleys,” lends itself to democratic cooperation “and ultimate control by the whole of the people,” thus connecting the theme of place with the fifth theme of limits to private privileges.  

The importance of place to political theory is related to what Frederic Howe called America’s “childish confidence in paper forms.” Like Peter Murphy’s critique of the constitutional “sacred text” tradition, Howe emphasized place and the practical functions of a local government rooted to the needs of a population over the mania for charters and “paper systems as perfect in their adjustment as were the constitutions of the French revolutionists.” For Howe, democracy was to “become a substance rather than form,” a lived reality rather than a paper chimera. In Wilcox’s view, the substance of democracy was naturally suited to cities because of the city resident’s inherent interest in local affairs: “It is among working people and the poor that local interests retain their importance to the individual, and partly for this reason

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10 Ibid., 201-2.
11 Ibid., 202, 204.
12 Howe, The City, 177.
13 Ibid., 176.
democracy appeals most directly and most safely to the masses.”\textsuperscript{114} This conception, linking democratic politics and urban populations, marked a major shift in American democratic thinking.

While generally optimistic, Howe, Wilcox, and others shared the Mugwumps’ concern over moral and ethical decline.\textsuperscript{115} Unlike these political activists, however, the political theorists fervently hoped that the cooperative basis of urban life would lead over time to the decline of political corruption. More important for urbanism and architecture was the fact that they saw the rise of cities as indicating how moral progress might catch up to the material progress of the nineteenth century.

Frederic Howe was among the most insistent voices on this issue; the academic political theorists understandably used more sober language to express hope that moral progress would reach or surpass material progress in the American city. Howe opened his chapter on the “profit account” of the new urban society with a long meditation connecting material and “moral” progress:

The bouleversement of society, this change from the country to the city, from individualism to communalism, from the self-sufficient household to the self-sufficient city … has been accompanied by gains and losses to society. The city has woven our lives into the lives of others…. The texture of the fabric has been altered. It is now closely woven…..

Within the city the game of life is played, and there are many capital prizes. Here, opportunity and fortune are to be found. Here business centres. Here life is full and human. The farm offers none of these things. It is barren of great possibilities, barren, even, of a living, the farmer says. The city is El Dorado, the promised land which fires the imagination. Failure may come, it is true, there is the chance, and life, movement, and recreation even in failure. The saloon is something, while the streets, the parks, the theatre, the church, one’s fellows, all make up the canvas of life even to the poorest.

\textsuperscript{114} Wilcox, \textit{The American City}, 10.
Howe continues by emphasizing the advances in urban civilization that brought “enlightenment” to modern experience:

And the city has given the world culture, enlightenment, and education along with industry and commercial opportunity. The advance in recent years in this regard has been tremendous. Compare our London, Paris, Berlin, or New York with these cities fifty years ago. Then, life in any large sense was limited to a few. To-day, to an ever-increasing mass of the population, opportunities are crowding one upon another. Not only is education generously adapted to the needs of all, but night schools, art exhibitions, popular lectures and concerts, college settlements, the parks, playgrounds, a cheap press, labor organizations, the church, all these are bringing enlightenment at a pace never before dreamed of….

And he finally connects these urban advances with the prospects of the public realm in a democratic society in republican rhetoric of a deepening civic consciousness:

All this is enlarging life, modifying our civilization, deepening the significance of democracy. It is rendering possible a higher standard of living. A new conception of municipal purpose has come in. It is neither conscious nor defined as yet, but in the midst of the outward manifestations of municipal activity, an unrecognized broadening of the culture and life of the city is going on, of immense significance to the future….

The humanizing forces of to-day are almost all proceeding from the city. They are creating a new moral sense, a new conception of the obligations of political life, obligations which, in earlier conditions of society, did not and could not exist.116

Even in the architectural literature, the idea of the dawning self-consciousness of the urban public was evident. For instance, John De Witt Warner described civic centers as places “at which shall be centred the public life of the city of to-day.” And he insisted that “as one after another modern city becomes self-conscious, it tends toward that more perfect adjustment of its public functions and facilities that results in one or more civic centers.”117 As John Dewey later argued near the end of the period of optimism in the urban public realm, “The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.”118

This connection of city life to the democratic ethos was at the core of the progressive-republican understanding of the “self-consciousness” that required careful cultivation among the urban public.

Civic education was one of the most consistently important elements of progressive political thought and municipal theory. Building on earlier American thought, civic education was conceived as a necessary component of democratic citizenship.119 A failure of civic education would mean the failure of self-sustaining democracy in many writers’ views. Delos Wilcox echoed a typical view when he wrote, “It is the character of civic education that will determine in the long run whether or not democracy can succeed in cities.” For Wilcox, “the supreme issue before America to-day is the perfection of democracy.”120 This entailed “a wider social consciousness, a heartier spirit of cooperation, a more refined appreciation of the arts of life, a keener sense of responsibility to the future, and all those other characteristics of progress that are the hope of evolution and the justification of social effort.”121 Among Wilcox’s “principal factors” in civic education was one shared by almost all stripes of political thinkers: “The common heritage of civic conditions, civic habits, and civic ideals.”122 Civic conditions, habits, and ideals preoccupied these political thinkers to an extent not seen since the founding era; they were, for Wilcox and many others, “the bone and sinew of citizenship.”123

The “civic conditions” aspect of political thought, as we might call it in shorthand, was inextricable from the larger context of municipal reform that engaged these thinkers. The emphasis on civic conditions, on habits of city life and ideals of urbanity, seemed to these writers

120 Wilcox, *The American City*, 3-4.
121 Ibid., 91.
122 Ibid., 92.
123 Ibid., 109.
and reformers to be of a piece with municipal art or civic art among art critics, architects, and others. One of the key elements of the civic conditions perspective was the conviction that democratic citizenship could be fostered by the cultivation of citizens through experiential engagement with the city. Mary Parker Follett, for instance, insisted that good citizenship, or civic virtue, “is to be acquired only through those modes of living and acting which shall teach us how to grow the social consciousness.” The best opportunities for this were provided by cities.\textsuperscript{124} For Delos Wilcox, the emphasis was on the school as a site of civic cultivation,\textsuperscript{125} but others, especially Frederic Howe, turned directly to the physical shape of the city. For him, cultivation involved making the city into an intimately known and welcoming place. Cultivation developed a “sense of the city as a home, as a common authority, a thing to be loved and cared for.”\textsuperscript{126} Although nineteenth-century metaphors of the “city as home” tended to connote both a privatization of the city and a feminization of domestic space, Howe’s sense leads in the opposite direction: to a turning out toward the urban public realm as a place of common concern.\textsuperscript{127}

History was another significant component of political thought at the turn of the century; it was a natural accompaniment or outgrowth of nineteenth-century historicism.\textsuperscript{128} Writers often based their work on perceived historical trends, related their normative principles to examples from history, and constructed historical narratives within which or against which they posited their preferred urban and political reforms. Frank Goodnow based his entire program for municipal politics on the historically-informed conviction that Americans had “abandoned the

\textsuperscript{124} Mary Parker Follett, \textit{The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government} (New York: Longmans, Green, 1918), 363.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 105-20.
\textsuperscript{126} Howe, \textit{The City}, 282.
\textsuperscript{127} On nineteenth-century metaphors of domesticity, see Betsy Klimasmith, \textit{At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930} (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005).
hopeless resignation which was so marked one hundred years ago.” Goodnow was so convinced of the importance of studying urban history in particular that he devoted a long chapter in his otherwise prescriptive book, *City Government in the United States*, to the historical development of cities. He began with English cities of the eighteenth century, which he and others saw as the direct antecedent to the American city, “the model on which the American system was framed,” in his words.129 In *The Modern City*, Frederic Howe devoted three early chapters to the historical development of cities and city governments, taking an even longer view than Goodnow by reaching back to antiquity. There were many purposes for such historical recollection in these works of political theory, but among the most important were finding models for the present and understanding how the present was different from the past in order to better guide municipal policy-making. But these historical digressions within normative municipal theory also legitimized the reformers’ urban interests. Since much of the past seemed to center on political and social experiences within cities, the urban theorists found ample historical precedents for their city-focused theory. The historical record provided a datum against which to measure American civic life as well as a field of examples to survey for contemporary use.

In Howe’s historical account, the ancient city-state was “an entity in itself,” limited in population and geographic extent and owing “allegiance to no higher power.”130 Rome, as an imperial city, was the center of an extensive territory but it was never subordinate to outside rule, and the cities which came under its rule remained largely self-sufficient. Howe connected this political structure with the material form of the ancient city-state:

> The promotion of the beautiful was a common concern as was the protection of the common life from violence and injustice. It was not enough for a citizen to vote and pay his taxes. He must be personally active in every civic and military function…. He could not act by proxy in either capacity. For this reason,

129 Goodnow, *City Government*, 43.
130 Howe, *The Modern City and Its Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915), 23.
according to the ancients, the ideal city must be limited in population. The citizen, too, must be able to attend on the duties of government frequently, for which reason the city must be limited in area, while the citizen must be endowed with leisure.\textsuperscript{131}

For Howe, citizens of ancient cities “lived for life. The city was the citizen’s temple, the abode of his gods, the inspiration of his ambitions.” It was not, like the modern city, seen in purely instrumental terms or primarily as an economic engine.\textsuperscript{132}

Howe’s account of the medieval city, which covered the period from the fall of Rome to the eighteenth century, posited a transition to modernity. With elements of the classical city remaining, especially the limits on its territory, it nonetheless became organized, as the modern city is, by trade and commerce, “centres of a highly organized industrial life.” Even more, Howe asserted that “the movement for modern liberty began in the medieval town. The bonds of feudalism were broken by the wealth and power of the burghers, who resented the taxes and dues imposed upon them by the overlords…. Their rights were then inscribed in charters, which were the first guarantees of modern liberty.”\textsuperscript{133} Here Howe has traced the historical roots of the constitutional tradition but implicitly contrasted the medieval charter, with its basis in the city, with the national constitutions of the eighteenth century. In contrast to both the ancient and medieval cities, though, the modern city “is no longer sovereign…. It has become an integral part of the state.” And thinking specifically of New York as well as London and a few other very large cities, he wrote that the life of the modern city “is no longer local, it has become international.” The city is now “almost exclusively an industrial product. It is not united by

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 33.
religious or class ties. It is cosmopolitan in its population and, with certain limitations, is administered on a democratic basis,” which “presents new problems, new difficulties.”

The priority of the public realm, often discussed in terms of the public good or the commonweal, was a fifth theme in the political literature of the time that bears on the discussion of urban citizenship and architecture. This was the most far-reaching theme. Much of the argument in the books discussed here centered on the idea of limits to private enterprise and the reach of “interests,” the latter being close to our concept of “special interests.” As Howe wrote, “many things are possible through public management that cannot be achieved through private control.” Public control of municipal services and public involvement in municipal matters was, as Howe acknowledged, “in a sense, socialistic.” But this municipal socialism aimed at the protection of the whole of the people and the safeguarding of the public realm. Public control and citizen involvement, “the care and the protection of the people,” he insisted, would “inspire love and affection for the city.” In this sense, the limits to private enterprise envisioned by many reformers and theorists were part of the “civic conditions” paradigm. Howe was probably the most adamant about the extent of corruption by interests, but also the most sanguine about the possibilities of reform. Though he declared at the start of The City that “as a matter of fact we nowhere have a democratic government,” that instead Americans had government “by special privileges and big business men,” he could still go on to assure his reader optimistically that “the city is the hope of the future. Here life is full and eager… In the city, democracy is organizing. It is becoming conscious of its powers.”

Delos Wilcox recognized the deleterious effects of “the accumulation of enormous wealth in the hands of one man without a corresponding responsibility for its use with reference

134 Ibid., 48-49.
135 Howe, The City, 291.
136 Ibid., 2, 7.
to social welfare” as constituting “a positive menace to the general well-being” and “dangerous to the public weal.”137 Near the end of The American City he invoked the metaphor of the light of the public realm and called for an increase in public consciousness to balance the private interests. He declared that public welfare depended

on the maintenance of a perpetual equilibrium between public and private interests. At the present time, we, in America, by common consent, are sick unto death with the money mania. Public spirit, civic conscience, are lamentably deficient…. Civic cooperation, founded as it is on the local sense … is the program that promises relief from the gross injustices of a one-sided civilization. The man who is not also a citizen is an outcast. He has no heaven. He is already in outer darkness. It is the sum of the shadows enveloping these men who are in no real sense citizens that makes the twilight in which the American city is now groping. What we must have at any cost is light, a civic conscience.138

This brief survey of political thought at the turn of the century indicates schematically the depth of commitment to city life, citizen cultivation, and municipal reform. “Civic conditions” occupied a central place in this strand of political thinking just as the architecture of the city achieved a new prominence in architectural thought and practice. Yet as late as 1888, when the full impact of urbanization was widely acknowledged and academic study of its effects was in full swing, the federal government warned of the dangers of cities. A report from the Interstate Commerce Commission, contrary to the arguments of the municipal theorists and reformers, stated,

Population under the influence of modern civilization tends to rapid aggregation in cities. This tendency is particularly noticeable in new countries….  

137 Wilcox, The American City, 21. Wilcox, like Howe, championed municipal ownership of city services, stating that “the development of modern conveniences tends to increase the advantages of the business and professional classes of the community. It is important, therefore, from the standpoint of democracy that the modern means of communication should be accessible to as large a number of citizens as possible,” and that the “paramount interest of the city in the right development of the ordinary so-called municipal utilities” necessitated municipal control (49). “The streets of a city,” he wrote, “are such an essential asset of its free citizens that it is questionable whether a municipal corporation should ever grant the right to any private parties to place fixtures in the highways. At least, any such rights, if granted, should be strictly limited in their term and the manner of their exercise, and should be revocable whenever the public interest demands” (50-51). For a broader treatment, see Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 340-52.

138 Wilcox, The American City, 228.
It will probably not be claimed by any one that it is desirable to give by law or through the use of public conveniences an artificial stimulus to the building up of cities at the expense of the country. In great cities great social and political evils always concentrate, grow and strengthen, and the larger the cities are the more difficult it is to bring these evils under legal or moral restraints. This fact is so generally recognized that the feeling may be said to be practically universal that the interest of any country is best consulted when public measures and the employment of public conveniences favor the diffusion of population and the profitable employment of industrial energy everywhere, rather than the concentration of population in few localities.\(^{139}\)

The myopic neo-Jeffersonian language of the report may have been antiquated already in 1888, but the sentiment conveys clearly how the nation-state, represented by an organ of the federal government, was invested ideologically in the expansiveness of territory rather than the centralization of the cities.\(^{140}\) This is part of the reason why reformers such as Wilcox, Howe, and, as we will see, Herbert Croly, put their arguments in such urgent terms. They realized that the longer such sentiments remained in wide circulation, the city’s potential would go unheeded, to the great detriment of the whole nation.

For Frederic Howe, “the advance of society” would “come about through the city. For here life is more active, while the government is close to the people. It is already manifest on every hand. Through the divorce of the city from state control this progress will be stimulated. The city will become a centre of pride and patriotism. Here art and culture will flourish. The citizen will be attached to his community just as were the burghers of the medieval towns.”\(^{141}\) The great optimism about the city’s prospects extended to the nation’s cultural development. And no writer engaged these concerns dual concerns more consistently than Herbert Croly.


\(^{140}\) For extensive discussion of how the federal government adapted to the expansive geographical situation of the nation, see Matthew G. Hannah, Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

\(^{141}\) Howe, The City, 292.
Chapter Two

Herbert Croly: “A Vigorous and Conscious Assertion of the Public”

Chapter one emphasized progressive reformers’ attention to municipal theory, but late nineteenth-century political thought struck a delicate balance between local and national understandings of citizenship. As much as Frank Goodnow, Delos Wilcox, Mary Parker Follett, or Frederic Howe stressed active citizenship by the urban public, they were mindful of the demands of national citizenship.1 Another political theorist articulated a vision of the national scope of modern citizenship with the metropolis as its cultural core: Herbert Croly (1869-1930). Croly was co-founder of the Progressive journal The New Republic and a political theorist of major significance based on the impact of his book, The Promise of American Life (1909; hereafter, The Promise).2 Croly was also an important architectural critic.3 Compared to the polemics of the best known architectural writing of the time—Louis Sullivan’s and Frank Lloyd Wright’s—Croly’s criticism can seem overly guarded and tentative.4 Among both political and architectural historians, the connections between Croly’s political theory and architectural

4 His biographer asserts that Croly’s published works of architectural criticism “were, at bottom, subjective and even whimsical.” Levy, Herbert Croly, 86. On the architectural polemics, see David S. Andrew, Louis Sullivan and the Polemics of Modern Architecture (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
criticism have been mostly ignored. But attempting to bring the two aspects of his writing closer together can illuminate the intellectual climate of the time as well as provide a context for understanding the architecture about which he frequently wrote—that is, New York’s civic classicism. Croly’s concern for the architectonic public realm comes through in many of his critical pieces. And, seen in the light of his political theory of a new “national promise” in American life, it reveals the importance accorded to metropolitan architecture. Croly’s architectural criticism presented a pragmatic defense of civic classicism as a sensible way for architects in the metropolis to address the new scale of the city and the new demands of the civic consciousness and urban public. Rather than expressing an exuberant but naive individualism that he found understandable only in the context of eighteenth-century agrarianism, Croly saw the civic classicists’ insistence on the relevance of European historical models as an efficacious way to reconcile architectural practice, which was to rest on high standards of professionalism, to the new demands of national citizenship stemming from modern urban conditions.

Architectural historians have tended to be much too credulous toward certain strands of the historical literature on the late Gilded Age and Progressive Era that validate their preexisting judgments about Beaux-Arts architecture. Rather than looking directly and critically at the sources, including major statements such as Croly’s *Promise*, they have usually echoed a limited number of secondary works, including those by Alan Trachtenberg and Richard Hofstadter, which have taken a distinctly pessimistic view of the aims and achievements of progressive liberalism. This inattention to the primary sources is coupled with an indifference toward secondary works that challenge the older narrative of the period as one characterized by social

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control and conservative reform attitudes. By engaging more recent historical literature on the period that takes a different view of its political thought and achievements, we can more fruitfully reexamine its architecture in a new context. The result is a view of civic classicism as a critical component of the urban public realm and a better understanding of the complex relations between architecture and politics in Croly’s writing.

Croly’s “Blank Years”

Herbert David Croly was born on January 23, 1869, in New York City, to David Goodman Croly (1829-1889) and Jane Cunningham Croly (1829-1901), and died May 17, 1930. Herbert’s parents were prominent journalists and devotees of French philosopher Auguste Comte, best known for his ideas of scientific progress known as Positivism. David was a prolific journalist, editor, and author of books on politics and social morality. He was editor of The New York World from 1863 to 1873, founded The Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide (hereafter, The Real Estate Record) in 1868, and published two issues of a radical journal, The Modern Thinker, in 1871 and 1873. He also published several books expounding his Positivist views on issues of racial segregation and Abolitionism, sexuality and marriage, and other topics,

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7 He died in Santa Barbara, California, having moved there in November 1929 in an effort to aid his recovery from a stroke he had suffered in late 1928. He was buried in Cornish, New Hampshire. For biographical details, I follow Levy, Herbert Croly, 3-95.
all, as he wrote, in “service of Humanity—human betterment—the lessening of human misery—
the betterment of the race, and the improvement of its environment.”

Herbert Croly’s mother, Jane Cunningham, was a leading female voice in late nineteenth-
century journalism. Writing under the pseudonym Jennie June, she was an early advocate of
women’s professional activities, and she organized the first Woman’s Congress in 1856. During
her long career she held many positions that allowed her writing to reach a wide audience,
including her long-time editorship of Demorest’s Illustrated Monthly from 1860 to 1887. She
founded the women’s club journal Cycle; contributed to The Home-Maker; Graham’s Magazine;
Leslie’s Weekly and Monthly; The New York World, Times, and Daily Graphic; and published an
exhaustive history of the women’s club Movement. Describing her as “simply a woman caught
in a trap,” Croly’s biographer David Levy argues that “the secret of Jennie June’s immense
popularity was the very inconsistency of her views. By arguing both sides of the fundamental
questions of the day,” she was able to capture a large audience of women. Whatever the merits,
successes, or failures of her attempt to reconcile mid-nineteenth-century genteel moralism with
an emerging feminism, Jane Croly’s prolific writing on wide-ranging subjects was surely a major
influence on Herbert—certainly as much as David’s narrower focus on bringing Positivism to
bear on contemporary American social issues.

Croly’s interest in writing was nurtured amidst this intellectual and professional climate
at the Croly home at 119 Bank Street in Greenwich Village. Most important for Herbert Croly’s

Meier, 1980), 15-44; and Elizabeth Schlesinger, “The Nineteenth Century Woman’s Dilemma and Jennie June,”
12 Levy, Herbert Croly, 10. Levy argues that Jane’s prolific writing and frequent professional engagements were “an
attempt to flee from her marriage,” 19. See also Haryot Holt Day, “Jennie June Croly, the Mother of Clubs,” New
York Post, 10 May 1916.
13 Levy emphasizes Positivism in Croly’s thought while Stettner interprets Croly in the mainstream of American
liberalism.
later career were the involvement of his parents in the emerging public sphere of the post-bellum era and their interest in applying philosophical insights to the pressing issues of the day. Both of these aspects of Croly’s parents’ experience played an important role in his own career beginning in the 1890s. He worked in the newly competitive world of professional architectural publishing and saw his critical task as one of rethinking contemporary conditions of the modern public.

Croly’s academic pursuits were fitful and unfocused, but the range of his academic studies gives evidence of his broad interests in cultural and political affairs. He studied at Harvard University from 1886 to 1888, during the fall term of 1892, and intermittently from 1895 to 1899, but never completed an undergraduate degree. During his irregular tenure at Harvard, Croly sat in several courses that would have had a direct impact on his architectural and political thinking: these included George Santayana’s course on aesthetics, Charles Eliot Norton’s course on art history and theory, William James’ course on psychology, and two of Josiah Royce’s courses on evolutionary theory and natural science. Santayana’s course on the philosophy of aesthetics (which formed the basis of his 1896 book, *The Sense of Beauty*) would have offered a direct rebuttal to the moralistic Ruskinian teachings in Norton’s courses. In a sense, Santayana’s and Norton’s differing perspectives on art could have provided an early model for the distinctions Croly would make in *The Promise* between earlier nineteenth-century moralism as part of a naïve American creed and the modern, progressive ethos he advocated as critical to his formative project of expanding the democratic ideal.

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Croly’s First Encounters with Architecture

In 1868, David Croly founded *The Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide*. From 1888, Herbert was a frequent contributor and, after David Croly’s death in 1889, an editor until 1891. He contributed weekly editorials on a variety of current issues, only some of which were related to real estate and construction matters. Croly’s regular forum in *The Real Estate Record* was the first chance he had to publicly hone his skills of critical social and political analysis. Reflecting the growing professionalization of architecture and its new relationship to the public, *Architectural Record* began publication in the summer of 1891 by the F. W. Dodge Corporation, which had been publishing David Croly’s *Real Estate Record* for many years. The new journal was intended to address a wide audience primarily of professionals but also of interested laymen in a sophisticated but accessible mode, contributing to the expansion and vitality of the public sphere on matters of high cultural importance. As editor Harry W. Desmond wrote in the first issue, *Architectural Record* would be

> a publication with somewhat of a purpose over and above a purely commercial one…. The field [of architectural writing] is one which must be entered with serious purpose or not at all. To amuse the public with Architecture, obviously is out of the question [sic]…. As to merely recording … contemporary work popularly classed as architecture, that task already is even too abundantly performed by numerous weekly publications. Only the higher field is unoccupied; but in this country, perhaps more than in any other, entrance into this higher field imposes serious responsibilities; for therein one is brought face to face with the gravest and least assuring facts of our national life.

Desmond connected the city to the higher cultural expressions of civilization in a way familiar from the political literature of the time:

> The city … has been the favorable environment of Art…. It has a vital position, though a degraded one, in the lives of our people. What has to be done is to give it

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its proper position, to reveal its divinity, to make people feel that Art is not merely decoration … but is the light breaking in upon us from the perfect world beyond our day’s circumference ….

Art has only one revelation, but many forms…. They make alike a similar demand upon us for truth, integrity of purpose, seriousness, nobility. They are eminently aristocratic … but in the loftiness of the higher nobility whose allegiance is given to Truth.  

Pretentious and mystical language aside, Desmond’s point was an important one. He called for a public understanding of art’s “revelation” and specifically argued that architecture could have a prominent place in cultural discourse in the United States. Other arts may be “more intimate and enticing,” but it is only architecture, he says, that “appeals to the public in a manner so much more frequent, conspicuous and insistent than either [painting or music] that, if it be not, it might easily become the more readily understood.” The daily press, according to Desmond, gives instruction in the other arts that is “to some extent educative” for the public. But with architecture no such effort existed. Architectural Record had come into existence, then, to provide a consistent attempt “to build up ‘a pile of better thoughts’ sufficient to be fruitful in great effects …. The road in part has to be discovered, and in the search, which is to be progressive, our readers are asked to accompany us.”

Desmond thus imagined the publication as both educative and exploratory. A new public for architecture would be cultivated, one that had not previously existed in the country on a large, national scale. He outlined a role for the publication that would help to crystallize and articulate a new ethos for American architecture (and the larger cultural sphere more generally).

Desmond and Croly were of a similar mind on this aim, judging by Croly’s own article also from the first issue. Exploring the “relationship of art and life,” Croly adopted a similarly pretentious language in his article, addressing the reader as “friend Smith” and declaring that art

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19 Ibid., 5.
20 Ibid., 6.
“can lead our soul through the labyrinth of life as in a vision.”21 But he showed concern for the same important points about the public’s relation to architecture. According to Croly, the purpose of informed architectural criticism would be to bring a kind of “schooling and knowledge to bear in estimating the worth of current art products—wherein consists their peculiar flavor, and what elements of permanence and transience they contain.” Above all, the critic should provide for the public a model of the “justice of sense.”22

Croly transferred from The Real Estate Record to Architectural Record for its first issue and eventually joined Desmond as co-editor, each signing their early editorials as “Primus” (Desmond) or “Secondus” (Croly). Croly stayed at the publication until the beginning of the fall academic term in 1892, when he returned to Harvard. In January 1893, he suffered a nervous breakdown, which precipitated a several-year hiatus from Harvard during which he established himself in Cornish, New Hampshire, and took his first trips to Europe. Returning to Harvard in 1895, he directed his studies toward philosophy but dropped out of the school in 1899, travelling first to Paris and then around the U.S. and finally settling in New York in 1900. There he resumed his post as co-editor of Architectural Record until 1906, and remained as an associate editor until 1913.23

Croly’s knowledge of professional and practical aspects of art and architecture were furthered by his associations with the circle of Augustus Saint-Gaudens in New York City and especially Cornish, New Hampshire. At Cornish, Saint-Gaudens’ estate had become an artists’ colony for other New York and Northeast artists and architects, including the painter and

22 Ibid., 226. See also Croly, “American Artists and Their Public,” Architectural Record, Jan. 1901, 256-62.
23 Levy, Herbert Croly, 80-94.
architect Charles Platt.\textsuperscript{24} Croly spent his first summer in Cornish in 1893 and continued to spend summers and to make other trips there until 1929. Although there is scant documentation of Croly’s relationships with the artists at Cornish, he undoubtedly was privy to many conversations about contemporary practice and art criticism. This is confirmed by Platt, who published an appreciation at Croly’s death in both \textit{The New Republic} and \textit{Architectural Record}. Platt wrote fondly of his memories of Croly, emphasizing especially their frequent conversations in which professional ideas, if I may so describe them, were lost in the extraordinarily wide vision of the man…. But from these very conversations … there comes back to me one vivid memory which helps me, as an architect, to pay tribute to his name. It is of his remarkable solidarity with the art we so often discussed, the insight, so unusual in the layman, to look at architecture from the architect’s point of view.\textsuperscript{25}

Other tributes in the special section of the July 16, 1930, issue of \textit{The New Republic} dedicated to Croly also recognized his interest in diverse topics beyond political affairs.

Croly’s adoption of the “architect’s point of view” was likely cemented by his relationship with the Cornish circle and the fact that he had hired Platt to design his house there in 1897. Although by this time Croly had been publishing on architectural topics for nine years, the experience of commissioning and overseeing the design of a house would have given Croly a new understanding not only of architectural design by working first-hand with a leading architect, but also of the interaction of a patron’s demands with the professional expectations of a well-trained architect.


Despite this immersion in and creative engagement with architectural culture, Croly’s political theory has long eclipsed interest in his architectural criticism. Architectural historians, of course, have had occasion to quote his criticism, which appeared mostly though not exclusively in *Architectural Record* beginning at its founding in 1891. This interest has not, however, resulted in a comprehensive or unified view of his architectural thought. Architectural historians have tended to ignore his political theory while recognizing his important position in that field. Political commentators, by contrast, have paid much attention to his two books, *The Promise* and *Progressive Democracy* (1914), which have been seen consistently since publication as leading statements of the Progressive movement. Unsurprisingly, these scholars have paid almost no attention to his architectural writing. Within the historiography on Croly, then, a gap between his architectural and political interests is evident, as if the man could not have reconciled these disparate interests. Thus, his life is sharply divided between a youthful aestheticism and dilettantism, which received its outlet in his architectural writing, and a mature sobriety and gravity, which was expressed not only in his political theory but also in his editorship of *The New Republic* and in his intellectual relationships with politicians, including Theodore Roosevelt. In Walter Lippmann’s opinion, Croly “was the first important political philosopher who appeared in America in the twentieth century,” and *The Promise* was a “political classic which announced the end of the Age of Innocence with its romantic faith in American destiny and inaugurated the process of self-examination.” Lippmann, in an essay in which he aimed to “set down a few notes which may give his biographer the clue to significant

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26 He continued to publish architectural pieces in *Architectural Record* through the 1920s, though less frequently. He also published occasional pieces in *Architectural Review* and several non-specialist publications.

27 Levy contends that “anyone who wants to understand the assumptions that have grounded our [modern American] politics … must give respectful attention to Herbert Croly’s work.” Levy, Herbert Croly, xii, 94. Likewise, Stettner argues that “Croly is rightly accorded a place in the front rank among the major writers who were influential in changing liberal theory” in the early twentieth century. Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism*, 4.
events at certain important junctures of his life,” said nothing about Croly’s significant body of architectural writing.  

It has generally been assumed that there was little connection in Croly’s thoughts on architecture and politics. Suzanne Stephens, who has briefly discussed Croly’s architectural criticism as a whole body of work, articulates the standard view. Reviewing the special tribute section published in The New Republic after his death in 1930, Stephens notes that none of the contributors except Charles Platt made an attempt to reconcile Croly’s politics with his architectural writing. She argues that the contributors, all of whom knew Croly personally, seemed to have found “Croly the political and social commentator more interesting than Croly the architecture critic.” Nonetheless, Stephens does point out perceptively that Croly brought a distinctive “sociological and psychological component” to his architectural criticism, a point of view different from the typical architectural writing of his time. This is related to the emerging interest in social experience in relation to the complexity of modern urban space evident among other influential writers of the time, especially William James and John Dewey. Croly, an avid reader of political philosophy and evidently knowledgeable about the latest views in sociological and psychological thought, was undoubtedly familiar with their widely discussed writings.

29 An early and influential expression of this view is Charles Forcey, Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippmann and the Progressive Era, 1900-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961. Suzanne Stephens attempts to bring the two aspects of Croly’s writing into dialogue, but the direction of the analysis ultimately perpetuates the dichotomy of Croly’s political and architectural writings. Stephens is content only to link Croly’s relatively minor interest in the “expert citizen” in political and social affairs—“the role of a creative individual in guiding a democracy”—to his understanding of the professional and social role of the architect (especially modeled, she believes, on Croly’s friend, Charles Platt). However, this link is only briefly sketched and Stephens does not address the complexity of Croly’s political thought except for passing reference to his “new nationalism.” Stephens, “Architecture Criticism in a Historical Context.” This catchphrase “new nationalism” has often been used to summarize Croly’s position, but as Kevin C. O’Leary argues, it undermines the fuller meaning of Croly’s “demanding understanding of republican democracy.” O’Leary, “Herbert Croly and Progressive Democracy,” Polity 26, no. 4 (Summer 1994): 535.
31 Ibid., 276.
(Croly, we remember, took a course with James at Harvard), especially their important ideas about social experience, even if he does not cite them in his criticism.\textsuperscript{33}

Both of Croly’s biographers agree that his architectural criticism was a discontinuous prelude to his political writing. And they agree with Christopher Lasch, who earlier argued that until publication of \textit{The Promise}—that is, the period encompassing some of his most important architectural writing—Croly’s life was “largely a blank.”\textsuperscript{34} Although the surviving evidence prevents a full reconstruction of Croly’s early life, Lasch, Levy, and Stettner have been puzzled by the fact that before 1909 there seemed little overt indication of a clear political direction in his thinking, let alone as forcefully and fully worked out as that presented in \textit{The Promise}. The established view is that once Croly’s political interests appeared they pushed aside his architectural interests. His architectural writing, in turn, has been interpreted as naive and amateurish compared to his serious and weighty \textit{Promise} and \textit{Progressive Democracy} and the editorial work and writing he did at \textit{The New Republic}. The implicit argument is that since Croly lacked direct professional or academic knowledge of architectural culture and practice (notwithstanding his close relationship with Charles Platt), his criticism must have been superficial.

If Croly’s architectural observations were not as bold as, for instance, Montgomery Schuyler’s, he did still develop a generally coherent and broad appreciation for the urban, social, and political contexts of architecture.\textsuperscript{35} This architectural understanding subsequently inflected his political writing. Although these interests were not expressed in tandem or with the same

\textsuperscript{33} This is not surprising, since Croly rarely cited other authors in his architectural writing, and only sporadically mentions other authors by name in \textit{The Promise} and \textit{Progressive Democracy}.

\textsuperscript{34} Christopher Lasch, “Herbert Croly’s America,” \textit{New York Review of Books}, 1 July 1965, 18.

\textsuperscript{35} As Stephens argues, his criticism “showed an interest in the building as the user or observer experienced it, particularly with regard to its intended function…. [He] attempted to place the works in an intellectual framework rather than simply present a series of personal impressions” as we would expect of an untutored critic. Stephens, “Architecture Criticism in a Historical Context,” 276.
measure of intensity throughout his life, Croly’s writings as a whole do suggest an abiding interest in the relations between cultural forms of expression such as architecture and contemporary social and political questions. After Croly’s death in 1930, a frequent English contributor to The New Republic, N. H. Brailsford, wrote to Croly’s widow Louise that “the journal as he [Croly] shaped, and led it, must have become a great builder of character, an intellectual architect, for many thousands of its readers.” Stettner comments that Croly, “the lifelong student of both politics and architecture, would have appreciated this deserved praise.” Indeed, Brailsford manages in this short passage to connect Croly’s impact on the public sphere with his contributions to political theory and an allusion to his architectural interests in a way that has eluded most other commentators on Croly’s life and thought. The idea of the “intellectual architect” as a “builder of character” for the modern city is a suggestive way of characterizing Croly’s concerns as architecture critic.

**Croly’s Promise and Republican Progressivism**

According to David Levy, Croly worked consistently on The Promise over a period of at least five years. The time spent on the book coincides, then, with a period of regular contributions to Architectural Record. This fact alone calls into question the assumption that Croly abandoned architectural interests in favor of politics. He gave up his editorship in 1906 simply to devote more time to the dense, demanding book; he did not, though, abandon his architectural interests. As evinced by several passages in The Promise, even within his political

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37 Stettner, ibid.
38 Levy, Herbert Croly, 94.
opus he found room to bring architecture into dialogue with broader social and political concerns.

Croly’s aim in *The Promise* was to articulate a program for political theory that we can call “civic nationalism.” As Cushing Strout argues, Croly’s civic nationalism was idealistic because it was based on “a ‘formative idea’ seeking better articulation.”  

Croly did not entertain the fiction of a neutral state as in *laissez-faire* liberalism. In Croly’s view, the demands of both democracy and economic justice required the federal government to forgo its *laissez-faire* tradition and to take an active stand on the side of the common welfare. A future of “national possibilities” is what binds Americans to the idea of the nation, which “from the beginning … has been informed by an idea” of a more perfect democratic experience. This, in short, was the central point of *The Promise*. As Croly wrote later in *Progressive Democracy*,

The idea of individual justice is being supplemented by the ideal of social justice.… Now the tendency is to conceive the social welfare, not as an end which can be left to the happy harmonizing of individual interests, but as an end which must be consciously willed by society and efficiently realized. Society, that is, has become a moral ideal, not independent of the individual but supplementary to him, an ideal which must be pursued less by regulating individual excesses than by the active conscious encouragement of socializing tendencies and purposes.

In Croly’s vision, the American national identity is based on ideas; the democratic purpose as the “formative project” he proposes is centered on a conscious sense of fraternity that is willed by effort rather than naturally received from a long tradition. The promise, the expectation of future fulfillment of this formative project, relies on a sense of shared significance in national life, the idea that genuine democratic experience is not individualistic and automatic,

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43 O’Leary, “Herbert Croly,” 541.
but based on self-conscious citizens sharing a common civic space and working in concert with a collective purpose. No longer could Americans be united under the *laissez-faire* attitude of “ambitious individualism and a passive government.” Instead, for Croly, the necessary change from a sense of destiny to a sense of national purpose is crucial, resulting in a changing conception of the public as actively engaged citizens working toward the fulfillment of the national purpose. What he aimed at above all else was to awaken reformers and all citizens to the realization “that there must be a vigorous and conscious assertion of the public as opposed to private and special interests, and that the American people must to a greater extent than they have in the past subordinate the latter to the former.” The “vigorous and conscious assertion of the public” that Croly insisted upon was a defining feature of republican-inflected liberalism in the later nineteenth century. Croly’s particular way of giving priority to the public realm was to argue that “the house of American democracy demands thoroughgoing reconstruction.”

In *The Promise*, Croly is intensely critical of the way in which the American promise had been constructed up to his time as a destiny rather than a purpose. Describing the traditional outlook as a “mixture of optimism, fatalism and conservatism,” this conception of an automatic drive toward a better future is, he believes, no longer tenable under the conditions of urban, industrial society. The traditional outlook had been optimistic in that Americans cheerily projected an expectation of improvement, that “the future will have something better in store for them individually and collectively” even without effort. It had been fatalistic in that the future was seen as “a consummation which will take care of itself,—as the necessary result of our customary conditions, institutions, and ideas.” And it had been conservative insofar as it was

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thought that “our national responsibility consists fundamentally in remaining true to traditional ways of behavior, standards, and ideals.” This trinity of contemptible ideas was to Croly “admirably designed to deprive American life of any promise at all.” It was devoid of work, hard thinking, and the renegotiation and rebuilding of ideas, institutions, and conditions to strive constantly toward an ideal. For Croly, attainment of an ideal like the national promise could not be approached “by sanguine anticipations, not by a conservative imitation of past achievements, but by laborious, single-minded, clear-sighted, and fearless work.” The American promise is, in his view, a commitment “to the realization of the democratic ideal,” and the approach to that ideal could no longer depend on innocent faith in progress but required a determined program to maximize democratic potential.47 This determination was closely related to the educative civic mission that other Progressives had articulated in their municipal theory.

Croly’s telos involved a change from a sense of national destiny to one of national purpose; it was a rejection of Manifest Destiny.48 This sense of national purpose was closely connected to a new understanding of the public as educated, activated, and engaged:

As long as Americans believed they were able to fulfill a noble national Promise merely by virtue of maintaining intact a set of political institutions and by the vigorous individual pursuit of private ends, their allegiance to their national fulfillment remained more a matter of words than of deeds; but now that they are being aroused from their patriotic slumber, the effect is inevitably to disentangle the national idea and to give it more dignity.49 (emphasis added)

The emphasis on words over deeds in the traditional version of the promise is connected to what of Charles Merriam understood as Progressivism’s demotion of the “monarchy of the Word.”50 This was the “sacred text” paradigm identified in the last chapter.

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47 Ibid., 5-6.
48 Stettner, Shaping Modern Liberalism, 34.
49 Croly, The Promise, 21.
The “formative idea” of expanding democratic practice to include a national scope was also described as a “new nationalism” in Croly’s own short-hand phrase. This was neither a xenophobic expression of American exceptionalism, nor was it nationalism of the usual type. And Croly’s “new nationalism” was only partly about a “national community” in the sense in which Benedict Anderson has influentially defined it. More importantly, Croly’s nationalism was about the scope and effectiveness of the federal government as well as the public’s broadened sense not only of the government’s duties and responsibilities but of its own consciousness as a polity. Like Howe, Goodnow, and others, Croly was concerned with civic consciousness and the cultivation of civic virtue as critical to the promise. “The social problem,” Croly wrote, “demands the substitution of a conscious social ideal for the earlier instinctive homogeneity of the American nation. That homogeneity has disappeared never to return…. But a democracy cannot dispense with the solidarity which it imparted to American life, and in one way or another such solidarity must be restored.” This was not to be restored through a revanchist cultural program but through cultivation of a conscious new ideal, the “formative idea.” For Croly, this cultivation was an ongoing process, a work in progress, and he believed each generation would have to renew and adapt the ideal to its own circumstances. There is no

52 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006). One element that Croly’s understanding of nationalism has in common with Anderson’s is the idea of the nation as conceived always “as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” Ibid., 7. Croly’s contribution was to articulate how this comradeship had historically evolved in the United States and how it had to change to accommodate the radically different circumstances of the industrial-urban age.
53 Croly, *The Promise*, 139. In fact, Croly criticizes many Progressive reformers for supporting in essence a revanchist program of moral and social norms: “Their common conception of reform as fundamentally a moral awakening” is a “species of higher conservatism…. The prevailing preconception of the reformers, that the existing evils and abuses have been due chiefly to the energy and lack of scruple with which business men and politicians have taken advantage of the good but easy-going American, and that a general increase of moral energy, assisted by some minor legal changes, will restore the balance—such a conception … is much less than half true…. How utterly confusing it is, consequently, to consider reform as equivalent merely to the restoration of the American democracy to a former condition of purity and excellence! Our earlier political and economic condition was not at its best a fit subject for an great amount of complacency. It cannot be restored, even if we would; and the public interest has nothing to gain by its restoration.” Ibid., 147-49.
suggestion of a homogenous or “organic” sense of national community in the promise as Croly imagined it.

In the latter part of the book, Croly begins to adopt architectural metaphors and to make references to architecture and architects in several instances. The last chapter of The Promise is particularly important for the relation of architecture and Croly’s conception of the formative project. Here he invokes the architect as an exemplar of the new professional and relates the architect’s experience to the broader social conditions he has analyzed. This engagement with architecture comes in the context of his disquisition on individualism in relation to the national purpose. Individuality properly conceived is not, he claims, an expression of uniqueness or singularity; not, that is, the atomized individualism of laissez-faire liberalism. Such hyper-individualism “derives from the early nineteenth century principles of an essential opposition between the state and the individual; and it is a deduction from the common conception of democracy as nothing but a finished political organization in which the popular will prevails.” Croly rejects this static liberal vision and adopts a republican vision. His idea was that democratic practice was dynamic and ongoing; it had a purpose rather than a “finished” state of being. Individualism properly understood “depends upon the actual excellence of the [individual’s] work in every respect—an excellence which can best be achieved by the absorbing and exclusive pursuit of that alone.” Here Croly is very close to articulating an Aristotelian idea of virtuous performance. Croly’s insistence on a “socialized individuality” that could better cope with the conditions of modern life was cast as a true or authentic individuality in contrast to

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54 Levy writes that this final chapter “was to be the source of countless misunderstandings and distortions” that have imparted “to the book as a whole a mysticism, an elitism, and a general tone that . . . is not nearly so important as some have maintained.” Levy does not cite the interpreters who have maintained this view, and the major literature cited here does not seem to confirm this characterization as particularly widespread. He is likely referring to secondary literature—now eclipsed by Levy’s own book and other works already cited—published between Croly’s death in 1930 and the 1970s. Levy, Herbert Croly, 115.

55 Croly, The Promise, 414.

56 Ibid., 411-12.
the inauthentic “economic individualism of our existing national system.” In Croly’s view, there was nothing particularly individualistic about the selfish and corrupting pursuit of money.

True individuality saw personal aims for accomplishment and reward as contributing to the greater good. In this way, Croly introduces the contemporary architect—or, at least his ideal version of one—as a model for the professions in general. Architects in his time, he claims, have “tacitly abandoned the Newer-Worldiness of their predecessors and began unconsciously but intelligently to seek the attainment of some excellence in the performance of their special work.” Unlike more strident critics who attached great importance to a unique Americanism in art, Croly was delighted to note that architects had begun training abroad systematically as “the first step in the acquisition of better standards of achievement.” Paris, “as the best available source of technical instruction in the arts,” proved critical to the improving standards of the artistic professions in the United States. With Parisian training, architects of the late nineteenth century showed “a steady and considerable improvement in the standard of special work…. In this way there was domesticated a necessary condition and vehicle of the liberation and assertion of American individuality.”

In Croly’s reading of the traditional American creed, the political concept of freedom was spatialized. Freedom had been connected to open space, to formlessness or the lack of boundaries and spatial distinctions. As he wrote in the context of describing the American “geographical Protestantism”—the idea that the seeming boundlessness of the New World had released Americans from “the bonds in which less fortunate Europeans were entangled”—nineteenth-century Americans too easily mixed “faith and irresponsibility” in relation to their

57 Ibid., 409.
59 Croly, The Promise, 429.
60 Ibid.
continental expanse. “Freedom and formlessness” characterized the “pioneer illusion,” which naively believed that the conditions that made westward expansion possible and desirable would continue indefinitely. Although he does not state it explicitly, Croly is articulating a critique of the nineteenth-century disregard of urbanism as inconsequential to the American res publica—Peter Murphy’s idea of the placeless public realm. If territorial expansion was part of American destiny in the traditional view, the density and boundedness of cities were beyond or outside the promise. Croly reverses this view and provides a vision in which urban life is central to the progressive promise as he articulates it. Well-articulated spaces in the city, as opposed to the boundlessness and formlessness of the nineteenth-century liberal-individualist ethos, are central to his architectural criticism. Croly consistently praises the well-formed, well-articulated spaces and passages of the buildings he assesses, referring to “the traditional sense of form whereby that sense and grasp of life can be made articulate and edifying.”

Although he does not state it, the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, with which he was surely familiar, is palpable in his criticism of the “geographical Protestantism.” Turner first presented his frontier thesis at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, and published it for wider dissemination in 1894. He memorably wrote,

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.

Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing

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61 Ibid., 424-25.
conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.65

While Turner seemed to celebrate this frontier ethos, Croly disparaged it unceasingly. Granting that it may have had utility during the nation’s pre-industrial development, Croly believed this “geographical Protestantism,” the rejection of urban tradition that saw the city as the “signifying core” of the polity, was ill-suited to the nation’s modern economic and political conditions and to its increasingly urbanized future.

As Thomas Bender writes, “the role of a metropolis in giving force to ideas and ideals” was critical to Croly’s articulation of the national promise, the formative project of a more perfect democratic experience as a national ideal.66 Although The Promise spent much time engaged with his national formative project, Croly in other places attended to the role of the metropolis in national culture and the architectonic public realm. For Croly, the metropolis of America could only be New York. As he famously insisted in an essay in Architectural Record, New York was the only American city capable of playing the roles of cultural capital and signifying center of the American nation.67 Croly’s understanding of New York as metropolis was the hinge connecting his vision of the national promise with its practical coming-into-being through the urban public realm.68 He recognized that a “certain largeness and even definiteness of spirit” was discernible in city residents toward the problems of the urban environment. The city’s new scale and visibility had awakened its citizens to “municipal vanity,” in an echo of Frederic Howe and Charles Mulford Robinson. New York as the American metropolis had a

66 Bender, New York Intellect, 223.
duty to “do something to anticipate, to clarify and to realize the best national ideals in politics, society, literature and art.” Further, because “modern art must of its nature be national in spirit,” New York was the one city capable of giving it full expression.

When it came to architecture specifically, Croly had a generous attitude to formal eclecticism and was concerned with the excellence of conception and execution rather than stylistic matters per se. As David Levy points out, Croly’s reading of Robert Grant’s novel, *Unleavened Bread* (1900) confirmed Croly’s idealism and his emphasis on the excellence of the executed work. His views of Grant’s novel are particularly illuminating for connecting his political theory and architectural criticism. In fact, Croly specifically mentions the novel as having inspired “the idea which lies at the basis of ‘The Promise of American Life.’”

Croly’s review can be interpreted as a first (and very short) draft for those portions of the last chapter of *The Promise* that deal with the architect’s role in society. Although Levy singled out Grant’s *Unleavened Bread* as an influence on Croly’s thought, the review is concerned almost equally with two other novels: Edith Wharton’s *Sanctuary* (1903) and Robert Herrick’s *The Common Lot* (1904). Croly begins by noting the American architect’s rising social status, writing that “he has become a social fact, not quite as conspicuous as the sky-scrapers he sometimes rears, but of such prominence and interest to demand an accounting on the part of our social auditors.” The accounting provided by the three novelists under review takes urbanism as a basis for incorporating the architect into the stories: “They are all of them seriously interested in modern American city life.” Croly’s opinions on *The Common Lot* and *Unleavened Bread* are

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especially noteworthy; Wharton’s novel, by contrast to Grant’s, is considered “psychological rather than social” and the architect appears in it less as a conspicuous social fact than as “a matter of mechanical convenience.”73

Croly undoubtedly knew of Wharton’s intense interest in architecture and had probably read or at least would have been aware of her 1897 book, co-authored with Ogden Codman, The Decoration of Houses.74 One of the distinctive things about Wharton and Codman’s book was its spirited defense of European standards for domestic architecture and interior decoration, a position that would have resonated with Croly’s interest in the excellence of cultural work as determined by European, especially French, standards. As Wharton and Codman wrote in their opening historical chapter, recent American architecture “bears witness” to a “steady advance in taste and knowledge.” In their view, American architects and decorators had recently become cognizant of two things that the French “have never quite lost sight of”:

First that architecture and decoration, having wandered since 1800 in a labyrinth of dubious eclecticism, can be set right only by a close study of the best models; and secondly that, given the requirements of modern life, these models are chiefly to be found in buildings erected in Italy after the beginning of the sixteenth century, and in other European countries after the full assimilation of the Italian influence.75

Croly’s lack of interest in Sanctuary’s architect stemmed not from Wharton’s faulty understanding or ignorance of architectural issues. In addition to The Decoration of Houses, Wharton had shown her discerning interest in the built environment with Italian Villas and Their Gardens (1904). Later in 1905, the same year as Croly’s review of Sanctuary, Wharton published The House of Mirth, in which the architectural settings are important elements in the

73 Croly, “The Architect in Recent Fiction,” 137.
75 Wharton and Codman, The Decoration of Houses, 4.
story’s psychological drama. In *Sanctuary*, though, Wharton simply had not used the architect’s character to make the kinds of points about intellectual and cultural life that interested Croly.

By contrast to Wharton’s fictional architect, Croly saw Robert Herrick’s architect in *The Common Lot* as integral to the story. Croly recommends Herrick’s book not on account of its literary merit, which he sees as lacking, but because architects “who feel that the world is too much with them … will find in it an awful example of the demoralizing effect upon a western architect of worldly ambition.” Herrick’s architect cravenly desires to climb the social ladder to achieve recognition, “and in order to get it, designs anything which will sell.” At its climax, the architect’s faulty designs for a hotel, built by an unscrupulous contractor, are revealed when it burns down. The point that Croly takes from the tale is about the relationship of success and integrity:

A popular architect is doubtless obliged to make a good many compromises with the world; but a high standard of technical integrity has not proved to be incompatible with success in American architecture. The American architect has a right to his place in the world of American life, and will lose much more than he gains by remaining content with the common lot of obscurity.

The larger point is that architects are now in a position to demand the best training possible, and the public to demand the best buildings possible from the architects. A disregard for the best models—as found in Paris, in particular—would neither advance the architectural profession nor the public good in terms of architects’ contributions to the American landscape. A retreat inward in search of an elusive “American style” would be a disastrous course of events for American architects. To Croly, the architect’s position was analogous to the country’s as a whole. That is,

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76 Wharton’s 1917 novel, *Summer*, features an architect as one of the protagonists, and her 1929 novel, *Hudson River Bracketed*, employs architecture in similar ways to *The House of Mirth*.  
78 Ibid.
the architect had to clearly confront contemporary conditions, applying the right lessons of the past even if they came from the “old world,” not letting a naive faith in American ingenuity impede real progress. Then, a slow coming-into-being of the conditions of a truly national architecture commensurate with the national promise would be possible. In both fields, architecture and politics, the integrity of the public realm was the primary consideration.

Of the three novels, Robert Grant’s had the most to say to Croly about the architect’s relation to society. The two main characters take different positions on the question of the American national purpose as Croly defined it in *The Promise*. Selma, the architects’ wife, “believes with all her insistent soul” in “untutored enthusiasm” as the guiding force for a specialist living in a democratic state; she is an exponent of “the obvious, the practical, the regular and the remunerative thing.” These are damning words from Croly, for Selma stands for the old naive Americanism that he excoriates at length in *The Promise*: “The old mid-century American point of view of immediate practical achievement at any cost reappearing at a time, when the conditions which gave it vitality and propriety no longer exist.”79 Selma, in Croly’s view, is an anachronism, and a particularly lamentable one given the influence she wields over her architect-husband.

Because of the persistence of this outmoded point of view, the American architect, represented by Wilbur, is seen too often “as merely an agent whose business it is to carry out their [clients’] ignorant ideas.” This view sees the architect—especially the architect trained abroad, one thus equipped with unique and valuable skills that set him off from others—not as a creative individual who could form a public following through his abilities, but as a threat to traditional order. The essential point about *Unleavened Bread* for Croly, and the one that presumably allowed him to see past the novel’s insipid writing, is that it “ingeniously wrought

79 Ibid., 139.
out the contradictions subsisting between certain aspects of the American democratic tradition and the methods and aspirations which dominate contemporary American intellectual work.”

He saw the book as addressing the problem of building a public for excellent work. In the midst of an article on “democracy and fine art,” Croly made the point of Grant’s novel more explicitly: “At the present time an artist is practically forced to make a choice of whether he will conform to the false popular emotional tastes, or whether he will sacrifice some measure of popularity to the intellectual and technical integrity of his work; and there can be no doubt which alternative he should accept.” Because American architects have begun to accept the second alternative, it has “attained its present very considerable success.” Although it may be true, as Levy argues, that a lesson Croly took from Grant’s novel concerned the “specialness” of the expert as “a threat to the democratic homogeneity of the community,” it was also about how excellence is reconciled with the democratic public. Grant’s novel does not answer the question, but Croly seemed to appreciate the attention it received in the story as well as the fact that the experience of an architect committed to doing good work was the context within which the writer broached the issues of publicity and excellence. In Thomas Bender’s words, Croly’s interest in Grant’s architect allowed him to explore “the public significance of distinctive special achievement.”

The fact that the architect also turns up at a crucial moment in his political writing—the final chapter of The Promise—must be considered more than convenient in the light of his interests. Croly’s view of the American architect’s cultural standing is crucial to his political aims because the architect’s experience revealed something essential about modern American life. Because of their visibility in the public sphere thanks to proliferating outlets for architectural

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81 Herbert Croly, “Current Comment,” 230.
82 Levy, Herbert Croly, 92.
83 Bender, New York Intellect, 227.
commentary (such as Architectural Record), architects could no longer rely on an enthusiastic but untutored individualism. Their work had to be submitted to the larger national purpose if it was to be enduring and meaningful for the public. The architect was to “give form to the ‘authoritative and edifying’ national ideal.”

How this could be applied to real architecture comes out in Croly’s criticism, in which his approach to design was principled pragmatism. Style was not the central concern but rather architecture’s more elusive contribution to the American national purpose that he articulated most fully in The Promise. Charles Platt’s words upon Croly’s death in 1930 evoke the pragmatism of Croly’s architectural perspective. According to Platt, Croly

wrote generously, and understandingly, and with a clear recognition of historic standards. In the domain of sociology he was a progressive, as we all know. He followed the same principle in his attitude toward art, but he was also a reasoned traditionalist, persuaded both by instinct and by study that our evolution needs to be steadied by careful consideration of precedent. When he philosophized the architectural development of his time—and he was always philosophical, he never forgot the lesson of the past—all this made him a sound educational influence…. Writing in a period in which American architecture was being transformed, he held fast to tried principles and urged discrimination. I have to think of my old friend as having made a most valuable contribution to the highest ideals of architecture.

A brief look at three pieces of criticism from the time before, during, and after Croly published The Promise shows these consistent concerns. Three ideas connect his political and architectural interests: the articulation of the public realm, the national scale at which New York was understood to operate, and the “process of discipline and rectification” using approved and authoritative models from Europe that would rein in the excesses of the exuberant individualism of earlier generations.

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84 Ibid.
85 Platt, “Herbert Croly and Architecture,” 257. Strangely, the sentence in the second paragraph beginning “He followed the same principle” was excised from the otherwise exact reprint of this tribute published in Architectural Record, Aug. 1930, 138.
86 Croly, “Current Comment,” 231.
In a 1902 article ostensibly about Art Nouveau, Croly turns halfway through to the American architectural scene by observing that European Art Nouveau artists insisted that “the proper home of the ‘New Art’ is the new world.” Croly is skeptical of the facile connection of newness and the social and political conditions of the “old” and “new” worlds. He writes, “The old world may or may not need a new art, which violently breaks away from established forms, but the new world certainly needs in the beginning an old art, in which those forms are not only preserved, but cherished.” The reason is Croly’s insistence on the authoritative models for American professionals as part of the national formative project. The American architects and artists “are taking the only sensible and practical way finally to reach America in aesthetic independence. There could be no better indication of helpless intellectual servility and aesthetic incompetence on the part of American artists, than the attempt to borrow, not traditional forms which can in time be naturalized, but intellectual needs and standards which at any particular time must be in large measure the product of local conditions.”87 This was the way “a creditable artistic tradition can be established.”88 Croly goes on to justify the formal program of civic classicism. He insists that “an art that begins by copying may end by being vigorously independent” and that “the difference between imitation and originality does not run at all as deep as was once supposed; and the more we know of the history of civilization, the more it is realized how profoundly important a part has been played in it by imitation.” For Croly, this method would add to the nationalization of the American intellectual and cultural life “comparable to the nationalizing, now under way, of their industry and politics.” In his scheme, the art follows the politics, and the example of historical artistic tradition could justify civic classicism’s formal agenda.

In a review of two suburban houses by John Russell Pope, Croly’s critical language reveals how the architects’ authoritative European training had served his expressive needs well (figs. 2.1-2.2). With “a sense of form and a set of principles,” Pope had consistently succeeded in providing “that special rendering, which the conditions of a particular design demand.” But Pope’s “rigorous schooling has not diminished his personal flexibility and initiative.” In Croly’s estimation, Pope had found “individual expression in the right sort of way.” He avoided the worst of the wrong ways: “the attempt to secure originality by conscious effort.”

The review makes liberal use of some of Croly’s key critical terms for evaluating design. He describes the houses’ “fundamental propriety,” their “proper disposition,” “dignity of effect,” and “solid dignified appearance.” Pope’s work, Croly reiterates, achieves “architectural dignity and propriety.” Everywhere, the hallmark of a good design is propriety. According to Croly, Pope “not only knows what he wants, but he knows very well how to get it; and it is this combination which gives his work a thorough consistency. By consistency I do not mean, of course, purity of style. I mean that quality in his work which enables him to introduce a telling unity of effect into the miscellaneous forms he uses.” He has achieved by means of judicious adaptations of historical sources and of the plans and their expression to their sites an “individual stamp … not in any arbitrary way, but by the candid and thorough treatment of two special problems of design.”

Croly’s impressionistic type of criticism, so different from Montgomery Schuyler’s (which we will encounter in subsequent chapters), does not simply rely on a subjective assessment of beauty or originality. Croly takes pains to explain just how the architect has manipulated his forms to the conditions of the site to obtain the “proper adjustment.”

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90 Ibid., 289, 293.
alternates between the broad brush of generalities (“propriety,” “dignity”) and specific explanations of the architect’s design tactics:

In the cases of these two houses the characters of the two locations were fundamentally different. The Stow dwelling is situated on the crest of a high hill overlooking a considerable stretch of country. On the other hand the site of Dr. Jacob’s house in Newport is a comparatively small plot, located in semi-urban surroundings. Consequently in the former case the problem was to design a house and its approaches which would cap the hill and command the view, while in the latter case the object of the lay-out was to shut out the surroundings, and to make the enclosed grounds, which amounted only to three and two-thirds acres, look complete within these narrow limits and so far as possible spacious.91

Croly wrote often about New York’s architecture. As the American metropolis, the city’s architectural developments had consequences for the whole nation. He reviewed a broad range of the city’s buildings—clubhouses, commercial blocks, residences, and libraries, among others—but always linked the building to its urban context and the larger significance of the architects’ contributions to the public realm. In an article on new commercial buildings along Fourth Avenue, he developed his pragmatic approach to architectural evaluation further. These “thoroughly contemporary” buildings were built by owners uninterested in “effects.” But the architects, in Croly’s view, managed to make something out them besides the “vulgarly commercial”92 (figs. 2.3-2.5).

After briefly recounting the economic factors related to the tall building, as well as the fact that most American cities had not imposed height limits, Croly observes that the tall building “renders meaningless all the architectural values upon which the traditional European street architecture has been based.” Instead, the American commercial building has been shaped by “novel formative and essentially real, practical requirements.”93 These buildings, in their internal

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91 Ibid., 281.
93 Ibid., 392-93.
arrangements and massing, are fit to their commercial purposes. But “while they have been built to pay,” at the same time they “have by the use (for the most part) of entirely appropriate means been made measurably attractive.”94 He goes on to detail some of the specific characteristics of the buildings:

The exterior consists of a frame work, usually about sixteen stories high of piers and floors, the lines of both of which are separated by fixed distances, and both of which cannot be disguised by much ornamentation. The use of large detail is forbidden both by the expanse and by the knowledge that no detail can be scaled large enough to count effectively at such a great height from the street.…

In the effort to render a sixteen-story building attractive at a minimum of expense, the architect has to depend upon a few simple and obvious devices. He can in the first place group his window openings to some slight extent and by these means he can emphasize the corners of the building and give them a certain solidity. In many cases this device has not been used, but in those buildings, such, for instance, as the Braender Building on the southeast corner of 24th St., whose architects have used it, the effect is excellent. In no other way can a structure of this kind be made to look like a tower rather than a cage, and the cost of the arrangement is practically negligible. It gives the building a salient line and direction, from which it can derive some propriety and dignity of appearance.95

The significance of these buildings for Croly was their indication that a new direction, one neither radical nor conservative, was underway in commercial architecture. He noted that “in almost all other departments of American architectural design the process of improvement has depended on the somewhat forcible imposition on the American public of European technical standards and traditional forms. But in respect to these commercial buildings this usual source of architectural amelioration has availed nothing.” The progress, he says, “has come about by way of a candid and unpretentious attempt to design buildings, which satisfied every real practical need at the lowest possible cost.” But these buildings did this “without any subservience to tradition or any revolutionary departure from it.”96 In other words, they expressed neither “false

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94 Ibid., 394.
95 Ibid., 400, 402.
96 Ibid., 403.
conditions” for which the European models would not suffice, nor did they partake of the exuberant individualism that Croly elsewhere excoriated as the mark of the old American creed.

Croly’s architectural criticism always had a connection to larger urban and national concerns, whether they related to the standards of the architectural profession as a model for the nation or the ways in which traditional types could be modified, or new ones created, from the “formative conditions,” as he called them, of their contexts. His writing overall connected the various scales of the architectonic public realm from the metropolis to the nation, concerned in the first place with articulating how public things—whether political actions or buildings—contributed to or discouraged the national formative project that he called “the promise of American life.” In his pragmatic architectural criticism, he provided a model for evaluating the contributions of the civic classicists—taking their adherence to European traditions as a potentially fruitful example of professional competence and the building up of a national standard appropriate to the civic spaces of the metropolis.
Chapter Three

A “Noble Line of Civic Buildings”: The Richmond Borough Civic Center

In the years leading up to and following Greater New York’s consolidation in 1898, a number of important architectural projects reshaped the city in significant ways, leading many commentators to describe a “New New York” coming into being. If political theorists such as Frederick Howe and Herbert Croly provided the ideas by which to rethink the city and its relation to democratic citizenship, architects such as Carrère & Hastings provided the physical settings through which the abstract political ideas were made tangible. The intellectual context provided by the political theorists gives us a new lens through which to examine New York’s built environment at the turn of the twentieth century, revealing how buildings and urban spaces could make visible the newly perceived urban public. New York, as the “American metropolis” of Croly’s vision, was the city most conducive to the new publicity. This chapter and the following two turn to new architectural projects of the early twentieth century to trace some of the concrete consequences of the new direction in American urban history.

The architectural expression of municipal buildings is evidence of a city’s corporate identity and self-image; it projects a visible index of its civic aspirations. Municipal buildings such as city halls or New York City’s borough halls embody this corporate identity as well as focus the public’s attention in terms of local politics.1 These buildings can also set the standard

or become models for other types of civic buildings. The City Hall designed by Joseph Francois Mangin and John McComb (1802-1812) became the much-admired model in New York.²

This chapter examines the role of Borough Hall and several of its neighbors in the vision of a civic center built in the St. George district of Richmond Borough, Staten Island, in the early twentieth century.³ These buildings, along with the New York Public Library’s Central Building studied in chapter five, were major projects by Carrère & Hastings, although the Richmond Civic Center has received only passing attention.⁴ The civic center and library projects both involved more than a solitary building and both significantly transformed the urban landscape of New York in the early twentieth century. The distinction of the Richmond civic center lies in the ways its buildings and spaces confront its site and topography, and in the fact that it is among the most important architectural responses to the 1898 municipal consolidation of Greater New York. The similarities in the Richmond civic center and the Public Library stem partly from the fact that both were under development in the Carrère & Hastings office at roughly the same time, but also

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³ Nomenclature for the borough and the island requires clarification as it has changed over time. Today the borough, as an administrative division within New York City, is referred to properly as Staten Island—its original name qua island—while Richmond is the proper county designation. The name of Richmond, first as a county of New York State and then as a borough within Greater New York after consolidation in 1898, continued to be used to designate the borough’s name until 1975 (see http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html). The borough’s name change coincided with a period of rapid development on the island, fueled in part by the opening in 1964 of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, which fundamentally changed the island’s predominantly semi-rural character. Thus, contemporary sources for the civic center under discussion in this chapter referred always to Richmond when it was understood as an independent political entity or, after 1898, as a unit of the municipal government. The sources used Staten Island to designate its physical location and its identity as a geographical unit of the city. I maintain this older political-geographic distinction of names throughout this chapter.
from a wider contemporary understanding of what civic space in New York City should be. This chapter and the next two examine the new types of civic space that emerged in New York after 1898 and the contributions of architecture to the contemporary redefinition of urban citizenship described in chapters one and two.

**Greater New York**

The municipal consolidation of Greater New York, given consent by voters in 1897 and officially enacted on January 1, 1898, provides the context for understanding the genesis and architectural expression of two of the newly united city’s largest civic projects in the early 1900s: Richmond Borough’s civic center and the construction of a central library for the recently-created New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. In fact, this context formed the critical background to all the civic projects of roughly the same time, including the building of Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal and their related infrastructure; the construction of new bridges and bridge approaches, including Carrère & Hastings’ Manhattan Bridge approaches; the erection of the Municipal Building on Center Street; the reimagining of New York’s urbanism in various urban planning projects, including the failed 1907 City Beautiful plan; Manhattan’s various City Hall Park and civic center projects; and the construction of Brooklyn’s municipal building. This list encompasses only the most prominent projects of the time, all of which were conceived and discussed in reference to Greater New York’s new scale and geographical extent, prestige, political standing, and urban public realm.
The formation of Greater New York through the municipal consolidation of neighboring political units around New York (Manhattan) has been well studied. Here I focus on the articulation of the civic aspirations underlying it and on the visual, spatial, and material adjuncts to those aspirations. Involved in the debate were not only politicians and political commentators, but also a wide variety of professionals, institutions, civic groups, and individuals. While it is beyond the scope of study to delve into the claims of the various constituencies and interest groups, consolidation was one of the longest lasting and most pressing issues in New York post-bellum history. It animated and focused public discourse and set the stage for many years of lively debate at the intersection of urban planning and municipal policy. The debate may not have represented the interests of all citizens—especially immigrants and those at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, who were spoken for by middle and upper-middle class professionals—but it was relatively broad-based and indicative of the new concern for the urban public realm.

Much of the discussion of Greater New York focused on three concerns that were often woven together in the published opinions and commentary: effective municipal governance—its structure, scope, and aims; the political, economic, and cultural position of New York City relative to other metropolises; and the visual, spatial, and architectural arguments for and effects of consolidation. While Andrew Haswell Green took the early lead in advocating consolidation, many other voices joined his advocacy in the 1890s. Uniting the advocates was their sense that consolidation was critical to the orderly expansion of the city. The debate thus crystallized the

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melding of political, urban planning, and architectural concerns about New York that had been developing since the end of the 1870s depression.⁶

In 1887, the New York Chamber of Commerce petitioned Mayor Abram Hewitt to consider the political union of the city with Brooklyn. Only in 1890 did a larger consolidation of the metropolitan area become widely debated thanks to the state legislature’s bill authorizing the Consolidation Commission under Andrew Haswell Green. This action, as the editors of Century put it, “commanded the attention of the press, with the result of arousing more public interest in the subject than had previously been felt. The passage of the bill … added to this interest perceptibly, so that it could for the first time since the discussion began [in 1868] be said that the matter had really become a public question.”⁷ Emerson Palmer, writing in The North American Review, predicted that “the agitation is likely to be kept up until something like an authoritative decision of the question is arrived at.”⁸ The 1898 Charter has been described as a document that began life as a vision of comprehensive planning but ultimately devolved into one concerned mostly with “satisfying the conflicting demands of all the different political clubhouses.”⁹ But what is of more interest here is the Charter’s testimony to the significance of municipal theory in politics, as we saw in chapter one, as well as consolidation’s role as a catalyst in public debate over the city’s future development and, concomitantly, its vision of civic life as embodied in the spaces and buildings of the city itself. It catalyzed the Municipal Art Society, for instance, to reformulate its purpose as one not only of aesthetic interests but also one in which “municipal

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⁹ Gilmartin, Shaping the City, 33.
embellishment” meant “the establishment of a comprehensive structural plan for the entire city.”

Calvin Tomkins set out the organization’s purpose as the following:

The object of the Society is to promote in every practical way the development of the City of New York along the lines of embellishment and greater benefit to its citizens. To aid in planning and beautifying its streets, its parks and public spaces, its public buildings and other structures…. To collaborate with other bodies aiming to secure similar results. To aid by exhibitions the presentation of all such work to the citizens of New York and to assist in every possible way the Municipal and State authorities, the Art Commission of the City and the heads of the Municipal Departments in securing such embellishments and benefits.”

Andrew Haswell Green was the first and most vociferous proponent of consolidation. He was described by his biographer, John Foord, as a man whose “influence did more than any other single thing to lift the conduct of public business in New York to a higher plane.” His entire career was dedicated, Foord wrote, to “high ideals of municipal pride.” According to David Hammack, Green’s private and public careers were nearly indistinguishable; as a real estate lawyer, comptroller, park commissioner, and in other capacities he pursued planning and policy decisions based on the idea that only comprehensive, large-scale urban planning could reconcile the various private and public interests of a metropolis. In order to secure the consent of wealthy private interests, he emphasized long-term economic benefits of comprehensive planning; in order to gain favor with the wider public he emphasized the shared goods—including infrastructure improvements, utilities management, improved street plans, aesthetic improvements, and many other quality-of-life concerns—that would result from systematic

10 Quoted in ibid., 30-31.
12 Foord, Andrew Haswell Green, 252, 254.
As Green wrote in his report on Central Park, large-scale plans offered “a commodious system of ways [that] will provide unobstructed circulation for this increasing tide of human existence, and enhance the comforts of daily life, by rendering habitations of the people more salubrious and agreeable.” And he acknowledged, despite his heavy preference for strong property rights, as laissez-faire liberalism dictated, that “it is quite probable the views of private owners will to some extent of necessity be subordinated to requirements of the public interests.” Green’s views, although far from the republican progressivism of Herbert Croly or Frederic Howe, are related to and grew out of the more general late nineteenth-century rejection of laissez-faire that saw the possibilities of public action as a decided good.

Green wrote in the preface to the official publication of the 1897 Greater New York Charter that the document marked “the consummation of a scheme” he himself had initiated in 1868. Green’s original statement advocating unification appeared in a report to the Commissioners of Central Park, a state board of which he was a member from its founding in 1857 until its abolition in 1870. In that report, Green characteristically took the long view, stating that “unity of plan” was “essential, not only for the future convenience of the inhabitants, but in order that the expensive processes of changing the plan of the coming City after it is built up may be avoided.” The bulk of the report is a list of improvements and planning suggestions that runs place by place through the metropolitan area and includes a lengthy discussion of bridges in which Green makes comparisons to London and Paris to argue for the “extent of bridge and

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14 Andrew Haswell Green, “Communication to the Commissioners of Central Park . . . ,” (New York: Wm. C. Bryant, 1866), 75.
15 Ibid., 72.
18 Green, “Appendix” [Communication to the Commissioners of the Central Park, 1868], in The Father of Greater New York, 46.
Near the end of the report he quietly introduces his far-reaching plan for municipal consolidation: “It is not intended now to do more than direct attention to the important subject of bringing together the City of New York and the County of Kings, a part of Westchester County and a part of Queens and Richmond, including the various suburbs of the city within a certain radial distance from the center, under one common municipal government, to be arranged in departments under a single executive head.”

Although the question of consolidation would founder over the coming years, put out of mind by combination of the depression of the 1870s, the political pressures of Reconstruction and labor agitation, and the different priorities of the Tweed regime, among other causes, Green was prescient when he asserted that the issue of consolidation would occupy public attention in the near future: “Can any one doubt that this question will force itself upon the public attention at no very distant period?” Because of the fact that “the relations of the city with the suburbs are becoming more direct and immediate,” Green argued that the disadvantage of an “incongruous and disjointed authority over communities that are striving by all material methods that the skill of man can devise to become one, will be more and more apparent, and the small jealousies and petty interests that seek to keep them separated will be less and less effectual.”

In the preface to the 1897 Charter, Green emphasized the radical nature of the consolidation, saying that earlier expansions and annexations of the city were “attended with little or no disturbance in the transition.” These “so-called consolidations” provided no models for this more momentous consolidation. The scale and diversity of what the Charter united was

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19 Ibid., 50.
20 Ibid., 54.
21 See Burrows and Wallace, Gotham, 1220-22.
22 Green, “Appendix,” 55.
beyond historical precedent, according to Green. Within the new metropolis “were to be found
divers complex and heterogeneous governmental jurisdictions. There were areas the most
densely inhabited upon the face of the globe and others comparatively unsettled. There was
every variety of local government known to the civil polity of the State…. There were three
cities, two of them among the most populous of the world, and differing in many of the most
important details of government.”

The unity of government would bring the metropolis “into
one harmonious and homogenous whole” which would be “without parallel in the history of
cities.”

By the mid-1890s, Albert Shaw, a journalist, editor of the *Review of Reviews*, and author
of several books on municipal government and national politics, had become a leading voice in
favor of consolidation. Writing in national journals such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The
Outlook*, Shaw became the most competent spokesman for the pro-consolidation argument based
on concerns about municipal government reform. Drawing upon the work of political theorists
and reformers we saw in chapter one, including Frank Goodnow, Frederic Howe, and Delos
Wilcox, Shaw articulated the possible benefits of a united metropolis that addressed concerns of
municipal efficiency, coordinated economic and urban planning, and the more abstract ideals of
civic pride that he thought accompanied the new social and political organization of the
metropolis. Addressing himself in 1896 to those who were concerned about the future
development of New York, Shaw highlighted the “neglect of the common wants of its
population” and the city’s “feeble … sense of common citizenship and of burgher pride and

25 Ibid., v-vi.
responsibility.”27 But the promise of consolidation and the hope for coordinated planning for the new city’s future made Shaw an optimist. He wrote that “the reasonable hope that New York is henceforth to have both honest government and also progressive policies is beginning to act powerfully on the minds of many citizens…. There is springing up a practical faith in the possibilities of Greater New York, … in its means and methods for promoting the welfare of all its people.” Thus, he declared, “no man’s contribution toward the general end is to be despised,” and the industrialists, writers and artists, women’s societies, business associations, the poor, and church leaders “may all contribute very appreciably” to the “advancement of the one great community which for a long time seemed to me the worst governed, the most unenlightened, and in many ways the least hopeful of all the great population-centers of the civilized world.”28

Echoing Herbert Croly’s understanding of the relation between artists and their public, Shaw declared that “New York has begun to give evidence of its growing importance as an art center. The tendency is toward the union of aesthetic forces, and towards a larger and more generous mutual understanding between the art leaders and the community at large.”29 In bringing together arguments about the city’s central cultural importance and the growing civic consciousness of its urban public, Shaw’s pro-consolidation advocacy probably did more than any other source to convince elite opinion of its efficacy.

During the 1890s, in the years before consolidation, commentators had been articulating a new vision of the city as one of the great metropolises of the world. Some of the commentary, even among professionals, could be hyperbolic and uncritically celebratory. In a breathless passage from the preface to his book on the leading personalities of New York’s business and professional elite, John F. Sprague wrote,

28 Ibid., 139.
29 Ibid., 137.
New York, the Metropolis of the world of the future, the Metropolis of free 
America of the past, incomparable and cosmopolitan in its characteristics, of all 
cities is the one most worthy of study, not merely on its own account, but for the 
future of mankind, and especially that of self-governed people. No history will 
ever do justice to this phenomenon among all human settlements. No forecast can 
adequately describe what its expansion will be.30

This “metropolis of the world of the future,” or as he also put it, “the world’s future greatest 
city,” was destined, in this view, to be enlarged into a great metropolitan city. Sprague continued, 
“There is another era in sight—not in the dim distance, but close at hand—when the American 
Metropolis will be naturally consolidated with its offshoots, as London has been, and when the 
‘Greater New York’ will be at once, by mere taking to itself of what has sprung from it and what 
belongs to it in the current of daily life incomparably the most important of the world’s 
municipalities.” 31 This vision saw a common destiny in the geography around the bay.

Manhattan was the obvious center, but the outlying districts were considered necessary parts of 
the metropolis’ heterogeneous vitality.

Sprague naturalized the effort at consolidation, as some of its other advocates did. In 
1888, Mayor Abram Hewitt articulated a similar sentiment of a nature-ordained consolidation 
when he declared that New York’s “imperial destiny as the greatest city in the world” was 
“assured by natural causes, which cannot be thwarted except by the folly and neglect of its 
inhabitants.”32 From this view, consolidation of the metropolitan region was not simply a good 
idea to obtain more efficient government and commerce, but was almost an unstoppable force of 
nature that would fulfill the destiny of the city. Sprague ended the preface to his celebratory tome 
with a vision of consolidated New York as a *fait accompli*: a “more majestic city now looming in

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Recorder, 1893), v.
31 Ibid.
the distance—the Greater New York.” Andrew Green had used a similar argument in his pro-consolidation presentation to the New York State Legislature. He told the representatives that nature had predetermined New York Bay as the site of a great metropolis:

The first step towards union of our peoples here was taken when nature grouped together in close indissoluble relation, at the mouth of a great river, our three islands, Manhattan, Long, and Staten, making them buttresses and breakwaters of a capacious harbor, placing them in line of shortest communication between the great region of which Boston was to become the commercial centre and the other great region of which Philadelphia was to become the metropolis; interposing mountains to the west and the sea to the east, obstructing any other path; determining, by the same conditions which were to make, and have made, this the chief emporium of foreign commerce, that it was also to be, as it is, the chief entrepôt of domestic trade; and pre-ordaining that here was to be, as there is, the great city of the continent, to become in time the great city of the world and of all time.

Green’s biographer, too, did not fail to take up this theme, connecting his role in the creation of Central Park to the larger theme of the metropolis in its natural setting: “To Mr. Green the Park was merely the nucleus and the beginning of a comprehensive system of improvement that was to make New York, as nearly as a great city might be, worthy of the natural grace of its setting and the scenic charm of its environment.” The “natural grace” and “scenic charm” of the bay would be invoked again later when the planning and building of Richmond’s civic center got underway.

Greater New York’s chief rival in population and economic centralization was London. Nearly all commentators in the debate over consolidation made reference to this fact. Newspaper articles were filled with statistics about the two cities. Four days after the Charter was approved by New York’s governor on May 5, 1897, the New York Times ran an article with the

33 Sprague, New York, the Metropolis, v.  
35 Foord, Andrew Haswell Green, 253.
“Now the Second Largest City in the World, London Only Excelling It in Wealth and Numbers.” Even skeptical commentators could not resist making the comparisons. Emerson Palmer, writing in the *North American Review*, thought consolidation “appeals to sentiment and the imagination rather than to the practical judgment” and that its advocacy was “the fad of a few men who are fond of publicity and of posing as benefactors of their generation.” Nonetheless, he began his report on consolidation efforts by stating that the issue was “one of more than local importance” and highlighted the fact that the new metropolis “would surpass Paris in point of population, and would rank second only to London among the great cities of the world. It is indisputable that there would be something agreeable to American pride in an achievement with such a result.” These comparisons served to legitimize and solidify the city’s importance in international cultural and business affairs, reminding American readers of the civic duties of size and prestige.

Perhaps because the process of consolidation had been drawn out over several years since the voters had first given consent, the response to the official joining of the metropolis on January 1, 1898, was muted. A small crowd of revelers gathered at City Hall Park before midnight on Friday, December 31, 1897. The next morning, the daily papers had front-page articles celebrating the consolidation, but in most the milestone received no greater focus than the other news of the day. In *The Sun*, the subheadline of the front-page article declared the new city “greatest but one in the world, and born last night.” It recounted the festivities held at City Hall before and after midnight. *The New-York Tribune*’s account was more direct in its appraisal of the significance of the night’s events: “The sun will rise this morning upon the

38 Ibid., 250.
39 “Hail to the New City!” *The Sun*, 1 January 1898.
greatest experiment in municipal government that the world has ever known—the enlarged city.”

*The New York Times*, however, ran several notices over two pages. Under the headline, “Damp Day for Old New York” on page two, the *Times* reported with glum humor that “Old Father Knickerbocker spent his last day of single blessedness trudging around under an umbrella, bedraggled and dispirited, for it looked as though the nuptials must be celebrated under the most inauspicious conditions of weather.” A front-page article, however, waxed poetic over the fact that despite the inclement weather,

showers of fire and stars of all the colors of the rainbow, and huge fountains of shining silver and gold, sparkling, glowing, and flashing vividly amid the blackness around and above, with the clash of cannons and the roar of exploding bombs punctuating with quick periods the minor din of steam whistles, braying horns, and shouting men, … the flag of Greater New York was officially unfurled over the New York City Hall at midnight by the touch of a button by the Mayor of San Francisco, 3,700 miles away, and the second city of the world came into existence.

Another *Times* article noted that no visible change took place at the stroke of midnight. Declaring, “a greater city comes into being without any visible change in conditions,” the article highlighted the continuity, rather than the disruption, of city services and government and the local attachments of citizens. Although no radical change could be felt—“The capitalists and the wage-earners … will pursue their daily routine undisturbed by the throes of consolidation”—the article did note important changes in policing and fire response, sanitation and health codes, corrections and the courts, education, and even the “treatment of ‘works of art’” through the Art Commission.

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If the slow genesis of Greater New York was marked by mostly invisible changes in daily life patterns, routines, and institutions, commentators did not fail to note the possibilities of significant, even radical, changes on the urbanistic and architectural fronts. Some, like John De Witt Warner, connected the civic spirit surrounding consolidation to the optimism for reform of the city’s physical structure. Warner, a former representative to Congress and early president of both the Art Commission of New York and the Municipal Art Society, connected the intensifying civic feeling to the timeline of the consolidation debate. He wrote,

In New York, especially during the last ten years, the growth of civic pride has been marked. Within the past five years the consciousness that here is the world’s capital, the appreciation of what this means, the readiness and ability to take and support enlightened means toward realizing our destiny, have so rapidly grown that one must now assume this city definitely accepting leadership, and able and ready to take all needed steps toward that end.

Apart from the idealized history of the city’s colonial and early republican past that historians and publicists at the time called “old New York,” a vision of the differences between the city just coming into being and the one just passing out of being went under the banner of “New New York.”

Old and New New York

Many written celebrations of the consolidation explicitly understood that a new urban order was coming into being, even if visible changes were few at first. The Tribune’s January 1 article on consolidation was most direct: “The historic city of New-York, the Old New-York, and

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what it has stood for in the eyes of the world, has closed its books. New ones it opens this morning." Vernon Bailey’s aerial perspective drawing of Greater New York accompanying Frederick Lamb’s article on city planning in the June 1903 issue of House & Garden is emblematic of this new vision of New York just before and for many years after consolidation (fig. 3.1). According to Lamb, there was a dawning understanding “that at this time more than at any other—now that the five boroughs have been brought together in one central government—an effort should be made to secure a comprehensive and intelligent plan upon which the city could develop in the future.” Viewing the unified city to the northeast from a point over New Jersey, Bailey’s drawing emphasizes New York Bay and the rivers as the natural features that unite the islands and varied landmasses surrounding them. Although it includes an unusually large portion of New Jersey, politically separate from Greater New York, the image very clearly underscores the point of consolidation: the area is one urban entity united by its waterways. No longer were these waterways perceived as isolating the cities and villages surrounding them. Now the whole was made apparent by the centrality of the bay as a kind of tissue connecting the separate parts into a larger unit. In Bailey’s drawing, the land is pictured as enclosing the bay in a nearly continuous loop as opposed to the previous vision of the bay as an entity that sorted and isolated the land. Lower Manhattan is the visual and urbanistic focal point. The Statue of Liberty stands exaggerated in scale as a beacon for incoming ships—many of them presumably carrying the immigrants who helped swell the city’s population in recent decades—on its tiny island. A new bridge spans the Hudson River providing the first direct overland route

48 Frederick Stymetz Lamb, “New York City of the Future,” House & Garden, June 1903, 295-310. This is one of many similar images that mark a new way of visualizing the city. Douglas Tallack describes a set of other aerial views that we might also relate to the theme of consolidation and the making of a new urban whole, including the well-known “King’s views” by Moses King. See Tallack, New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005), 127-43.
from the west, while several new bridges over the East and North Rivers connect Manhattan with
Brooklyn and the new borough of Queens. Staten Island, too, is present; Bailey
impressionistically records the topography of the island and reveals by a few highlights its sparse
development among the hills. It is presented as the nature resort of the metropolis, the borough of
rural-suburban retreat within easy reach of the center, just as the literature of the time promoted
it, as well will see.

The focus on lower Manhattan as the urban center of the city was a significant part of the
reimagined metropolis. As the *New York Times* wrote in 1903, with an accompanying illustration
(fig. 3.2), “The lower end of Manhattan is to be no longer, as it has been so long, a terminal
merely. It is to become a centre.” The small, abstract plan shows the bridges, tunnels, and
subway line connecting the business district of Manhattan with downtown Brooklyn. As the
article notes, the connections to and from this part of Manhattan were fundamentally altering the
experience of the city: “The daily and nightly movement of its business population will no more
be, by a huge majority, southward and northward. It will be centripetal and centrifugal.”
Planning and the visual imagery it spawned together conspired to turn the district into the hub of
an expansive metropolitan area, both physically and symbolically the center of Greater New
York. The article read much into the abstract image as a spur to imagining the planning ideas set
into motion with consolidation:

How immensely the radiation of New York, as compared with its longitudinal
extension, will simplify all our municipal problems and facilitate the solution of
them we have to invoke the aid of imagination to apprehend, in default of any
satisfactory experience. But to begin to imagine, with reason and probability, is to
see that the tenement-house problem, the transportation problem, all our urgent
problems, are at last in the way to a good solution, provided only the municipality
watches, assists, and duly regulates the individual or corporate enterprise which is
at its service.50

By visualizing the city as an expansive but unified whole, the great urban problems of the day, the *Times* suggested, could at least be imagined as rectifiable. Images of the united metropolis spurred the political imagination as never before.

Another commentator, John C. Van Dyke, vividly evoked the “radiation” from lower Manhattan. He observed that “almost everyone in New York who goes to business in the morning and returns somewhere to dine and sleep in the evening, has his separate tale of woe to tell about the annoyances of urban travel…. Rapid transit is a necessity, but somehow not yet a comfortable reality. Moving to and from the centers of business is still a vexation and an annoyance.” Choosing City Hall rather than the Battery as the epicenter of the radiation, Van Dyke described the new pattern of travel within the city: “If one considers the City Hall as the hub of the city, and draws a thirty-mile rim about it to include the metropolitan districts, it becomes at once apparent that what the whole wheel needs is more spokes. That would not only make the hub and the rim accessible, but unify and strengthen the entire structure.”

As the next chapter shows, this vision of lower Manhattan as the unifying center of the metropolis provides a context for the development of Bowling Green as a public space, which, forming a chain with the Battery and City Hall Park, was part of a spine of open space in lower Manhattan. Likewise, although less readily apparent, the visibility of lower Manhattan played a role in shaping the civic center on Staten Island as a visual counterpoint across the bay.

Along with the new visual focus on the unified city, one of the cultural results of consolidation was the reimagining of the metropolis conveyed by the ubiquitous catchphrase, “the New New York.” Bailey’s drawing could just as well have used that phrase as its title rather than “Greater New York.” The two monikers were interchangeable, although Greater New York

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tended to be used as a more generically descriptive phrase to indicate the practical and political effects of the municipal consolidation (especially since the city’s 1897 charter was usually known in shorthand as the Greater New York Charter). The idea of a renewed or reimagined city, aware of its past but boldly forging a new vision of the future, was a central component of the transformation of New York’s urbanism. After 1898, “New New York” became shorthand for conveying the sense of civic optimism among elites, reformers, municipal officials, and publicists; it could be found in the daily and weekly newspapers, in travel writing and guidebooks to the city, and in the promotional literature of city boosters and commercial organizations. The accompanying publication to the 1899 municipal commemoration of Andrew Haswell Green’s civic work stated this sentiment well:

As the commercial capital of a nation we have a great trust in charge. More than any other community we have had greatness thrust upon us. Without making an effort or taking thought, in a period which is but a span in the life of great cities in the Old World, the community assembled around this port, one by contiguity of borders, by commercial association, by industrial pursuit, and by social sentiment, already the second city in the world, is still progressing with such rapid development that there is scarcely room for doubt that when the infant of this day shall reach maturity and come to cast his first vote he will be a citizen of a municipality which, in population, in wealth and influence shall stand at the head of the line of great cities whose influences guide the destinies of the world, and whose records embellish the pages of history.

Much of this literature was tied to the architectural marvels and distinctive urbanism of the city in recent years and as it was imagined to be in the near future. “The mighty fabric of the Metropolis” became a focus for this reimagining. As Vernon Bailey’s drawing suggests, the new vision of New York was preeminently spatial and architectural, a visual celebration of the

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54 *New York: The Metropolis of the Western World* (New York: Foster & Reynolds Co., 1917), 7. This tourist’s guidebook, representative of many of its kind in the early twentieth century, takes the reader on an itinerary of architectural sites going up Manhattan Island from the Battery to Riverside Park and further to Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. The guide went through several editions through 1932.
scale, style, and perceived unity of the metropolis. Randall Blackshaw’s 1902 article in *The Century Magazine* was one of the most direct and idealistic statements of this vision of the New New York. Illustrated by one of the period’s leading architectural renderers, Jules Guérin, it presented views of recent and planned architectural wonders, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new facade by Richard Morris Hunt (fig. 3.3) and the library at the center of Columbia University’s new campus by McKim, Mead & White. Blackshaw’s article appeared just as the face of the city was being dramatically transformed. An especially revealing image is Guérin’s rendering of the new First Appellate Courthouse by James Brown Lord (fig. 3.4). Lord’s small neoclassical box, surmounted by sculpted figures by Karl Bitter, Philip Martiny, and others, stands on the east side of Madison Square, which was projected to become one of the new centers of the growing city along with Union Square only six blocks to its south along Broadway. In the background of Guérin’s image rises the tower of Stanford White’s Madison Square Garden, one of the earliest harbingers of the architectural changes to come in the New New York. Guérin’s charming, picturesque image, like all in the series, is a crisply drawn perspective painted in watercolor. Tellingly, it was one of only two of the article’s images to be published in color; clearly the light and color were key to its visual appeal. Although it is a night scene, Guérin has highlighted the courthouse in bright white, presumably reflecting the light of the lampposts and lanterns in front of it. But like the tower of White’s festive building behind it, it also seems to be lit as if from floodlights coming from beyond the picture’s left frame. The contrast established between the courthouse and the neighboring brownstones captures the essence of the New New York: the dark, dreary brownstone city is being replaced by one of

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light, marble, and visual interest. Although the small courthouse is no taller than the
brownstones, its colonnade of Corinthian columns and the sculptures surmounting its attic
balustrade lend it a monumental dignity very different from the domestic scale next door.

In the text, Blackshaw outlines what is mostly a roster of notable architectural,
engineering, and social policy achievements that have remade the face and feeling of the city. He
acknowledges that New York does not, and probably cannot, have the romantic associations of
Old World cities: “New York may never weave for the human spirit the spell that was woven
ages since by Rome and Athens. Though it should attain to the hoariest antiquity, its very name
must prevent its becoming, like those of the Greek and Roman capitals, a synonym for age.” The
city’s very name disclosed something distinctive about the metropolis: that it was forever
destined to be new, no matter its longevity. In this sense, the “New New York” was simply a
fulfillment of the city’s destiny, a coming-into-being of its perpetual modernity. “To-day a new
New York is coming to birth,” Blackshaw declared, “which bids fair to vie, if not in historic
interest, at least in magnificence and beauty, with even so splendid a capital as that of France.”57

A striking omission from Blackshaw’s catalog of improvements is the skyscraper.
Although he mentions several in passing, including the Flatiron, which is also illustrated (fig.
3.5), he hurriedly moves on to other topics, ranging from parks and school buildings to rapid
transit lines and railroads, libraries and churches to aid societies and club houses, among others.
His catalog of building types emphasizes mostly monumental buildings that are horizontally
oriented rather than vertically striving. As Thomas Bender and William R. Taylor have argued,
this horizontality emerged as a key attribute of the civic identity of new buildings at the turn of
the century. Verticality was associated with commerce, while horizontality signaled buildings
with civic pretensions, whether in fact public or not. Even the “tower-on-base” skyscrapers such

as the Metropolitan Life Building (fig. 3.6) two blocks south of Lord’s courthouse eschewed an all-pervasive verticality. Not until the Woolworth Building did the cause of height for height’s sake start to attract architects’ attention in New York. According to Angela Blake, the skyscraper was the one building type that bore the burden of representing New York City’s Americanness in the first three decades of the twentieth century. They were, in her view, “an almost organic expression of New York’s metropolitan status.” But if Blackshaw’s priorities are any indication, tall buildings occupied only one segment—and certainly not the most prestigious—of a large and diverse group of building types and urban projects that were remaking the city in the new century.

The fullest expression of the new urban vision in printed form was John Van Dyke’s The New New York, published in 1909 and illustrated, like Blackshaw’s article, by a leading architectural renderer, Joseph Pennell. Dedicated to New York Mayor George McClellan, “whose efforts in municipal art have identified him with the new city,” the book extolled the complexities, scale, and pace of life in the new metropolis, “a swift-expanding city” where “everything is more or less confused by movement, by casual phenomena, by want of definition.” Van Dyke’s thesis was that “those who have erected the new city, as need has dictated, have builded better than they knew. They have given us, not the classic, but the picturesque.” He specifically interpreted Pennell’s images for the reader as visual evidence of the new city coming into being. But more than that, Pennell’s images visualized the conspicuous

59 Blake, How New York Became American, 93.
60 Van Dyke, The New New York, v. On McClellan’s role in civic reform, see Gilmartin, Shaping the City, 92-111, 121-35.
62 Ibid., viii.
visibility of the new city’s spaces and buildings—that is, they pictured the material elements of
the new city as typically designed for visual inspection and delectation. As Van Dyke wrote,

That the “big” things, the high bridges, the colossal sky-scrapers, the huge
factories, the enormous waterways, are pictorial in themselves needs no wordy
argument. The illustrations in this volume are sufficient proof. In them Mr.
Pennell has shown that the material is here and that it needs only the properly-
adjusted eyes to see its beauty. That beauty, in the original as in the pictures, is
not a harmony of streets, squares, and houses, nor a formal arrangement of
monuments, towers, and domes; but rather a new sublimity that lies in majesty of
mass, in aspiring lines against the upper sky, in the brilliancy of color, in the
mystery of fields of shadow, in the splendor of fields of light,—above all in the
suggested power and energy of New York life.63

Observers, visitors, and citizens of the metropolis needed “properly-adjusted eyes” to understand
the new city, and Van Dyke and Pennell’s work set out to provide a guide to this adjustment
(figs. 3.7-3.8). Their emphasis on the new visuality—the city as composed of material elements
with distinctly visible prominence in the public realm—permeated the civic vision of Greater
New York.64 And this visuality and public visibility played a large role in determining the site
and form of Richmond’s civic center.

The Richmond Civic Center

Richmond’s Borough Hall, designed by Carrère & Hastings in 1903 and opened on May
21, 1906, stands on a hill directly above the ferry terminal, its water-facing plaza providing
sweeping views over New York Bay from New Jersey in the northwest to Brooklyn in the east.
Ahead and to the west of the building’s central axis is the Battery of lower Manhattan. Styled on

63 Ibid., 18.
64 Occasionally, commentators espoused an environmental determinism associated with the new city. For instance,
Gabrielle T. Stewart wrote that the purpose of planning was to “make our city so attractive and so beautiful as to
spread a beneficent influence over our homes and our entire life,” that there was a “moral suasion which goes with
beautiful surroundings,” “Municipal Beauty I,” *Architects’ and Builders’ Magazine*, July 1904, 471-82. But beyond
this moralism, the sheer visuality of the new city was the key point for many commentators.
French Renaissance architecture primarily of the early seventeenth century, Borough Hall is a clear example of Carrère & Hastings’ well-documented commitment to French precedents (fig. 3.9). With its central tower as a civic beacon and its embracing gesture toward the visitor disembarking from the ferries below, the building still stands as the preeminent civic symbol of the borough. Two other buildings nearby—the Richmond County Courthouse and the St. George branch of the New York Public Library—were built by Carrère & Hastings as part of a larger civic center plan, but it remains a fragmentary, incomplete version of the much more unified and grandiose vision of the borough’s first president, George Cromwell (1860-1934, presided 1898-1913).

To understand the Richmond civic center as an embodiment of the civic ethos at the turn of the century requires an examination of a number of contexts. Whether or not it is true, as Jonathan Ritter has argued, that at the beginning of the twentieth century there was “a surprising lack of moral and democratic rhetoric in civic center debates,” it is demonstrably the case that at Richmond’s civic center democratic—or, more precisely, civic-republican—rhetoric played an important part not just in the planning but also in the reception of the project. Richmond’s civic center was a direct result of the consolidation of Greater New York and the new demands of municipal government after 1898. It developed in relation to the architectural and urban concerns of commentators, architects, planners, and politicians in the post-consolidation period. The existing offices of the County of Richmond did not suffice for the new representational and political aims of the post-consolidation order. The civic center can be seen also in relation to new ways of visualizing the city’s urban form that predominated in the period before the Regional Plan—formalized, for instance, in the New York City Improvement Commission’s planning

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reports of 1904 and 1907 and in the Municipal Art Society’s and other designers’ various planning efforts. Staten Island’s history, its geographic position within the new city, and various aspects of the site itself played a significant role in shaping the forms and representational program of the buildings at St. George. The civic center addressed its geographical location and responded to the material and political development of the island in distinctive ways. It was a primary example of a new urban modality: a range of monuments in a park-like setting, adjusted to the contingencies of its picturesque suburban site. It thus transformed the civic center model into one fit for Staten Island’s distinctive and highly prized lack of dense urbanization.

Borough Hall, as the first and most important component of the civic center, had a heavy burden of representation. It was not just a symbol of municipal government but also a material representation of an entirely new polity. Before 1898, Staten Island was not only isolated and distant from New York City (Manhattan), it also was not thought about in the social imaginary as a unified whole. Each of the villages and towns was relatively independent of the others both economically and socially (fig. 3.10). Each had its own local economy, all of which were together largely independent of New York City’s booming commercial economy (with the exception of the tourist and leisure pursuits offered on the island) and, to a great extent, of the other local economies on the island. Life was extraordinarily local and inward-looking.

After 1898, the residents of Staten Island became something they had not been before: a unified polity. A legal document, the Greater New York Charter, created a new public and a new sense of citizenship out of the disparate communities on the island. They were not only members

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67 See Dorothy Valentine Smith, This Was Staten Island (Staten Island, NY: Staten Island Historical Society, 1968).
of a new and large metropolis, they were also part of a distinct political unit, the Borough of Richmond. Any new borough government building would have had a heavy symbolic duty, but a location at the interior of the island, or, in fact, any location other than St. George, in front of the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, would have been less readily visible to the larger public and thus less politically potent. Given the nature of the location chosen for Borough Hall, visible from New York Bay from almost all approaches and even visible, just barely, from Manhattan on a clear day, the building was obliged to represent the Borough and its people in an especially direct way.

Staten Island before Cromwell

In the decades before consolidation, Richmond County occupied a very minor place in municipal or architectural concerns in the greater New York region. In part, this had to do with its distance to Manhattan and small population: Richmond was composed of a handful of isolated villages and was extremely small relative to Manhattan and other neighboring cities, including Brooklyn. Seldon Judson’s 1886 business guidebook fancifully described the island “in its isolated and independent position” as being “like a little principality.” Judson’s amusing description suggests a unified political community, which was anything but the case on the island in the period before consolidation. Although island residents clearly identified as Staten

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68 There are readily available publications on Staten Island’s architecture. Some of the landmark designation reports are useful for reconstructing the island’s development history. For an overview of Staten Island’s architecture and development before consolidation, see Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, New York 1880: Architecture and Urbanism in the Gilded Age (New York: Monacelli, 1999), 990-1007. See also Shirley Zavin, Staten Island: An Architectural History (Staten Island, NY: Staten Island Institute for Arts and Sciences, 1979). An anecdotal history, valuable for its images, that provides a sketch of the island’s history with particular emphasis on the St. George and New Brighton districts is David Goldfarb and James G. Ferreri, St. George (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2009).

Islanders, the very weak county government and the isolated nature of the island’s villages meant that local identities and allegiances were tied to very specific districts rather than to the abstract and mostly meaningless idea, on a day-to-day basis, of Richmond County.

According to the national census, the county’s population in 1870 was 33,029. By contrast, New York (Manhattan) had a population of 942,292, twenty-eight times larger than Richmond, while Brooklyn’s population was 396,099, twelve times larger. Richmond’s population grew slowly to 38,991 in 1880; 51,693 in 1890; and 67,021 in 1900. Although it had more than doubled in the course of thirty years, Richmond’s population in 1900, two years after consolidation, accounted for only 1.9% of New York City’s total population of 3,437,202. After 1900 Richmond’s population growth rate slowly increased, but by 1920 it still accounted for only 2.1% of the city’s 5,620,048 residents. Given these numbers, the island’s distance from Manhattan, and an economy that was largely isolated from the larger patterns governing the development of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and other parts of western Long Island, it is no surprise that little planning attention was paid to Richmond. Commentary in guidebooks and histories of the island before 1900 never failed to note that modern development had largely bypassed it. For instance, Judson’s 1886 guidebook noted ruefully that because “the Island has been shut off from railway communication with the mainland altogether, and its nine miles of magnificent waterfront, almost the best on the entire harbor of New York, has been left in nearly utter disuse, it is not strange that it [commerce and manufacturing] has made slow progress.” Although the pace of development would increase after consolidation, late nineteenth-century Staten Island was, in terms of physical, social, and political organization, fundamentally the same island it had been for a century—and a stark contrast with New York’s ceaseless development. This contrast

70 This data was compiled and calculated from U.S. Census records available at http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial.
71 Judson, Illustrated Sketch Book, 39.
formed the core of the island’s appeal as the foil to the crowded, dirty, rowdy, commercial, and ethnically diverse metropolis across the bay.

The first significant document relating to the island’s physical development was prepared by Frederick Law Olmsted for New York State’s Staten Island Improvement Commission. A much earlier plan for a village in or near St. George, prepared by William Ranlett and published in his book, *The Architect* (1847), incorporated detached, picturesque villas appropriate to the mostly rural island (fig. 3.11). According to John Archer, this was the first time a suburban village similar to English prototypes of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had been published in the United States. Presented in 1871, Olmsted’s report was an exemplary model of the emerging planning concerns of the late nineteenth century. It drew upon ideas in his 1870 paper, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” read at the annual meeting of the American Social Science Association and published a year later in the Association’s journal. In

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72 John Archer, “Country and City in the American Romantic Suburb,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42, no. 2 (May 1983): 150. Archer also describes the development of New Brighton (1834-36), adjacent to St. George, as “one of the earliest American commuter suburbs,” 152. Thus, Staten Island was throughout the nineteenth century at the forefront of American suburban development. See also Gale Harris, “St. George Historic District Designation Report” (1994).


that paper, Olmsted turned planners’ attention to the “drift townward” that was, he believed, inexorably leading to the depopulation of rural areas and the concentration of people in and consequent expansion of urban areas. To deal properly with this irreversible trend, Olmsted believed that planners would have to abandon conventional methods of city building, including the gridiron plan, and turn to methods that could produce a more openly built and diverse urbanism encompassing extensive parks. 

Presumably, one of the features of Staten Island attractive to Olmsted was its considerable difference from New York. In 1870 the island was still predominantly undeveloped and rural, with just a handful of small villages scattered about its northern and eastern shorelines. These villages, moreover, were not planned according to a gridiron like Manhattan’s, but had developed more spacious and flexible plans in the sense that Olmsted outlined in the 1870 paper. Decades later, even George Cromwell would discuss Staten Island as offering a unique challenge to municipal planning in New York given the island’s mostly non-urban character. “It is,” he wrote, “a matter of vital consequence to Richmond, which is not urban and in need of urban regulations, like Manhattan and the greater part of Brooklyn, but a combination of suburban, semi-rural and rural, and requires, for its best development … that there be a distinct and local intelligence in its administration.” This “distinct and local intelligence” would be on display as Cromwell developed his civic center.

Olmsted’s Staten Island report was intended to show

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77 Annual Report of the President of the Borough of Richmond, 1908 (Staten Island, NY, 1908), 11. Staten Island Museum Archives, Richmond Borough Records, Box 3, Folder 7.
78 The architects, according to Robert Stern, “most coherently adapted the municipal spirit to a suburban situation.” Stern, et al., *New York 1900*, 69.
that the improvements required to secure the greatest possible prosperity to your Island, are such as will present the largest number of sites for dwellings, furnished with urban public conveniences and associated with permanent and generally available advantages of landscape and sylvan beauty, all accessible with regularity and comfort from the business quarter of New York, and all preeminently healthful.  

This characterization of natural beauty in proximity to “urban public conveniences” was a hallmark of romantic suburban planning in the mid-to-late nineteenth century in both England and the United States. In fact, Olmsted’s appraisal of Staten Island as a unique preserve of “sylvan beauty” in close proximity to the center of the metropolis—essentially a romantic suburb—remained central to the island’s development projects for many decades, affecting even the form of Carrère & Hastings’ civic center in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Histories, guidebooks, and other published material on Staten Island repeated the refrain that the island’s natural beauty and unique position on New York Bay made it a distinctive treasure within the metropolis and, after 1898, within the city itself. Olmsted was not the first to instigate this encomium of Staten Island’s natural bounty, but he was particularly influential and his pronouncements carried weight with elite opinion and among policy makers. Olmsted’s aim in his 1870 report was two-fold: he wanted to show that contrary to conventional belief Staten Island was largely not a malarial cesspool—“there are parts of the Island which now suffer from an undeserved reputation for unhealthfulness,” he wrote—and he wanted to make a case for comprehensive planning that would preserve and harness the best natural features of the island while still providing for its development as a suburban retreat. The latter point was perhaps preeminent in Olmsted’s mind and was clearly the main interest of the state commission that

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employed him. Olmsted warned his readers, “There are few things which make greatly for the
happiness of men concerning which they know so little of the process by which the happiness
comes, and the conditions on which it depends, this as of the beauty of nature [sic]. It is the
commonest experience that men destroy beauty under an idea that they are going to increase it.”
Olmsted wanted Staten Island to avoid this fate—to preserve the “sylvan beauty” of its land and
to provide for a general plan of development that ruled out “the utter folly of a policy” dedicated
to “profit by individual speculators.”82

Olmsted’s interest in preserving and marshaling the power of the island’s natural beauty
was shared widely by chroniclers and promoters of Richmond. In another 1871 report by the
Commission that employed Olmsted, the committee compared the island to Isle of Wight: “This
Isle of State naturally possessing as it undoubtedly does, such unrivalled geographical position
and a salubrity so far superior to that of the beautiful valetudinarian resort—the far-named Isle of
Wight—so much in excess, indeed, to repeat the words of the experts, that it is ‘less healthful
than Staten Island could be made.’”83 Decades later, after the city had changed dramatically, the
distinction of the island still commanded attention. Mary Chamberlain described the picturesque
approach to St. George on the ferry, declaring that since the days of Robinson Crusoe, society’s
“imagination has been fired by the marvelous possibilities of a ‘tract of land wholly surrounded
by water.’” She advised her readers to

Take the St. George ferry at the tip of Manhattan late some afternoon. Watch
Battery Park, the Woolworth tower, the slender bow of Brooklyn Bridge and the
beetling ferry houses melt into a foggy wedge of tall thin buildings. Watch the
huddled land across the harbor stretch out and up into warehouses, trees and
dwellings. Then follow the ferry passengers out at St. George’s depot, the focus of
Staten Island where scurrying little steam trains, so much like those of the London

82 Ibid., 185.
83 Staten Island Improvement Commission, “Report of the Committee on Transportation and Intercommunication,”
1871, n.p. Staten Island Museum Archives, Richmond County Records, Box 5, Folder 60.
“Inner Circle,” whisk commuters to waterfront villages, and electric cars buzz off to the hilly interior.\textsuperscript{84}

The promotional literature also indulged in this kind of description. In the Judson guidebook already cited, the author begins his summary of the island’s commercial and social register in very Olmstedian terms:

\begin{quote}
Staten Island, “the emerald gem lying between crystal seas,” is, without question, one of the most picturesque and charming spots in America. Far enough away from the great city to preserve all the delightful beauties of nature, and near enough to admit of rapid and comfortable transit, it is enjoyed by all classes of citizens as a place for residence, recreation and business…. Its area is about sixty square miles, nearly all under cultivation. The surface is greatly diversified, and exhibits smooth, fertile plains, beautiful valleys and stately hills covered with verdure, from whose summits grand and noble views of the surrounding country and moving life on the waters can be obtained. No such charming variety of scenery can be found within one hundred miles of New York.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

Similarly, Gustav Kobbé’s 1890 guidebook begins by describing in some detail the topographical and geological features of the island which contribute to its picturesque reputation. Kobbé then links the island’s charms to the natural beauty of its surroundings. After recounting the ferry ride to St. George, the author returns his gaze to the bay and the lands that surround it. He describes the view across the bay and makes the visual connection back to lower Manhattan:

\begin{quote}
Directly back of the ferry landing rises a steep bluff from whose summit the old St. Mark’s Hotel … commands a magnificent view of the harbor and the New Jersey and Long Island shores…. Further beyond a pall of smoke hangs above Jersey City against which the Statue of Liberty is outlined with wonderful majesty and grace. To the right is New York, resembling a patch of varied color against the blue of the bay and sky. The tall Washington building and the tower of the Produce Exchange … rise above the general outline.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

Kobbé sounds an Olmstedian interest in the connection of this suburban retreat to the teeming city across the bay. The district called New Brighton, just to the north of the ferry terminal at St.

George, “offers every convenience in the way of gas, electric light and pure water—thus combining all the advantages of the city, with the fresh air and freedom of the country.”

George Cromwell and Carrère & Hastings

Although the details are not recorded, two factors affected Borough President George Cromwell’s choice of architects for the new Borough Hall. Cromwell likely knew John Carrère personally. Carrère lived on Tompkins Avenue on Staten Island and was a member of local social groups through which he had almost certainly come into contact with Cromwell. Shortly before work on Borough Hall began in 1904, a local newspaper described Carrère as “a familiar friend” to Staten Islanders and profusely praised his professional and civic accomplishments. Carrère was, according to the account, “a public spirited citizen of not only indomitable energy but of deep, broad and practicable information and thought and of convincing eloquence, who has for many years exerted a positive and beneficent influence in the affairs of Staten Island.”

Carrère and his firm had designed a number of buildings and monuments on the island before 1903. In addition to several house alterations, at least six projects are documented: an ancillary chapel for St. Paul’s Memorial Church (1889), the Kernhardt Mausoleum (1896) and the Eberhard Faber Memorial (1898) at the Moravian Cemetery, a series of rental houses on Vanderbilt Avenue (1900), and the club house for Harbour Hill Golf Course (1900). Carrère, the most prominent architect on the island since the departure of Henry Hobson Richardson, would have been a clear choice for Cromwell.

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87 Ibid., 29.
88 “Our New Borough Hall,” Staten Islander, 2 April 1904.
89 List compiled by Richard L. Simpson, Carrère & Hastings Collection, Staten Island Museum Archives.
As well as designing these modest projects on the island, the firm was nationally prominent and, of local civic significance for Cromwell, it was beginning to reshape the face of the New New York. Having formed their partnership in 1885 after working several years in the office of McKim, Mead & White, Carrère & Hastings won the New York Public Library competition in 1897 and the new central building was well underway by 1903. Other prominent New York City projects built or under construction by 1903 include the Mail & Express Building, the First Church of Christ Scientist, several Carnegie Libraries, the Blair Building, and numerous fashionable residences. In 1903, not long before they were approached by Cromwell for the civic center, the firm had been selected to design the Manhattan Bridge approaches and had been selected as one of the firms to design the new municipally-owned ferry terminals; as it happens, they were given the job for the St. George terminal of the Staten Island Ferry. This job may have been the decisive factor for Cromwell: using the same firm to design the adjacent Borough Hall would ensure a unity of conception for the whole area. Given the firm’s prominence and accomplishments at the time, the prestige that would accrue to Richmond with a prominent civic center designed by the firm must have been appealing to Cromwell.90

Described in his New York Times’ obituary as “a pioneer in the social-planning school of government,” George Cromwell came into office in 1898 armed with plans (conceptual if not definite) to improve the physical conditions of his borough.91 Borough Hall became an early and enduring result and symbol of his commitments. His first term, through 1902, was relatively unproductive as his planning aspirations were thwarted by the Robert Van Wyck administration.92 Under the original Greater New York Charter of 1897, borough presidents had

90 For a complete list of commissions and completed work, see “Project List,” in Hewitt, et al., Carrère & Hastings, vol. 2, 267-91.
92 On Van Wyck, see Gilmartin, Shaping the City, 33-34, 47-52.
little authority over the planning and financing of development schemes affecting their boroughs. As the *Times* noted, borough presidents in the years immediately after consolidation “were hardly more than advocates for their own localities, and their influence depended almost solely on their political affiliations. Thus Cromwell [a Republican] could expect little from a hostile Tammany Mayor, and that is what he got.”\(^9^3\) The situation changed with the revised 1902 Charter, which abolished the city-wide Board of Public Improvements and gave borough presidents more authority over planning decisions within their jurisdictions.\(^9^4\) The new Charter was the legal catalyst for Cromwell’s pursuit of a civic center in Richmond. Armed with new powers to initiate plans and to finance them, Cromwell set out to reform the physical character of his borough.

Cromwell’s active pursuit of development in Richmond between 1902 and 1912 earned him some opponents, who, near the end of his fourth term, formed a “citizens’ safety committee” and called for an inquiry into whether the “improvements” undertaken during his tenure “had been made lawfully, economically, and without waste.” The opposition charged Cromwell with attempting to “Manhattanize” Staten Island and claimed that “the sixty-foot avenue and expensive parks and wide reaching viaducts proposed by the present administration were not only not needed, but that the present value of Staten Island real estate could not stand any more assessments.” In their formal petition to Mayor William Gaynor, the opposition stated, “It has been the policy of the Borough Government, without the demand or consent of those affected thereby, to plan and carry out public works on a scale far beyond the needs of this community, either at the present time or within a reasonable future, far beyond the means of our people to

\(^9^3\) “George Cromwell Dead.”
\(^9^4\) Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 83.
Mayor Gaynor took up the issue and charged his Commissioner of Accounts to undertake an official investigation and report. Delivered to the mayor in June 1912, the report found “nothing in the way of wrongdoing, illegality, or negligence” in Richmond Borough’s government.96 Although Cromwell narrowly lost reelection in 1912 against two candidates, his reputation remained high city-wide as a public-spirited official who had worked tirelessly to promote the welfare of his borough. As the Times noted at his death, Borough Hall had become a symbol not of profligacy and overreaching planning powers, but of Cromwell’s sound investments in the borough’s public accommodations and infrastructure. “It was,” the Times declared, “the most inexpensive public building erected by the city in those years, was completed in record time and without a scandal—the inevitable concomitant of public improvements during that period.”97 And in hindsight, Cromwell’s schemes did not “Manhattanize” the island but can be seen to have judiciously adjusted the city’s civic architectural models to the distinctive suburban realities of the borough in ways that built directly upon Olmsted’s ideas.

The degree of Cromwell’s personal attachment to Borough Hall in particular was evident in the otherwise sober and bureaucratic reports of the borough president. In his report of 1904, published as construction was underway, Cromwell conveyed his personal attachment to the project in vivid terms. Significantly, he linked the building with the new stature of the borough within Greater New York and its position in the spatial matrix of the city:

Our future as a community of homes, as a waterfront of commerce, as an establishment of manufactures, as a pleasure ground of health and recreation, as a terminal of a continent’s traffic, as the entrance to the greatest port in the world,
will be by the laying of this corner-stone, cemented by our formal and manifest unity, and Staten Island will develop in all the features in which it stands pre-eminent among the border communities of our great country.

Describing the corner-stone laying ceremonies for Borough Hall, Cromwell wrote, “It seemed to be the crowning event of many years of effort to establish Staten Island in the position which rightly belonged to her, among the self-governing communities of the land, and it seemed also and was not only a promise, but a guarantee of the distinct and important future of the Borough of Richmond in the City of New York.”\(^98\) Cromwell was also sure that the building would have a beneficial influence on the borough’s architecture, predicting that “the impetus given to the rapid development of the Borough in public architecture and municipal importance by the construction of a superb public office building will unquestionably be felt.”\(^99\)

The fragmentary civic center eventually built to Carrère & Hastings’s designs took shape on land adjacent to the new ferry terminal also designed by the firm (fig. 3.12). The connection of the civic center and the ferry service was a critical one for George Cromwell, the architects, and residents of the island. Problems with ferry service had plagued the island for decades. As Frederick Law Olmsted described it in his 1871 Improvement Commission report, “The ferry arrangements of Staten Island are singularly bare, rude, unattractive in appearance, and inconvenient compared with what they easily might be.”\(^100\) In a footnote to the same section, he sounded an optimistic assessment of future changes to ferry operations, noting that managers had insisted that “their receipts do not so far exceed their running expenses as to justify an investment of capital in appliances of convenience, comfort and attractiveness.” But, Olmsted

\(^99\) Ibid., 12.
\(^100\) Olmsted, “Report,” 248. Olmsted’s sentiments were widely shared by Staten Islanders more than three decades later. A resident complained to a meeting of the city’s Sinking Fund Commission in 1903 that the ferry and rail company’s “boats are rotten and their train service is worse.” A member of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce echoed that sentiment, stating that “the service given to the people of Staten Island at the present time is an outrage and the boats are a disgrace to the City of New York.” “Staten Island Protests,” *New York Times*, 26 February 1903.
noted, it was encouraging to learn “that the business of the ferries is increasing a great deal faster than the population of the island.” Because of this, Olmsted predicted that “in a few years more, therefore, some essential improvements may be reasonably looked for.”

Agitation for improved ferry service was strengthened by the 1898 consolidation. With Richmond officially joined to New York, consideration of municipal transportation was no longer simply a matter of moving suburban residents or pleasure seekers to and from the city, but became a matter of interborough commuting, as Cromwell was well aware. Moreover, the quality of ferry service was now linked to the prestige of the new metropolis as a whole. It is no coincidence, then, that changes to ferry management and operations took place at the same time that the city was building its first subway lines. As a writer in *Architect’s and Builders’ Magazine* put it, “As the metropolis of the railroads, the city is preeminently one in which easy access from point to point should be efficiently possible.” This widely shared view had the aim of linking together the boroughs and the suburbs so that the visitor should be able to make “what may almost be termed a grand tour of Greater New York.” But even with new subway services, “transportation by means of ferry must be developed and maintained at the highest pitch of efficiency” to properly serve the growing metropolitan region.

Olmsted’s and Cromwell’s expectations for the ferry service were fulfilled in the summer of 1903 when the city’s Sinking Fund Commissioners approved acquisition of the ferry service

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101 Olmsted, “Report,” 248. Olmsted records that ferry receipts in 1870 amounted to $2.5 million, up from $912,500 in 1861. His numbers are suspect; an 1882 article reported the previous year’s fare collection as $210,000. See “Staten Island Ferry Fares,” *New York Times*, 19 March 1882. In 1894, the collection was $800,000 based on 8,000,000 fares on all of the Staten Island Rapid Transit Company’s ferry and railroad lines. See “Staten Island Ferry Fares,” *New York Times*, 21 August 1894. The round-trip fare at both dates was ten cents.


for $3.2 million. $2 million was set aside for new boats while the rest was earmarked for a new terminal and road approaches at St. George.104 At the time of its opening two years later, on October 25, 1905, Mayor George McClellan expressed the civic ethos again in his comments about the significance of the new ferry service. Addressing a crowd after the inaugural trip from Whitehall to St. George taken by 2,000 invited guests, McClellan exclaimed,

It is unnecessary for me to tell you how much this ferry means to Richmond, or that it marks the beginning of a new era for your borough. You know all this far better than I do. But the inauguration of this greatest experiment in municipal ownership and municipal operation means the beginning of a new epoch for all five boroughs of New York. This ferry is the longest step in the direction of binding the boroughs together since the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge. It establishes a standard of interborough communication which forever must be lived up to. It will serve to break down the barriers of nature and to bind more closely together into one homogenous whole the five component parts of our city, so that as the years go by, the people of New York, forgetting borough boundaries, … will remember only that they are citizens of one great city.105

Carrère & Hastings’ design for the new St. George Ferry Terminal created “a building of imposing architectural character,” a truly monumental gateway to the island from its most exalted approach106 (fig. 3.13). Commissioned in 1903 after the approval of the city’s acquisition of the ferry service, the terminal’s design was approved in 1905 and construction was completed in June of 1907.107 The low, broad structure seems to have influenced the slightly later Whitehall Terminal designed by Walker & Morris (fig. 3.14), the Chelsea Piers by Warren & Wetmore (fig. 3.15), and the ferry terminals group at 23rd Street (fig. 3.16) and Lackawana Terminal in Hoboken, New Jersey (fig. 3.17), both by Kenneth Murchison. The St. George Terminal set the pattern for a civic form of ferry terminal. The structure was composed of four limestone pylons from which projected the wooden barriers to separate the three slips (fig. 3.18). A much enlarged

104 “Staten Island Ferry to Be Owned by City,” New York Times, 3 July 1903.
version of this pylon would be used by Carrère & Hastings at the Manhattan Bridge (fig. 3.19). Metal trusses over the slips held the landing bridges inside and metal and glass screens at the outer edge of each slip protected the boats docked below, which would have been almost entirely enclosed under the structure when fast at dock.

Although at a much-reduced scale and with less profligate use of expensive materials, the terminal referenced another transportation terminal begun a year earlier: McKim, Mead & White’s Pennsylvania Station. Carrère & Hastings, protégés of the McKim, Mead & White office, seem to have had the Pennsylvania Station’s plans in mind when conceiving the character of the building. The most striking affinity between the ferry terminal and rail station is the contrast between decorous, classically detailed waiting rooms and the metal and glass concourse (figs. 3.20-3.21). The formal resonances to other, more prestigious projects emphasized the civic significance of transportation in the modern metropolis. The visual connections between rail and boat terminals helped link the city into one whole and increased the pressure for architectural compatibility in buildings meant for public use.

The land approach to the Staten Island ferry terminal was also a significant public improvement undertaken in conjunction with the new building (figs. 3.22-3.23). The street improvements were meant to facilitate access to the new ferry terminal as well as provide an easier and more dignified approach to Borough Hall. According to city engineer Louis Tribus, the street improvements, along with “the ferry terminal and its viaduct, the Boro Hall, the Public Library, and, we hope, a coming handsome Court House, will make of St. George one of the

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most beautiful portions of New York City.”¹⁰⁹ Always at the forefront of civic center plans at Richmond, even among the technical experts concerned with road drainage, retaining wall construction, and other such matters, was the issue of the borough’s public face on the waterfront. The infrastructure and building improvements had more than a practical purpose: they were meant in the first place to visibly connect the borough with the rest of the city and to announce its civic aspirations under the municipal charter.

The site plan included in Tribus’ report reveals the confluence of transportation lines that made the location of Borough Hall particularly prominent within the social landscape of the borough (fig. 3.24). Tribus’ plan, incidentally, specified an “ocean view parkway”—never constructed—to the southeast of the terminal, a lingering element of Olmsted’s older ideas to stitch the island’s villages together by broad landscaped parkways. The plan indicates the new pedestrian approach to the south of the terminal (to the right in plan), the branching of the rail lines to the north and south as they leave the ferry terminal to serve the two populated shorelines of the island, and the bridge accommodating trolley tracks that spans the space over the rail lines. At the head of the trolley bridge, and at the point where Bay Street and Jay Street (today Richmond Terrace Extended) converge and turn into South Street, stands Borough Hall. As Cromwell reported in 1903, the building stands “practically in the very centre of the splendid street widenings and extensions for the St. George ferry approach.”¹¹⁰ Bay and Jay Streets were widened from 50 feet to 100 feet and regraded. At its highest point, South Street was cut ten feet to reach the new grade on its approach to the terminal. In addition to the street improvements, a new retaining wall along Jay Street on the ferry side was built with an overhanging sidewalk (fig.

the purpose of which, Tribus wrote, was “to preserve to the public the use of the full right of way” along that stretch of street. He also noted that “as a concession to artistic taste and perhaps conservatism, the parapet is finished with a granit [sic] facing on the street side and a granit coping.” As part of the most conspicuous public space in the borough, the engineering had to contribute to the representational civic task. Describing the difficult engineering of the wall construction, Tribus wrote, “3 years ago when these plans were being prepared there was but little information in this country, in available shape, on the design of such walls, and practically no experience as to their behavior under load.”\(^{111}\) The road and its new retaining wall were thus conspicuous examples, to those who knew, of sophisticated civil engineering, a suitable adjunct to the more pretentious architecture going up around it.

**Planning the Civic Center**

Charting the evolution of Cromwell’s ideas about the civic center in detail is impossible given the loss of both the architectural documentation and his personal papers. There are, however, hints of Cromwell’s ideas in several of his annual reports to the mayor. Although they tend to be brief descriptive summaries of work and planning objectives, they do suggest the borough president’s early thinking about the civic center’s development.

In his first report, submitted to Mayor Seth Low at the end of 1902 as required by the city’s new charter of that year, Cromwell documents the first discussions of a new building for borough government. In April, Talbot Root, George W. Vanderbilt’s Staten Island real estate

\(^{111}\) Tribus, “The St. George Ferry Approach,” 266.
agent,\textsuperscript{112} proposed on his client’s behalf to build an office building for municipal use at Stapleton, a district about a mile and a half from the St. George ferry terminal. Under the terms proposed by Root, the building would be “of such size and character as to accommodate all departments and bureaus of the Borough Government” and that the borough should lease the building for ten years, before the end of which the city would be obliged to purchase the building. Although it received the endorsement of Stapleton’s residents, the plan was rejected because “the City desired a more accessible site to all residents of the Island, and felt that such a structure should be built and owned by the City itself.”\textsuperscript{113} Why city leaders wanted to build and own an office building for the borough’s government is unclear, but it is likely Cromwell had a major hand in that decision. The fact that the Bronx had recently built its own borough hall—originally called the Bronx Municipal Building, it was designed in an Italianate style by George B. Post in 1895 and completed in 1897 (fig. 3.26)—may have convinced Cromwell that Richmond deserved its own building, too.\textsuperscript{114}

Cromwell submitted a resolution to the Board of Estimate in May asking for $200,000 to be apportioned for the construction of a new “public office building.” In his report he wrote that “the erection of such a structure as can now be built is an improvement long needed on Staten Island.”\textsuperscript{115} With the increased functions of borough government following the revised city charter, the old municipal accomodations were found wanting. Borough (formerly county)

\textsuperscript{112} Root is not mentioned in the report, which states only that “the agent for Mr. George W. Vanderbilt made public a proposition ….” Root is identified as Vanderbilt’s agent on Staten Island in Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, \textit{Staten Island and Its People: A History, 1609-1929}, vol. 2 (New York: Lewis Historical Pub. Co., 1930), 946.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Annual Report of the President of the Borough of Richmond, 1902} (Staten Island, NY: n.p., 1902), 7. Staten Island Museum Archives, Richmond Borough Records, Box 2, Folder 1.


\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Annual Report of 1902}, 7.
government was housed in two locations on the island in 1902: at Richmond-town, centrally located on the island but approximately seven miles from the St. George terminal, and in the former tenement building known as The Richmond in the New Brighton district, approximately one mile from the ferry terminal. Richmond-town had been the seat of local government since 1729, but its inconvenient location was felt to be detrimental to the efficient conduct of municipal business. Richmond’s superintendent of public buildings, John Timlin, Jr., made the case for building a new municipal seat along these lines, arguing that existing buildings were in a state of disrepair. He stated, “Of the several buildings of which I had care, practically every one required a great deal in the way of renovation and a thorough cleaning out of the accumulations of years.”

Undoubtedly, he was a voice on Cromwell’s side arguing for the construction of a new municipally-owned building.

As Cromwell told it, most Richmond residents favored a St. George location for the municipal building “as being equally accessible from all parts of the Island, and the point of nearest communication with Manhattan.” Given that lower Manhattan was now seen as the focal point of a radial spatial pattern in the enlarged city, it would have seemed natural to locate the borough’s civic building at the island’s closest point of visible contact with Manhattan. With the city’s approval of funds in April 1903, the site at St. George was acquired and construction work began on December 13, 1903. As Cromwell told it, the groundbreaking was a simple occasion to mark the beginning of the borough’s new civic life. He wrote, “The chosen area was well-filled with Borough and City officials and with prominent citizens…. Workmen, horses, wagons and ploughs with many implements thronged the outskirts, while the officials and interested citizens closed in a dense mass about the space. There was no formal speech-making.

116 John Timlin, Jr., in ibid., 64-65.
117 Cromwell, in ibid., 7.
as it seemed best that the initial step in the construction of the Borough Hall should be simple and unpretentious.”

Cromwell expressed his happiness at the course of events related to the new municipal building and other improvements then being undertaken. He opened his 1903 report to Mayor Seth Low by connecting the building and other improvements with rhetoric extolling the new period of municipal governance in the city:

The fortunate conditions of Borough administration defined by the revised Charter, the sympathy in purpose between the Municipal Government and the Boroughs under the present regime, and the appropriations granted, have opened practically a new era for the Borough of Richmond. The past year of this administration has witnessed an awakening of progressive work, and advance in permanent development and an initiation of important and needed local improvements on a large scale, really unprecedented in the history of Staten Island.

Cromwell also implored the mayor to include Staten Island in “the tremendous scheme of interborough communication … not in the remote future, but now.” His vision, by the end of 1903, was clearly growing to encompass a wide array of planning and building ideas that would more closely connect Richmond, physically and symbolically, to the rest of the city. He would follow Olmsted’s vision of judiciously urbanizing selected parts of the island while regulating and directing development to preserve its natural features and rural character.

Earlier in 1903, in tandem with his solicitation of funding for the new Borough Hall, Cromwell began to advocate for retaining the old location of the Staten Island Ferry terminal at St. George. There had been agitation among some Staten Island residents and business interests to move the terminal to Tompkinsville along the south shore, but Cromwell, with his planned Borough Hall on his mind, argued that it would be more economical and timely for the city to buy the existing private terminal rather than having to deal with the “long delay” that would

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118 Annual Report of 1903, 12.
119 Ibid., 5.
result from the choice of the Tompkinsville site.\textsuperscript{120} Additionally, as a city engineer wrote in a later report, the St. George terminal, “thru the effect of tidal action, [had] absolute freedom from floating ice in the winter season.”\textsuperscript{121} Thus, a confluence of factors worked in favor of St. George. The city decided in March for the St. George location and immediately made plans for street widenings and new street grades in the terminal district.\textsuperscript{122}

A major hint—aside from the largely wishful thinking of the Municipal Art Society’s civic centers group\textsuperscript{123}—that Borough Hall was just the first of a host of buildings that would create a central municipal district for Richmond was indicated in Cromwell’s 1904 report. Arguing that the construction of Borough Hall, then underway, was his chief accomplishment to date, he wrote that “if nothing else has been accomplished during this administration” the building “will stand as a monument to local patriotism and constant efforts to benefit Staten Island.” He then declared that the building’s influence would “certainly” include “the erection of other public buildings at St. George, which if not central, is now and always will be the centralizing point of the Borough of Richmond.”\textsuperscript{124} Like the emergence of lower Manhattan as a “centralizing point” for the entire city, St. George would become the spatial and symbolic focus for the island. Although his 1904 report provided no details about what the other elements of a future civic center might be, it is clear that seeing Borough Hall’s construction provoked Cromwell into actively thinking about developing St. George as a municipal center of architectural distinction.

The laying of the cornerstone on May 21, 1904, was made into a great civic celebration (fig. 3.27). As the \textit{Times} described it, “Staten Island formally acknowledged, declared, and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{120} “Staten Island’s Ferry,” \textit{New York Times}, 8 Feb. 1903.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Tribus, “The St. George Ferry Approach,” 262.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} “Richmond Ferry Plans,” \textit{New York Times}, 21 March 1903.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Cromwell, \textit{Report of the President}, 12.
\end{itemize}
gloried yesterday afternoon that she was an integral part of the Greater New York.” Confirming Cromwell’s ideas about the civic status of the building and its strategic importance in securing the borough’s municipal standing, the *Times*’ story went on to describe how Mayor McClellan, during his speech, turned to George Cromwell and declared that “the day really ought to be called ‘Cromwell Day.’” McClellan pressed hard on the public spirit theme to describe Cromwell and himself as having risen above partisanship to do the work of promoting the common welfare:

> Mr. Cromwell and I belong to opposite political parties. We have fought earnestly, strenuously, and manfully, and we are to fight again, but Mr. Cromwell and I belong to that class of partisans who think they best serve their party when, in office, they forget party differences in the interest of the whole community. I have sat side by side with Mr. Cromwell in the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, and I assure you that he has given me his support, just as I have given him mine, not only for the Borough of Richmond, but for all New York.125

Indeed, some of the commentary unleashed by the laying of the cornerstone was effusive. Elements of the rhetoric, including parts of the mayor’s speech, were clearly opportunistic posturing on the part of officials eager to bask in the light of civic munificence. Published several days after the ceremony, the *Staten Island Republican* dedicated several pages to it, indulging in the same effusive rhetoric and making the building’s construction into an epoch-defining event. Describing the day as one in which even nature had conspired, by supplying a “clear and propitious sky,” to make “a scene of impressive dignity and elated animation,” it very confidently stated that the purpose of the ceremony was “the cementing of all the people in one common purpose of ambition and advancement by the erection of a great municipal building.” Grandiosely declaring that the date of the ceremony “was the greatest day in the history of Staten Island,” the report recorded how “nature smiled and men laughed in sheer gladness of heart as they took one another’s hands and congratulated themselves and each other on what seemed to

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be the crowning event of many years effort to establish Staten Island in the position which rightly belongs to her among the self governing communities of the land.”126

The politics of city consolidation, hopes for reformed municipal governance, and the relation between local and federal government were conspicuous themes during the ceremonies. New York Senator Chauncey Depew’s speech was so concerned with the borough and the city’s relationship to federal governance that it could have been the outline for a political science treatise of the time, along the lines of those by Delos Wilcox or Frank Goodnow. Depew, who was familiar with the politics of architecture from his role on the State Capitol Commission in the 1880s, told the crowd of dignitaries and citizens, “We are here to celebrate … the political union of Staten Island with New York. Public opinion was about equally divided at the time of the creation of the greater city as to its expediency, but today we are united in our pride and confidence in the metropolis…. Greater New York has aroused a civic pride which before was singularly lacking.” He then turned to the architecture proper, stating that “this building is the physical sign that Staten Island is part of this mighty and powerful whole. Your unequalled location will lead to growth and progress here as little dreamed of now as were the developments of today by your citizens of a hundred years ago.” And he then advanced a familiar argument about municipal governance:

But I think no one who has studied the question can doubt that there is a constantly rising intelligent patriotism and civic pride in this vast electorate. It was a wise thought in the framers of the charter to put our government upon the federal idea…. The secret of successful government under this system is in giving in matters which pertain to localities the largest measure of home rule…. In great aggregations of populations where there is so little of the neighborhood and individual contact which made the township a power and a model, responsibility should be concentrated. There ought to be greater authority given to the borough president in local appointments and the details of administration with borough limits.

126 “Splendid Ceremonies at Formal Founding of Richmond Borough Hall,” Staten Island Republican, 25 May 1904.
… In a city so vast and growing as rapidly as New York, there should be a concurrent growth of the federal idea and of home rule.

Finally, he declared, “publicity and responsibility are our safety.”127

George Cromwell, too, linked the building to the larger fortunes of the city and to the political structure of American government. Describing the soon-to-rise Borough Hall as “a great and beautiful building” that would “stand as a landmark centuries after we have passed away,” Cromwell asserted a deeper importance for the building. He said, “The great significance of this occasion … lies in the fact that we are rearing here today the permanent home of borough government, that new form of local self government vouchsafed to us by the Charter of the City of New York, of which we have become an important and integral part.” But turning to an even larger context, Cromwell noted that the propitious site of the building was not far from the spot where Henry Hudson had made his first landing: “Happy coincidence it is that the structure we all hope will be the lasting pride of our citizens should grace such historic ground.” He then connected the site as well to the “beautiful bay at our feet” and spoke with ever more civic-minded rhetoric:

Situated at the Atlantic gateway of the United States, the commerce not only of a nation, but of a world, passes before us in a never ending procession of ships bearing the flags of every country, carrying the products of all climes, and representing every race that navigates the globe.

The millions who flee from oppression abroad and seek the land of liberty as a future home, receive the first greeting in the land of their adoption from the green clad hills of Staten Island.

… A period of great progress and activity lies before us and will require the labor, the energy, the intellect and enterprise of every one of Staten Island, to make this borough what a proud destiny it should be.

Finally, at the moment of the laying of the cornerstone, he stated, “With this mortar, let us cement together the whole of Richmond, its various sections, its factions, parties, creeds and

127 “Senator Depew’s Speech,” in ibid.
races, as well as the hearts of all, in common cause for the common good.”  Clearly, by the
time of its construction, Cromwell was thinking broadly about the role of Borough Hall in the
city’s fortunes and connecting it to the improvements in his borough. It seems reasonable to
speculate that the image of an even greater civic center that could match the grandiloquence of
his, Depew’s, and others’ civic sentiments could have formed itself in his mind at this time.

It was during 1906 that plans for building a new County Courthouse were first discussed
and when the idea of a civic center comprising various public buildings seems to have first
coalesced into a real possibility. In his annual report of that year, Cromwell celebrated the
opening of Borough Hall and linked it with other buildings in St. George as part of a conspicuous
gateway to the borough. The opening of Borough Hall did not elicit the same outpouring of civic
rhetoric as its cornerstone-laying ceremony had two years earlier. Still, Cromwell described the
new building as a “commodious, dignified and well-equipped” building in the St. George district,
“where it possesses a commanding outlook over the harbor and where, with one of the Public
Library buildings, with the hoped-for Court House, the handsome Staten Island Academy, and
the beautiful Curtis High School, it lends its beauty and dignity to appropriately add to this most
conspicuous portion of the borough.”

The public library building Cromwell mentioned was then under construction by Carrère
& Hastings as part of Andrew Carnegie’s deal with the New York Public Library to provide
branch locations throughout the city. Carrère & Hastings had designed the borough’s first
branch library in 1904 at Tottenville, one in 1905 at Port Richmond, and another that opened in
June of 1906 at Stapleton before undertaking the St. George branch. According to the pamphlet

128 “George Cromwell’s Speech,” in ibid.
130 Hewitt, et al., Carrère & Hastings, 325-29, 338.
celebrating its opening on June 16, 1907, the building held 11,000 volumes and was the 23rd of the Carnegie branches and the 37th branch of the library system overall. As a local newspaper reported, the St. George branch’s opening was “an event of considerable importance, both from a social and intellectual standpoint. It is keenly appreciated by the reading community, and will grow in interest and importance as time goes on. This is considered the most important public library so far established in Richmond Borough.”

Deferential to Borough Hall but stylistically compatible, it was designed as a simple H-shaped mass constructed of red brick and limestone. Its main facade was raised on a stone base, which on the back side—downhill—embraced a full floor with smooth ashlar facing (figs. 3.28-3.29). Both sides were composed in a tripartite organization similar to the nearby Borough Hall: the center section of each facade was composed of five bays with round-arched windows, framed by two slightly projecting wings with flat-arched lintels. A pedimented door framed the central entrances on both sides; on the main facade the entrance was embellished by free-standing Doric columns in front of the projecting vestibule. Each side was approached by a narrow pavement, which included terraced stairs at the rear to connect the door to the street downhill. Because the library stood uphill from Borough Hall along Hyatt Street at the top of the curving intersection with Bay Street (fig. 3.30), its front faced the residential streets of St. George. Although it was physically close to Borough Hall, its uphill location prevented it from being an integral part of Cromwell’s later civic center plan. Still, the building was visible from the bay and to pedestrians

131 “Opening Exercises,” pamphlet dated 26 June 1907, New York Public Library, St. George Branch Records, Box 2.
132 Clipping from The Staten Islander, 27 June 1907, New York Public Library, St. George Branch Records, Box 2.
using the South Street connection to the ferry. At least visually, then, the library participated in the scenography of the emerging civic center at St. George.\textsuperscript{133}

With the economic downturn of 1908, Cromwell and his borough government turned to smaller issues of improvement and administration, and for several years the subject of large-scale improvements, construction, or additions to the St. George civic center was off the table. It emerged again in its final form in 1912. Unfortunately, Cromwell’s annual reports in the intervening years do not indicate how the plan emerged into a full architectural scheme. He presented a fully worked out urban plan for the civic center to the Board of Estimate on March 21, 1912, but the necessary funds for the purchase of land that the plan required were not approved. The Board of Estimate did, however, appropriate $250,000 for the purchase of the land directly west of Borough Hall for a County Courthouse and a terrace connecting the two buildings. The terrace and courthouse were the last elements of the civic center to be built according to Cromwell’s plan. Later, the Police Precinct Headquarters (1920-23) and the Staten Island Children’s Courthouse (1929-31) were built two blocks west of the County Courthouse (figs. 3.31-3.32).\textsuperscript{134} Although these buildings occupy one of the blocks originally designated for the civic center, they do not reflect Cromwell’s original ideas. The intervening block had not been purchased by the city and it was left to private development. The Police Headquarters by James Whitford is faced on three sides with terra cotta shaped to resemble limestone blocks and is a relatively severe box-like building enlivened on its main facade by the decorative emphasis on balconies above the symmetrical doorways. The Children’s Courthouse by Sibley & Fetherston is also faced with terra cotta to imitate limestone. Its pavilion-like neoclassical design

\textsuperscript{133} An addition in the 1980s using the same materials and fenestration pattern nonetheless occluded its close formal affinities to Borough Hall, especially in its overall massing. See Hewit, et al., \textit{Carrère & Hastings}, 338.

with central pediment contrasts vividly with the boxy and taller police precinct next door. It recalls early nineteenth-century buildings in New York such as the Bank of the United States on Wall Street (fig. 3.33).135

Cromwell found an ally for his civic center plan in the *New York Times*, which in 1912 published two illustrated articles on Richmond’s planning efforts, including, prominently, the civic center (figs. 3.34-3.35). The *Times* characterized the debate over the civic center plan as one “between the picturesque and useful on the one hand and close, almost cheese-paring economy on the other”—the latter comment clearly directed at the fiscally-sensitive Board of Estimate and the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund, municipal agencies that had final authority to approve or deny such plans.136 The articles lavished praise on Cromwell as a beneficent, public-spirited leader and positioned the civic center plan in the best possible light by providing rebuttals to possible arguments raised against it and by arguing that it was a crucial component of the larger slate of proposed improvements aimed at raising the quality of life on Richmond. As the second of the articles declared, “Under Borough President George Cromwell, Staten Island residents have had cause to point with pride, as the old saying goes, to their public officials. In its road work, in its transit work, in its city planning work and in other lines of public benefits, Staten Island has experienced a decided transformation since it became a part of New York City in 1902 [sic].”137

The plan published in the *Times* called for a “noble line of civic buildings” that stretched across four blocks beginning with Borough Hall in the east and encompassing—if we include the

135 The Police Headquarters and the Children’s Courthouse are New York City landmarks. For full descriptions, see landmark designation reports LP-2057 and LP-2058. The designation reports argue that these structures fulfilled the aim of Cromwell’s civic center design, but they depart urbanistically from the plan he promoted and are separated from Borough Hall or the Courthouse by a commercial block. They are also unaligned with each other and appear relatively diminutive compared to the civic buildings to the east. Thus, from a distance and up close, the buildings do not look or feel closely related to those designed by Carrère & Hastings.
Public Library, which was shaded the same way as the other new buildings on the plan—five buildings with gardens, narrow streets, and pedestrian paths between and around the buildings. Cromwell’s plan would have required that the city purchase all of the land west of Borough Hall between Jay Street and Stuyvesant Place, except for the block already owned by the city two blocks west of Borough Hall, which would eventually be occupied by the Police Precinct Headquarters. The ensemble would have masked the hodgepodge of small houses set back at varying distances from the street on Stuyvesant Place behind it (fig. 3.36-3.37). As the *Times* described it, Borough Hall as it existed in 1912 was “completely isolated” and “has to hobnob with wooden and brick structures of no distinction whatsoever.” Cromwell’s plan clearly addressed this breach of civic decorum at the delicate shoreline of St. George by providing for “a series of fine public buildings, each harmonizing with the other and each standing in grounds of its own. By this means he would create overlooking the Bay a noble row of municipal and governmental offices, which would add dignity to the end of Staten Island.” Moreover, according to Cromwell, the outlay of money required to secure the land and construct the buildings would constitute a sound investment in the future of the borough; it was a plan to “make an improvement which future generations for 200 years will rejoice in.” From Cromwell’s perspective, it was “absurd to cavil over the expenditure when a great public improvement is under discussion.”

Moving north from the library and Borough Hall, between which the wedge of space was labeled “public place,” the plan called for an adjacent courtyard and fountain with the L-shaped County Courthouse at the far end; then, across Dekalb Street, a symmetrical federal building and post office on a block of its own; then, across Wall Street, the Staten Island Museum; and finally, occupying the northernmost wedge-shaped block between Jay Street, Stuyvesant Place, and

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138 “Noble Line of Civic Buildings.”
Hamilton Avenue, a space that “might be devoted to any number of civic purposes, such as a park or a public market.” As the *Times* described it, this row of “four or five handsome public buildings” would stand “at an elevation above high-water mark quite sufficient to bring out their terracelike effect.” The terrace effect would have been especially prominent because of the significant slope uphill from Jay Street to Stuyvesant Place along the whole length of the plan. The ground floor of the buildings, except for the courthouse which stretched down to Jay Street, would occupy the highest grade on level with Stuyvesant Place and would be surrounded and approached by terraced patches of grass, plantings, and pavements negotiating the change in elevation from east to west.

Although it is not clear who was responsible for designing the site plan as a whole, John Carrère at least had a hand in determining the shape and siting of the Courthouse before his death on March 1, 1911. The *Times* wrote that he was “largely responsible” for the selection of the site and for convincing Cromwell to press the Board of Estimate for its purchase. The *Times* article illustrating the urban plan of the civic center appeared one year after Carrère’s death, so that presumably Thomas Hastings was responsible for its completion. The plan illustrated in the *Times* is not signed or dated, and the accompanying text refers to it only as “Cromwell’s plan,” leaving open the question of its authorship. If Carrère did work out the full scheme before his death, perhaps Cromwell had waited to publicize it until he found a moment when the economic outlook would be more favorable to the reception of such an expensive, large-scale public works project. If Hastings or someone else in the firm was responsible for drawing up the plan, this must have happened sometime later in 1911 after Carrère’s death or in early 1912.

139 Ibid.
A New Type of Civic Center

What was finally built at St. George only partially fulfilled Cromwell’s civic center plan. Borough Hall and the Public Library were already in place by the time of the plan, while the County Courthouse was built as shown in it. The courtyard between Borough Hall and the courthouse (fig. 3.38) was modified in several ways: the balustrade marking its eastern edge was extended further east to line up with the colonnade of the courthouse; it was built with two fountain basins along the balustrade on Jay Street, spaced widely apart, instead of one in the center (fig. 3.39); and in the internal arrangement of pavements and grassy areas a few small changes accommodated the greater expanse of the courtyard. But these were minor changes from the published plan. Although the remaining blocks to the west did not materialize according to Cromwell’s plan, the block containing Borough Hall and the courthouse created an effective visual focus uphill from the ferry terminal and an appropriately monumental face for the newly established borough. Architecturally, the most important aspect of the built fragment of the civic center is the way in which it adapts to its site to create two distinct urban aspects—one facing the water and the other facing the St. George neighborhood and, implicitly, the whole of the island. The difference between the east and west faces of these adjacent buildings reveals a sensitivity to the specific urban situation at St. George. Carrère & Hastings created an alternative urbanism—much as they did for the New York Public Library and other projects at the same time—which fulfilled the political ambitions of civic classicism but which also adapted this urban classicism’s rhetoric and form to the distinctive status of the “garden borough” and the exigencies of site. To understand this adaptation, we need to consider the ideas then current about civic centers and to see how Carrère & Hastings’ plans conform to or depart from then-current conventions. The
deviations from the civic center models demonstrate the adaptability of civic classicism to fit the peculiarities of varied physical contexts throughout New York City.

According to Jonathan Ritter, John De Witt Warner was the first to use the term “civic center” in a 1902 article in Municipal Affairs.\footnote{Ritter, “The American Civic Center,” 5-6. Ritter mistakenly reads the alternate British spelling of center—centre—in the title of Warner’s article. Warner does use the Anglicized spelling in the text of the article but the title itself uses the standard American spelling. The reason for the different spellings in title and text is unclear. Ritter claims, without further citations, that “the Anglicized form implies a European precedent…. This connotation reflects contemporary aspirations to import European planning models into U.S. cities. The Americanization of the term outside of New York, on the other hand, indicates the evolution of the civic center concept and its establishment in American planning practice.” Ibid., 6-7.} Prior to this, as Warner himself demonstrates, the civic center idea was merely an implicit model of urbanism. For example, in a report by the Fine Arts Federation of New York, the civic center idea was described as a municipal improvement scheme characterized by “some large space for the aggregation of its monumental buildings—some noble square, for instance, or avenue lined with equally noble buildings.”\footnote{A report of the Fine Arts Federation of New York, quoted in John De Witt Warner, “Civic Centers,” Municipal Affairs 6, no. 1 (March 1902): 2.} In Warner’s own words, the civic center was a place “at which shall be centred the public life of the city of to-day.”\footnote{Warner, “Civic Centers,” 4.} Warner put the question of a civic center in municipal terms that resonated with the municipal political theory of the day. As a great metropolis, New York had to be seen as “a dignified and civic organization as distinguished from a mere social or business aggregation.” This was a distinctly political view of architecture. From this perspective, Warner then criticized what he saw as “New York’s greatest material lack,” which he described as “one or more great civic centres, at which, alike to the beauty and the convenience of the city, shall be effectively grouped those public or quasi-public structures that are, as it were, the vital organs upon which its vigor and character must so largely depend.”\footnote{Ibid., 23.} The New York Times offered its readers a verbatim definition, based on a recent report from Warner’s civic centers committee of the
Municipal Art Society, stating that “the term civic centre … include[s] the grouping of public
buildings around a park or open space or plaza, so that to the advantages of light and air is added
the length of vision which enhances architectural beauty, while there are also brought into closer
relation those buildings which, through their use by the public, become a centre of civic life.”

Warner discussed the civic center as a kind of progressive realization—a growing civic
consciousness among the urban polity—that the public realm of New York finally needed
consideration and adequate physical expression after generations of private preeminence
orchestrated “between local rings of real estate interests.” Citing the ancient cities of Ninevah,
Babylon, Thebes, Athens, and Rome, Warner declared that despite their differences they “were
alike in this: Each was the expression of its civic life and could not well have existed without
such a focus of its energies—this because, its citizens being men, not brutes, their public life was
highly organized…. And, as one after another modern city becomes self-conscious, it tends
toward that more perfect adjustment of its public functions and facilities that results in one or
more civic centers.” As we saw in chapter one, this comparative view of modern American
cities with historical examples and the emphasis on civic “self-consciousness” were staples of
the new municipal political theory in the late nineteenth century. Recognizing this
convergence, Warner declared that New York was now “able and ready” to create architectural
and urban forms appropriate to its new political stature:

In New York, especially during the last ten years, the growth of civic pride has
been marked. Within the past five years the consciousness that here is the world’s
capital, the appreciation of what this means, the readiness and ability to take and
support enlightened means toward realizing our destiny, have so rapidly grown

144 “Civic Centres,” New York Times, 16 March 1905. For the Times’ source, see Gabrielle Stewart Mulliner,
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid., 4.
147 This convergence in both rhetorical and substantive terms between political thought and architectural and urban
design theory has not been recognized either in previous studies of the City Beautiful or in case studies of municipal
that one must now assume this city definitely accepting leadership, and able and ready to take all needed steps toward that end.

From a material standpoint, the first is a well-considered plan for city development; and of this civic centres for the grouping of main public or semi-public buildings will be an essential.\textsuperscript{148}

Fostering civic consciousness and civic pride was a major theme of the civic center promoters, but two other themes were also consistently prominent: the role of municipal power to counteract private, especially real estate, interests, and the eminence of site that would clearly privilege public or semi-public buildings within the cityscape. These three themes were mutually reinforcing, so that most writers, even if they focused on one or another of them, would almost inevitably cite the others as critical aspects of the civic center concept. In addition to Warner, J. G. Phelps Stokes—a member of the Municipal Art Society’s civic centers committee with Warner—and Guy Kirkham were particularly outspoken on the matter of civic centers. Both penned articles for an influential report, \textit{The Grouping of Public Buildings}, published by the Hartford Municipal Art Society in 1904, in which they laid out a complete rationale for the civic center idea. Kirkham emphasized the connection of visibility and “grateful eminence of site” for public buildings, articulating in very schematic form what could almost be described as a theory of publicity for public buildings. In his view, a civic center contributed to “the truly ideal city [which] becomes the practical city, the truly practical the ideal.” The creation of civic centers—there could be more than one in large cities—would “provide spacious focal points, giving distinction of site to important buildings, convenience of communication, and effective, not wearisome, vistas.” Well planned and coordinated groupings of public buildings would facilitate “the public business” and would “foster civic pride,” which, he stated, “is a developer and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{148} Warner, “Civic Centers,” 23.}
safeguard of civic duty, civic honor.” Echoing Herbert Croly’s interest in the development of architectural types as a signature of modern architecture, Kirkham argued that civic center buildings “should present distinctive architectural characters” that would exhibit “that variety in unity which is the artistic ideal.” The well planned civic center, with appropriately and typologically distinct buildings would, in words that could have been written by Croly, indicate that “there is progress toward a definite and fitting type of structure, with beauty as its consummation…. This is as true of city-building as of any constructive art. We must understand the needs and purposes of the city, and in meeting these rightly the safe and convenient, and finally the beautiful, city will be evolved.” This pragmatic melding of aesthetics and “needs and purposes” was very much at the center of Croly’s architectural criticism.

Phelps Stokes’ essay, which began on purely aesthetic terms, turned to the broader political question of the civic center. After first declaring that park-like settings would best distinguish public buildings—“exhibiting them amid lawns and foliage and pleasant landscapes and at a sufficient distance for their proportions to be appreciated and enjoyed”—Phelps Stokes invoked, like Warner, ancient authority and argued that “devotion to the public interests” were reinforced by “the beautiful plazas and public buildings” that “furnished unparalleled encouragement to the people to come together and mingle” and “become united in common interest in the common weal.” If the “imperfect democracy then prevailing permitted concentration of power” in those ancient city-states, in modern America there was now the chance, Phelps Stokes suggested, to avoid “an excess of beauty and of luxury owned privately,” which “led through private to public demoralization.” Instead, civic centers could be conceived as being on the front line of progressive desires to restrain private interests for the public good.

150 Ibid., 50.
“Where beauty is enjoyed publicly and habitually,” he wrote, impetus is given to preserving the public interest. Architecture could channel and express the priority of the public good. And in a phrase that could have been written by Richard Dagger or Ronald Beiner today, he wrote that “the wider the public enjoyment … of a city, … the wider the mutual thoughts and feelings and interests that arise; and this tends to the development of a wider social morality.”151 This is very close, indeed, to Beiner’s concept of a “shared horizon of citizenship” linked to the quality of the built environment.

This political reading of the civic center discourse runs counter to prevailing interpretations. As Jonathan Ritter has noted, interpretations of civic centers and of the City Beautiful more broadly “have generally discounted ‘civic pride’ as vague rhetoric” or even as “dissembling rhetoric” that masks class interests.152 As we have seen in chapters one and two, however, a number of intellectual historians and political theorists have concluded that such rhetoric was essential to the republican ethos that developed in the Progressive Era and, consequently, should be taken as expressing an authentic political program for restraining private interests in favor of the common good.153 Arnold Brunner, a New York architect involved in Cleveland’s civic center plan, presented at the 1916 National Conference on City Planning perhaps the most direct statement of this political perspective:

The Civic Centre is where the city speaks to us, where it asserts itself. Here the streets meet and agree to submit to regulation. They resolve themselves into some regular form, the buildings stop swearing at each other, competition is forgotten, individuals are no longer rivals—they are all citizens.

153 Full references to this literature are found in chapters one and two. The references most relevant to the argument here are Kevin Mattson, Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), and Michael J. Sandel, Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).
Petty struggles for prominence, small successes and failures disappear. Here the citizens assume their rights and duties and here civic pride is born.\footnote{Arnold Brunner, “Cleveland’s Group Plan,” in Proceedings of the Eighth National Conference on City Planning (New York, 1916), 24.}

Brunner’s ideal of a regulated urbanism\footnote{This does not, as Jonathan Ritter suggests (“The American Civic Center,” 16), seem to be exactly equivalent to Françoise Choay’s “regularization” (a part of her “critical urbanism”) defined as a plan to “regularize the disordered city, to disclose its new order by means of a pure, schematic layout which will disentangle it from its dross, the sediment of past and present failures.” Françoise Choay, The Modern City: Planning in the 19th Century (New York: George Braziller, 1969), 15.} that helps to foster the urban civic consciousness was a natural complement to the political theorists’ interest in the cities as the crucible of the new public.

An avenue lined with noble buildings, as defined by the Fine Arts Federation, was precisely what George Cromwell and Carrère & Hastings proposed for Staten Island. Although never completed, the fragment that was built suggests that the specifics of site played a large role in determining the arrangement and form of the buildings. As Warner’s report suggested, “civic center” was not a monolithic idea and it did not have to correspond to the concept of a “noble square” or traditional grouping of buildings around an open space. It could, as at St. George, be a noble line of buildings, a terrace or range, taking advantage of topographical and geographical contingencies.

**An Urban Scenography for Staten Island**

In the late nineteenth century, St. George did not have much in the way of commercial or industrial sites, and until the Borough Hall it did not have a civic function, either, except insofar as the ferry constituted one. Describing the waterfront road, Richmond Terrace, as a boulevard of trees, Gustav Kobbé distinguished the district by its spacious plots filled with free-standing,
widely dispersed houses set within garden-like settings—much as Olmsted had earlier described it in his vision of the island. Kobbé wrote,

At St. George begins a famous feature of the Island—Richmond Terrace—which extends all along the North Shore. The road is hard and well-made and shaded on either side by tall spreading trees. The view of the water is uninterrupted, only one side of the road being used for building. The houses are all detached, standing in gardens of their own. Some are several feet above the road, with terraces of sloping green, and others, with tall white columns reaching to the roof, a suggestion of the old colonial days, stand in the midst of wide sweeping lawns.156

The transformation of the most visible part of the area into a civic and transportation center ultimately led to the urbanizing of the district as commercial buildings replaced houses along Stuyvesant Street. The new buildings were built out to the sidewalk and a continuous street edge began to define a more robust urban enclosure as the backdrop to the civic center.

Borough Hall, Richmond County Courthouse, and the terrace between them initiated a new kind of urbanism on Staten Island, growing out of the site’s waterside location, topography, and visibility from the bay and Manhattan and commensurate with the island’s romantic-suburb type of development. Carrère & Hastings adapted the classicism of their other civic and institutional buildings to fit these exigencies of site and program at St. George. Like their project for the New York Public Library, the civic center was oriented outward, to the larger city. As the New York Times described it, the old county government center at Richmondtown, near the center of the island, indicated that before 1898 “the borough still looked inward.” The new civic center indicated that “all this has changed…. The very fact that Richmond is near the centre of the borough is to its disadvantage.” The article continued,

For the Borough of Richmond, by its geographical location, must ever be something apart from the rest of the city, and the [borough] President has determined to make the approach to it as notable in its architectural features as it is already in its natural surroundings…. [His plan will] at one and the same time

156 Kobbé, Staten Island, 29.
gather together all the municipal and judicial business of the island and add a new beauty to the environments of New York Bay.  

With its buildings aligned in a range along the slope of the hill overlooking the bay, the civic center proposed a new pattern for the island’s urbanism: it eschewed the enclosure of the typical civic center plan in favor of a series of free-standing monuments placed within formal gardens and carefully detailed streetscapes, “at an elevation above high-water mark quite sufficient to bring out their terracelike effect.”

Perhaps taking the line of buildings at Sailors’ Snug Harbor as a model, an ensemble Carrère certainly knew well, Carrère & Hastings transformed the mid-nineteenth-century campus to fit the more prominent and picturesque hillside at St. George. Borough Hall, the County Courthouse, and the courtyard between them were the only pieces of the ambitious plan to be realized, but they became a set piece of a new scenographic modality for Staten Island and for New York’s cityscape more generally.

Borough Hall, the first and most important element of the ensemble, was designed with two distinct faces: one facing the water to the east (the “ceremonial” front, fig. 3.40) and the other facing the residential streets of St. George to the west (the “business” front, fig. 3.41). Three major features of the building help articulate its two primary faces: the U-shaped plan, the second-story colonnade along the ceremonial front, and the clock tower. Together, these elements orchestrate the distinction between the building’s two primary orientations and insert the building into the particular site dynamics of its location.

In plan, Borough Hall takes a U-shape with its enclosing wings reaching toward the water (fig. 3.42). The wings frame an open forecourt for the building on the approach from the ferry. Situated at the top of a flight of steps up from street level to accommodate the hillside topography, the forecourt creates a viewing and gathering platform adjacent to the building (fig. 3.43). This

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157 “Noble Line of Civic Buildings for Staten Island.”
158 Ibid.
platform takes advantage of the “length of vision” that John De Witt Warner had associated with civic center planning, staging sweeping views across the bay, encompassing parts of New Jersey, Manhattan, and Brooklyn—as full a scope of the geography of the metropolis as is available anywhere from land within the city. Harnessing the visual drama of what Cromwell called the “commanding outlook” provided by the site seems to have been the entire raison d’etre of the forecourt. Within the broad sweep of that outlook, the forecourt also helps to establish a more defined vista between Borough Hall and the Battery of Manhattan. This sight line to the recently recognized radial center of the enlarged metropolis connected St. George, and Staten Island as a whole, into the visible space of Greater New York. The axis between Borough Hall and Battery follows the approximate route of the Staten Island ferry, further emphasizing the physical connection of the city’s center and periphery. And as part of the broader sweep of view across the bay, the forecourt is akin, for instance, to the Riva degli Schiavoni at the water’s edge of the Piazzetta of Saint Mark’s in Venice: a ceremonial welcome point and a place of greatest visibility within the city.159 The site’s prominence makes it a place of political significance where the urban public is made visible to itself.

Borough Hall’s tower punctuates the axial connection between Staten Island and Manhattan. It creates a beacon for visitors approaching by ferry and, originally, articulated a formal visual connection to the Washington Building’s towered cupola on Battery Park (later removed, as discussed in the next chapter). But the tower’s bulk is placed on the business front of the building rather than the ceremonial front. In elevation, the tower is made an integral part of the articulation of the business side of the building: the red brick and light stone quoins and entablatures accommodate the tower’s rising bulk. The tower also creates a clear axial symmetry

159 This reading is suggested by Daniel Savoy’s interpretation of the urban scenography of the Bacino and Riva degli Schiavoni in Venice from the Water.
from the approach down Hyatt Street (fig. 3.44). A similar prominence is achieved from the street approach to the south (fig. 3.45). Thus, from both water and land, the tower articulates the centripetal visual force of the building; it is the hinge upon which the borough’s connection to Greater New York pivots.

The colonnade along Borough Hall’s water-facing front also contributes to the distinction of ceremonial and business facades (fig. 3.46). Like its primary models—the French provincial hôtel de ville and the Parisian mairie, as well as other French buildings especially of the early seventeenth century—\(^\text{160}\)—the ground floor is articulated in stone and carries the colonnade above, with the upper stories primarily in brick. Another possible model for the building, more directly in plan than in elevation or in materials, would have been New York City Hall. The projecting wings in City Hall’s U-shape plan also reach out to the city center—at least the center as it was when built in the early nineteenth century—and the building has a free-standing portico on the entrance side of the first floor. Borough Hall’s colonnade, however, adds a noticeable flourish to the building from the ferry approach, its shadows giving relief to the otherwise planar articulation of the exterior walls. Along with the clock tower, the colonnade is a rhetorical device signaling the civic purpose of the building. While the clock tower is the primary focus of the business side of the building, the colonnade is the primary focus of the ceremonial side.

The Richmond County Courthouse, designed in 1912 and under construction until 1919, indicated a different approach to the civic center from that of Borough Hall (fig. 3.47-3.48). Like its neighbor, it was considered a “dignified, substantial and imposing structure.”\(^\text{161}\) But in plan and elevation it is remarkably different from Borough Hall. Rather than a free-standing

\(^{160}\)See Blake, “Carrère & Hastings, Architects,” 266-78. Blake also relates them to the architects’ other town hall commissions, including those of Patterson, New Jersey, and Portland, Maine, both designed within a few years of Borough Hall.

\(^{161}\)“Richmond County Court House, St. George, Staten Island, N.Y.,” Architecture and Building, September 1919, 69.
monument in the center of a block, the courthouse takes an L-shaped plan wrapping around two sides of a block and accommodates the hillside topography with a steeply sloping side elevation. Although joined, the courthouse is articulated on its street-facing sides as two distinct buildings: an office block with mannerist details such as exaggerated voussoirs and keystones and broken window pediments along Stuyvesant Place, and a more severely Roman temple-fronted wing facing the water. Thus, like Borough Hall, there is a business side and a ceremonial side to the courthouse. But the exterior walls facing the courtyard (fig. 3.49-3.50) present a consistent style, disregarding the distinction between the business and ceremonial wings of the reverse side.

There are, then, dual and overlapping formal distinctions at the courthouse: between water- and neighborhood-facing fronts, and between street- and courtyard-facing fronts. As at Borough Hall—and perhaps even more emphatically because of the distinctive formal treatment of each part—these differences indicate attentiveness to the site’s topography, the building’s representational challenges, and the particularities of the (sub)urban scenography of the civic center plan as a whole.

Curtis Blake has described the consistent rustication around the courthouse “as a blanket” acting to hold the two wings together. But the architects did not simply elide the business and ceremonial sides of the courthouse with common details, as was the case at Borough Hall. They also marked the distinction of the two sections as different masses with different urbanistic purposes (similar to the way in which they articulated the different urbanistic purposes of the street and courtyard facades). The most telling detail is the setback of the ceremonial wing along Schuyler Street (fig. 3.51). As the ceremonial side, the temple-front wing partakes of the suburban garden urbanism of the water-facing front of the civic center. The business side, facing an ordinary and relatively narrow street that allows no distant perspective views, is built out to

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the sidewalk like the typical kind of urban architecture whose job is to define the street edge. The
temple front, by contrast, does not define an edge but creates a scenographic contrast with both
the courtyard-garden and Borough Hall that is clear even from a significant distance out on the
water (fig. 3.52)

The garden-like courtyard between Borough Hall and the County Courthouse has been
almost completely overlooked in the commentary on the ensemble, but it is an integral element
as well as the best articulated space of the entire civic center plan (3.53-3.54).\footnote{Blake, for instance, describes it in only two sentences but calls it a “ceremonial parterre garden” with a
“particularly felicitous” formal arrangement of niche, basin fountains, and other landscape features. Ibid.}
Defined by the L-shape of the courthouse on two sides and partially by the north side of Borough Hall, it was
the most enclosed space of the plan—a figural space and outdoor room in its own right, rather
than a buffer of space around a building as were the open spaces in the unbuilt parts of the plan.

The courtyard amplified the garden-like setting of the urban ensemble. We can
reasonably assume that Carrère & Hastings had some form of larger grouping in mind when
designing Borough Hall in 1903; they probably took cues from the slowly coalescing urban ideas
of George Cromwell. In any case, the courtyard-garden draws attention to the significance of the
difference between the business and ceremonial fronts of the buildings as critical aspects of the
civic center’s urbanism. Along with the hillside terracing, the courtyard also marks a big
departure from the urbanistic model provided by Sailor’s Snug Harbor. There, as noted above,
the range of monumental buildings in a garden setting provided a local model for Carrère &
Hastings in their efforts to adjust civic classicism to the suburban dynamics of the island. The
courtyard-garden, facing the water, amplifies the open, landscaped qualities of the entire range of
the civic center’s plan. The courtyard with the two colonnades beside it—the upper loggia-like
colonnade of Borough Hall and the temple-like colonnade of the courthouse—work together to
create an urban scenography appropriate to the civic functions of the buildings but within a park-like suburban setting adjusted to the romantic suburb of Richmond Borough as it existed in the early twentieth century.

A number of precedents could have informed the design of the L-shaped building with adjacent garden, including, among the most prestigious, the Villa Medici in Rome. The villa would have been particularly appropriate as it was situated at the outskirts of sixteenth-century Rome in an area just beyond the densely built up urban center. Staten Island’s civic center was in a roughly analogous position at the periphery of Greater New York yet also at the most visible point of the garden suburb borough. Among French precedents that were certainly known to the architects, Parisian hôtels such as the Hôtel Lambert and Hôtel de la Vrillière were configured around L-shaped wings enclosing a garden. Although it was a more distinctly urban type, the hôtel was particularly well-regarded by the Parisian École des Beaux-Arts, attended by both Carrère and Hastings.

C. Howard Walker, in a brief notice about the courthouse in The Architectural Review, commented on the different treatment of the ceremonial and business sides, but he saw no reason for the difference. Begrudgingly praising the Corinthian portico as “correct and monumental,” he wrote that the “rear building, especially as to cornice, has little relation to the front. The pediment hoods and windows are of small value.”\(^{164}\) He was right, of course, that the two sides had little relation to each other. From the perspective of the civic center’s garden-like suburban scenography, however, the difference was necessary and almost inevitable. The site itself—the topography, the location on the periphery of the Bay, and the location as the entrepôt to the romantic garden borough—compelled the solution Carrère & Hastings settled upon. Their

achievement is indicated by the fact that even today it still seems a natural solution, developed organically out of the site conditions rather than imposed by will upon them.

Through the manipulations of civic classicism called into service at Staten Island’s civic center, Carrère & Hastings’ created a suburban scenography articulating several intertwined meanings: the newfound unity of the borough of Richmond as well as the political unity of Greater New York; the role of open space and landscape in adjusting urban architecture to suburban conditions; and the purpose of civic architecture to act as a beacon and landmark within the cityscape. But the broadest significance of Carrère & Hastings’ civic center plan, even in its unfinished state, is that it is clear evidence of the city becoming conscious of its publicness. As part of Greater New York, Richmond Borough was a full-fledged member of what by then Herbert Croly and others were calling the “American metropolis.” George Cromwell insisted that this status should be amplified and made visible in an ensemble of buildings both dignified and representative of the unique characteristics of the borough. At the Richmond civic center, architecture was an agency of publicity helping to make visible the new urban public of modern New York.
Chapter Four

The Continuous Street Wall and the Historic Square: Bowling Green

Carrère & Hastings brought civic classicism to Staten Island by adapting its principles to the exigencies of a distinctive site: the hilly fringe of New York Bay. With its terrace, free-standing monumental buildings, and efforts at visibility in the cityscape, the Richmond civic center—even in its truncated form of library, Borough Hall, courthouse, and garden courtyard—inflected civic classicism to match a sparsely populated and largely undeveloped part of Greater New York. In Manhattan, by contrast, Carrère & Hastings and other architects adopted different strategies to respond to the urban conditions on that island.

Like City Hall Park less than a mile north on Broadway, Bowling Green is a survivor of centuries of urban development and a vestige of the city’s earliest days. After briefly tracing the history of Bowling Green from the days of New Amsterdam, this chapter examines how the buildings built on the square between the 1880s and 1920s developed a distinct urbanistic modality very different from the one at Staten Island. Over its long history, as the kinds of buildings around Bowling Green changed, the embedded meanings of the space changed as well. Through three centuries, culminating in the intensive build-up of the early twentieth century, Bowling Green charts in miniature the changing scale and urban conditions of New York City at large.

Along with these large-order changes, more narrowly architectural concerns played a significant role in the square’s redevelopment starting at the end of the nineteenth century. In
particular, new ideas about high-rise buildings changed the architectural character of Bowling Green. The tensions between civic ideals and large-scale economic imperatives were vividly, if mostly unintentionally, built into the texture and character of the square, which stands today largely as it did in the middle of the 1920s.¹ For all these reasons, Bowling Green provides new insight into New York’s early twentieth-century civic landscape.

“The Green Hearthstone of Welcome”: Bowling Green’s Early History

Spencer Trask, a financier and philanthropist in turn-of-the-century New York, began his 1898 essay on the history of Bowling Green by staking a claim for the square’s unique urban identity in the face of massive physical changes sweeping across the city at large.² Trask evocatively placed Bowling Green in a larger story about the city’s history, revealing the significance of the square for contemporary images of the city. According to Trask, New York is cosmopolitan, essentially so, beyond all large cities of the world. Absorbed in the whirl and stir of the To-day, occupied with vast schemes and enterprises for the To-morrow, overswept by a constant influx of new life and new elements, it seems to have no individual identity. It does not hold fast its old traditions, its past associations. It is hurried on, in the quickstep of its march of improvement, far away from its starting-point; and as it goes and grows with rapid progress into something new and vast, it ruthlessly obliterates its old landmarks and forgets its early history. It is well, sometimes, to look back and remember the beginning of things, to quicken our civic pride by measuring our growth, to recall the struggles and the conquests which proved the courage, patience, and stamina of the people who made New York what it is.

He continued,

There is no piece of land on Manhattan Island which has retained for a longer period its distinctive name, and at the same time fulfilled more thoroughly the purposes of its creation, than the small park at the extreme southern end of Broadway, known as Bowling Green. It is the one historic spot which has never lost its identity or been from public use since the foundation of the city.³

Omitting comparison to City Hall Park,⁴ Trask identified the special character of the long-surviving square at a moment when momentous changes were beginning to occur there. Trask’s essay, for example, was published the same year in which the Custom House competition was conducted. In Trask’s account of the square’s history, the space itself stands is a synecdoche for the entire city of New Amsterdam and early New York: Bowling Green was “the large open space opposite the [fort’s] sally-port [which] was set apart and known at first as ‘The Plaine’…. This was the village green, which marked the growing social life of the people.”⁵ In this view, the square was the measure and physical embodiment of the city’s relentless change.

A similar view of the square’s civic importance even appeared in the period’s popular literature. For instance Amelia Barr describes the square in *The Belle of Bowling Green* as a space to which the city’s “heroic and civic memories especially cling…. Its mingled story of camp and court and domestic life ought to make the Bowling Green to the citizens of New York all that the Palladium was to the citizens of ancient Troy.”⁶ And in recognition of the unique geographical position of the square, Barr ends her opening paragraph by describing how Bowling Green “has lain for nearly three centuries at the open seaward door of the city, like a green hearthstone of welcome.”⁶

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⁴ Trask probably considered the space spoiled by two large, ill-suited encroachments: on the south end, the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse (1869-80) by Alfred B. Mullett and, on the north, the Tammany-financed New York County Courthouse (1861-81) by John Kellum and Leopold Eidlitz. On the contemporary debates surrounding the use and design of City Hall Park, see Randall Mason, *The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), chapter 3.
A welcome point near the edge of Manhattan, overlooking the bay with a view toward Staten Island, Bowling Green occupies a strategically important geographical position in the city. Its close link to the Battery and the bay made it a vibrant focus for the physical and symbolic understanding of the cityscape. As we saw in the last chapter, key to the Richmond civic center’s geographical and symbolic connection to the rest of the city was the reciprocal view between the Battery and St. George. A similar dynamic at Bowling Green made it a vital point in the spatial structure of the city.

In its original state, Bowling Green, “the Plaine afore the Forte,”7 was the largest common open space of New Amsterdam and was used as early as the 1640s as a cattle market. But the shape of that space as it developed in the 17th century determined the form of the later “bowling-green,” as it was named in 1732 when the Common Council leased the space to nearby residents, whom Trask described as “public-spirited and sport-loving citizens,” for its maintenance. According to the Council’s resolution, the city corporation “will lease a piece of land lying at the lower end of Broad Way, fronting to the Fort, in order to be inclosed to make a Bowling-Green therof, with walks therein, for the beauty and ornament of said street, as well as for the recreation and delight of the inhabitants of the city, leaving the street on each side thereof 50 ft. in breadth.”8 The current fence, a partial and heavily-restored original, was erected in 1771 to clearly demarcate the space as a park, to keep out “all the filth and dirt of the neighborhood,”9 and, not least, to sanctify the statue of King George III at its center.10

Early views and plans of the city—including the view possibly by Cryn Fredericksz from about 1626 (fig. 4.1), the “Prototype” view from around 1653 (fig. 4.2), and the well-known

“Castello Plan” from around 1670 (fig. 4.3)—clearly show the fort’s importance and the rudiments of the irregularly-shaped market place (“Plaine”) to its north. In these early views, and through the early 19th century, the city was consistently pictured from a low vantage point, often from the bluff of Brooklyn Heights across the East River. This convention had the effect of making the lower tip of Manhattan the visual center, and not only the historical origin point, of the city.

It is not clear what topographical or other circumstances determined the odd angle in the square’s orientation relative to the street opening to the north, except for the original division of land among the area’s farmers and traders. From early on, as the views and plans show, Broadway—in Dutch, Heereweg—ran toward the fort in a straight line and intersected it at its western rampart. The oblong space in front of the northwestern face of the fort resulted from the angle of the street and the orientation of the fort’s ramparts to the cardinal directions. The spatial relationship among the fort, the open space in front of it, and the Heereweg created a distinguished urban square never considered suitable for building upon despite growing real estate scarcity and the skyrocketing price of land in lower Manhattan. Early on, as the views indicate, the space fronting the north edge of the fort was left open and defined by being clear of obstacles rather than by any substantial boundaries or walls (other than the fort itself). Within a few decades, though, as the Castello Plan shows, a continuous fence was built along both sides of De Heere Straet. The addition of the fence created a defined edge to the street and a clear boundary for the market space—now something more like a forecourt, portending Bowling Green’s much later function as a forecourt to Cass Gilbert’s Custom House (1899-1907).

The area around Bowling Green was from the beginning both a civic center and a fashionable residential district. As Spencer Trask put it, “From the earliest days of the city, when
the Governor lived within the Fort, later, when the Government House occupied this same site, and afterwards, when this land became private property, this locality, and the immediate neighborhood, was the most select and fashionable part of the city.” By the early twentieth century, long after the early residences had been replaced, the square and its surroundings took on a new exclusivity as the home of, or close neighbor to, major industrial and financial corporations.

Through the eighteenth century, attempts were made to formalize the square and the street approaches to it. City leaders conducted a series of surveys and street improvements and resolutions regarding the square’s physical and civic attributes passed the Common Council. For example, in 1744 the Council passed a resolution declaring “that the owners of the houses between Mr. Chambers and Mr. Depeysters corner house, by the Bowling Green, have liberty to range their fronts in such manner as the Alderman and Assistant of the West Ward may think proper.” The resolution ordered

That a straight line be drawn from the south corner of the house of Mr. Augustus Jay, now in the occupation of Peter Warren, Esquire, to the north Corner of the house of Archibald Kennedy, fronting the Bowling Green in the Broad Way, and that Mr. William Smith, who is now about to build a house (and all other persons who shall build between the two houses) lay their foundations and build conformably to the aforesaid straight line.

However, this attempt at regularity was undermined, according to Trask, because

The liberty given to the owners of the houses by the ordinance of 1744, ‘to range their fronts’ as might be thought proper, was so thoroughly availed of that even until the present time, one hundred and fifty years after, no attention has been paid to the later order of 1745, for the buildings pulled down in 1895, to make room for the new Bowling Green Offices, were very far from being on a line, and the few buildings still remaining to the north, towards Morris Street, do not even yet front on a straight line.

12 Ibid, 180.
13 Ibid., 180-81.
Nonetheless, these acts of the Council set precedent for the later unifying and regularizing architecture that characterized the square’s rebuilding starting in the 1880s. In effect, the latent regularity implied by the mid-eighteenth-century Council resolutions came into being in the early twentieth century under conditions and with building types unimaginable one and a half centuries earlier.

The Governor’s House and Dutch church within the fort proper were the first non-military public structures on the site. After the fort was removed in 1789, Government House was built as a residence for the president at a time when New York was briefly considered as a potential national capital. For New York at the time, the neo-Palladian building was large and imposing. Government House was not, however, the first federal building in the city. Its predecessor was Federal Hall at Wall and Broad Streets, constructed just a year earlier by George Washington’s lieutenant and engineer, Pierre Charles L’Enfant. L’Enfant’s design reconstructed the existing City Hall, originally built between 1699 and 1704 and remodeled in 1763. The engraving by Cornelius Tiebout from 1793 shows a view of Federal Hall looking west down Wall Street toward Trinity Church (fig. 4.4). L’Enfant refaced the building and added the aggrandizing second-floor portico. Tiebout’s view, published for wide distribution in King’s Handbook of New York City (1892), is more informative about the building’s architecture and context than the more famous patriotic elevation engraving by Pierre Lacour showing President Washington’s inauguration in April 1789 (fig. 4.5). In Tiebout’s perspective view, taken from the east, we see the covered portico at ground level, indicated by the arch, forming “a flagged walk for the recreation and convenience of the citizens,” and the simpler, asymmetrical treatment

of the side walls. L’Enfant’s Federal Hall was among the most architecturally ambitious structures in the city when it was completed, and it set a precedent for new public buildings following it. As John Drayton, an English visitor, remarked, it was an “elegant and grand building well adapted for a senetorial [sic] presence.”

The first building to respond architecturally to Federal Hall was the new Government House, as it came to be called, built in 1790. Probably designed by John McComb, Jr., Government House was an enlarged and more scenic version of L’Enfant’s Federal Hall (fig. 4.6). It stood symbolically for the new political order of the nation even more emphatically—and more visibly—than Federal Hall. Its significance extended up from the site itself. Occupying the small hilltop on the reclaimed ground of the former fort, Government House was built on top of a symbol of the despised former regime (remaining loyalist sympathies notwithstanding). Lower Manhattan’s coast line was at the time still close to its original contour; this was before the massive land-making efforts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which have put Bowling Green further inland. As it was in 1790, the site was directly adjacent to the waterfront and thus a true welcome point to the city. Government House was fortunate to occupy this most salient and visible geographical point in New York, which must have seemed a fitting place for the new nation’s most representative building. This visibility—both from the all-important water approach and from the within the city, where the only higher buildings would have been a few churches with tall steeples (fig. 4.7)—helped establish Bowling Green as one of the city’s most prominent geographical points.

16 Quoted in ibid., 328.
17 McComb’s authorship is surmised by Damie Stillman in “New York City Hall: Competition and Execution,” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 23, no. 3 (Oct. 1964): 129.
As quoted by Trask, South Carolina state representative and later governor John Drayton in 1793 provided a good description of Government House in its context:

At the lower end of Broadway is the Battery, and public parade…. The back part of the ground is laid out in smaller walks, terraces, and a bowling green. Overlooking this prospect, is the Government House; plac’d upon an handsome elevation, and fronting Broad Way, having before it an elegant elliptical approach, round an area of near an acre of ground, enclosed by an iron railing.

… The Government House is two stories high. Projecting before it is a portico, covered by a pediment; upon which is superbly carved in basso relievo, the arms of the State, supported by justice and liberty, as large as life. The arms and figures are white, placed in a blue field; and the pediment is supported by four white pillars of the Ionic order, which are the height of both stories.  

Government House not only occupied the symbolically charged ground of the old fort, it also extended the neoclassical architectural language of L’Enfant’s Federal Hall, as Drayton suggests, with greater three-dimensionality. McComb extruded Federal Hall’s slightly projecting upper portico into a full-blown two-story porch, regularized the exterior design into symmetrical units on all four sides, and even included pediments on the side facades (fig. 4.8). Much grander than the surrounding buildings, Government House offered a better platform for the federal presence in New York than Federal Hall. Tiebout’s 1783 engraving of a drawing by Charles Buxton (fig. 4.9) shows the square with the empty pedestal (which formerly held up the statute of George III) at the center behind the portrait of General Washington. It was an early public image of the square’s patriotic associations (the house seen at the right was briefly Washington’s New York residence, at 1 Bowling Green), draping the image of both Washington and the square with the classical forms of the early national period. The inscription on the urn’s pedestal in the center, which reads “Sacred to patriotism,” made this point explicit. Bowling Green was now a “sacred” place exalted by its nationally significant associations.

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McComb’s design for Government House may also have been inspired by Vice-President John Adams’ country estate, built in 1767, just north of New York, near the intersection today of Varick and Charlton Streets (fig. 4.10). The engraving by Tiebout for a 1790 edition of *New-York Magazine* shows the house, known as Richmond Hill, embedded in leafy surroundings. Architecturally, the projecting portico and pediment, raised up by a flight of stairs, suggests a basic template that would have been seen as appropriate and decorous for the president. The position of McComb’s house at the summit of the mound marking the spot of the old fort brought some of the isolated charm of the country house to the heart of the city, keeping its form and spaciousness but radically altering its context and thus its public meaning.

The national significance of the site was short lived. The very year of Government House’s construction, Congress passed the Residence Act locating the national capital on the banks of the Potomac River. McComb’s grand residence was to be surpassed by one even grander in the new capital. Government House then served for a few years as the New York State governor’s residence until, in 1799, it was turned into the Custom House, regaining a modicum of its national importance. It survived in that state until it was auctioned off by the government in 1813 when the Custom House moved to Wall Street; it then burned in an 1815 fire. Yet, at the very origin of the republic, Bowling Green had been imbued with strong patriotic, national associations. Thenceforth the square remained significant for two reasons: it was the “green hearthstone of welcome” to the growing and bustling commercial port, and it was a place associated with nationhood—an urban political space. Its geographical setting and its architecture contributed to and reflected these dual meanings into the early twentieth century.

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19 The historical presence of Washington made Bowling Green a kind of secular shrine, although because of its many other embedded urban attributes, it was not nearly as strong a lure as other locales associated with Washington. On the cult of Washington and locations associated with him, see Seth C. Bruggeman, *Here, George*.
As Trask wrote in his history of Bowling Green, the area through the late eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries “was the most select and fashionable part of the city” (figs. 4.11-4.12). However, as the growth of business around the Battery and lower Manhattan in general drove residences northward, “this particular row of houses facing the Green preserved their individual characteristics, and were used as dwellings. They still retain their exterior appearance, though they have ceased to be so used. They are now occupied by the offices of the large foreign steamship companies.”20 When the scale of change finally caught up with Bowling Green, the houses were doomed to be replaced by larger, more modern buildings.

The Tall Office Building and the Urban Square

As it developed at Bowling Green, the tall building was conditioned by and helped to articulate the idea of the urban ensemble, the street wall, and the urban vista. Juxtaposed with the Custom House to one side, the urbanistic effects of the tall buildings enclosing Bowling Green formed another modality of urban architecture in New York in the years around 1900. Different from the terrace effect conjured by Carrère & Hastings at St. George, and from the more distinctively Beaux-Arts approach of the monument-on-a-podium at the New York Public Library, Bowling Green offered the alternative of a denser, continuous street architecture. It followed, in certain respects, long-standing urban traditions but modified them to accommodate both the aesthetic possibilities and the economic imperatives of building tall in a commercial city.


20 Trask, “Bowling Green,” 204.
Focusing on the skyscraper as it developed at Bowling Green brings to the fore a different set of concerns than the usual ones of structural expression, technology, and “progressive” aesthetics. Instead, the salient issues include the building’s relation to its site, its urban impact, the construction of perspectival views from approaches and key vantage points, and the development of patterns of structural and formal articulation. At Bowling Green, tall building design became an urbanistic practice that answered certain functional needs of the modern city while hewing to other traditional concepts of urbanism and architectural composition. After 1916 skyscrapers were conditioned by the new zoning ordinance demanding setbacks, a new legal restraint that called forth a new design approach. But the architects who worked at Bowling Green did not see this as license for unbridled experimentation; they sought ways to create a continuous urbanism that had some evident connection to the unique conditions of the square. They sought a compromise between tradition and innovation: as Herbert Croly wrote (though referring to a different set of New York buildings), they designed “without either any subservience to tradition or any revolutionary departure from it.”

The large-scale transformation of Bowling Green from a tidy, genteel garden square to a bustling commercial center began definitively in 1880 when the Produce Exchange announced it would move to the square, at the southeast corner of Beaver Street (fig. 4.13). The Exchange had previously occupied a small block farther south along Whitehall Street (fig. 4.14). The new structure replaced a range of rowhouses and low commercial buildings; a plan from 1899 (4.15) and a view from above show the massive change of scale that the building introduced to the

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square through its footprint of 53,779 square feet (fig. 4.16). The growth of real estate finance and banking also indicates the changes starting to encroach upon the square: with land and construction, the Produce Exchange cost over $3 million to build.23 This massive capital investment in a historically sensitive urban center signaled the scale of changes starting to affect Manhattan development more generally in these years. As the near decade-long economic depression lifted at the end of the 1870s, large-scale investments in building and speculative development ushered in a new era of urban change.24

The architect of the Produce Exchange, George B. Post, described his deliberate move away from picturesque elements of design toward greater regularity that stressed overall building mass (fig. 4.17). According to Post, the Produce Exchange was designed in a “modified Italian Renaissance” style that, “with its long, simple, and strongly marked cornices and unbroken rows of arches, is in marked contrast to the prevalent fashion of minute moldings, small window panes, and irregularly broken sky lines. What is lost in picturesque effect is certainly gained in dignity and repose.”25 As one observer wrote, “In this simple work you do not find any weak results, no playful divisions, no meaningless ornaments; but you find grave and grand wall spaces in noble proportions, and decisive contrasts in the various stories.”26 Mariana van Rensselaer, while finding certain elements conspicuously deficient, concluded that Post’s Exchange “is one of the most imposing monuments we have,” primarily because of its “emphatic repetition of a few well-chosen motives” which Post “has used in a broad, powerful, and singularly effective fashion.” In spite of what she saw as “crude ornamentation,” the building

23 Ibid.
26 C. Hinckeldeyn, quoted in Landau and Condit, Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 124.
was “very fine in general proportion, and in the shape, sequence, and contrast of strong and even
noble features.”

Van Rensselaer’s attention to the “strong and noble features” of the Exchange focuses
attention on a crucial aspect of late nineteenth-century architectural design. According to Barbara
Lane, by the turn of the twentieth century there was a distinct change, across architectural styles,
in “an effort to reduce the apparent size and mass of the individual building.” Articulation of
substantial mass rather than picturesque silhouette, the reduction of ornament, and preference for
monochromatic materials were characteristic responses to the large-scale urban changes of the
previous century. Lane interprets these changes as stemming from the widely shared concern,
expressed strongly beginning in the 1890s, for unifying and ordering the haphazardly growing
cities of the time. Buildings from the 1860s through the 1890s, by contrast, tended to employ
varied silhouettes, polychromy, intricate ornament, and “surfaces of uncertain depth.” The result
was a miniaturization or dematerialization aiming “not so much to make the building as a whole
appear small, as to make the boundaries of its interior volume appear insubstantial, diminishing
its apparent mass.” Only after architects widely recognized the new scale of the city, and the
problems it posed, did changes in architectural articulation follow.

Following Lane’s argument, the Produce Exchange not only exemplified the large-scale
economic and real estate changes affecting late nineteenth-century urbanism, but also forecast
the architectural changes to come after the turn of the century. Post seems to have recognized

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Marianna Griswold van Rensselaer, “Recent Architecture in America,” reprinted in Accents as well as Broad
Effects: Writings on Architecture, Landscape, and the Environment, 1876-1925, ed. David Gebhard (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 1996), 175-76.

Barbara Miller Lane, “Changing Attitudes to Monumentality: An Interpretation of European Architecture and
Urban Form, 1880-1914,” in Growth and Transformation of the Modern City, ed. Ingrid Hammarstrom and Thomas
Hall (Stockholm: Swedish Council for Building Research, 1979), 101-3. Her thesis applies equally well to the
United States, and especially to major cities such as New York, where there were more opportunities than in any
other American city to build both large commercial structures and a wide variety of civic and institutional buildings.
Published in a relatively obscure volume, Miller Lane’s essay has not had the kind of impact that her compelling
thesis warrants.
these coming changes in his comments about the desirable loss of “picturesque effect.”

Completed in 1884, the Produce Exchange was an outlier: a building much less picturesque and much more reliant on effects of mass than any of its contemporaries. This is even true of other buildings by Post from the same time. For instance, Post’s Mills Building (fig. 4.18), completed in 1882, shares a similar composition—trabeation rather than the Exchange’s arcuation—but is layered, profusely detailed, and polychromatic. Similarly, the Times Building from 1889 is a layered and picturesque design (fig. 4.19). If the 1898 metropolitan consolidation spurred a rethinking of civic architecture, this seems to have dovetailed in New York with the larger trend identified by Lane toward more massively articulated, less picturesque buildings. Still, being a product of the 1880s and not the 1910s, the Produce Exchange was faced in small bricks and intricately molded terra cotta ornament; it was red and brown rather than a light buff stone color, and it still exhibited the depth of mural layering that would be less frequently seen a decade or two later (fig. 4.20).

The building was not universally acclaimed. If van Rensselaer saw mostly good in the building, the prominent critic Montgomery Schuyler deemed Post’s Produce Exchange a “pretentious successor” to Leopold Eidlitz’s earlier version on Whitehall Street (fig. 4.21).29 In the course of a scathing critique of the building, Schuyler addressed the issues of the changing scale and form of the city and the role of a large building in a historic setting. The Exchange’s horizontal extension—its main facade was approximately 308 feet long—was particularly troubling in Schuyler’s view. As he observed, “It is plain how the differences of treatment vertically, together with the absolute uniformity of the treatment horizontally, tend to enhance the apparent length of the building and to reduce its apparent height, since every row of similar

openings is, in effect, a horizontal band.” Perceptively, Schuyler analyzed the exterior design as one of ponderous and unremitting horizontality:

This multiplication of openings as they ascend, by giving the eye no line to trace upward, almost effaces the vertical lines, which are nowhere at all accentuated except at the angels, where, indeed, they could not be disguised, and where they are very mildly reinforced by pilasters extending, one through the main division and one through the two-tiered attic, with emphatic cornices above them, cutting the building into layers, so that even at the angles the vertical lines cannot be followed throughout. On the other hand the horizontal lines are developed and emphasized by every expedient in the repertory of the designer.

In this way, Schuyler asserted, Post was “fearful … of abating the stress laid upon the horizontal lines.” Already, the horizontality identified by William Taylor and Thomas Bender as indicative of civic architecture in New York was influencing the design of a conspicuous commercial building at a historically sensitive location.

Despite the architectural connoisseur’s contempt for the building’s infelicities, the Produce Exchange was an iconic presence in modern New York. It was, in the words of a turn-of-the-century guidebook written a generation after the building’s construction, still “one of the notable architectural features of New York.” The building’s tower, in particular, which Schuyler had derided as “an afterthought … adjoined to it … up an alley” (fig. 4.22), rose as a beacon at the entrance to Bowling Green and afforded “the finest obtainable view of the harbor and surrounding shore.” An anecdote from the *New York Times* indicates the place the building occupied in the city’s physical and imaginative landscape:

A stranger in New York was taking in the points of interest along lower Broadway the other day in company with a New York cousin.…

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31 Ibid.
“What is that big red building?” asked the stranger.
“That! That is—er, or yes, that is the Produce Exchange,” replied the city cousin, who remembers that a picture of it is on a calendar that hangs over his desk.
“And what do they do in the Produce Exchange?” queried the out-of-town man, yearning for information.
“Why, they make ‘corners’ in wheat and coil oil, and lard, and things like that, I think, but to tell the truth, I never was in there, and I really have no idea just what they do do. Mighty fine building, though, isn’t it?”

The building was spectacular enough to be featured on a calendar at the New Yorker’s office, indicating that it remained one of the city’s major architectural landmarks for at least two decades after it opened in 1884. And postcards and published views attest to its ubiquitous visual presence as a landmark at the end of the nineteenth century (figs. 4.23-4.24). Even if the public had little understanding of what happened inside its spaces—an indication of the ways in which the mechanisms of capital could be obscured by architecture—the building itself held a spot on the itinerary of architectural sights, primarily because of its prominent and imposing presence on Bowling Green. Even Schuyler, despite his criticisms, acknowledged that the building’s siting and its imposing presence from a distance were enough to ensure its recognition as “one of the most conspicuous edifices of New York. It is conspicuous by its site—one of the finest on the island—which promises to secure permanently the detachment of the building, and the view of its principal front from an effective distance.”

Again, concern for visibility is a key concern in the period’s architectural criticism.

Shortly after the start of construction on the Produce Exchange, a second step in the transformation of Bowling Green was taken with the construction of the Washington Building (1 Broadway today) by Edward Kendall beginning in 1882 (fig. 4.25). Together, the Produce Exchange and the Washington—prominent on the skyline from the water approach to the south

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(fig. x)—heralded the transformation of Bowling Green into a new kind of square: a commercial hub rather than a residential garden square following London models. These buildings also marked the beginning of a new way of creating urban space. Like the civic center on Staten Island and the New York Public Library, the rebuilding of Bowling Green spurred the development of a new modality of civic classicism.

The Washington Building prominently marks the entrance to Bowling Green—it is a hinge at the opening connecting Battery Park and the square, thus defining the primary visual gateway into Manhattan from the bay (fig. 4.26). Its towered cupola may have inspired Carrère & Hastings to put the clock tower on their Richmond Borough Hall as a way to mark a visible connection across the water that, as we saw in the last chapter, contributed to the spatial understanding of the unified metropolis after 1898. Although very different in form, Borough Hall’s tower and the Washington’s cupola punctuated the skyline of the two boroughs at their points of closest contact with one another. The two towers gave visual weight to the claims of modern New York: it was a city of commerce that also sought to give visual expression to larger public meanings. The towered cupola signaled a civic function for the otherwise commercial purposes of the Washington Building; its siting seemed to demand at least a nod to civic decorum. Walter B. Chambers, who redesigned the Washington Building in 1919 in response to later architectural changes at Bowling Green, seemed to indicate an inchoate awareness of the civic demands of this particular site. He wrote that “architects who plan or remodel structures in this historic locality have unconsciously assumed certain obligations and may be said to approach their work under the dominating influence of what, for the want of a better locution, might called ‘historical perspective’” based on the site’s past and its enduring visibility in the
cityscape. Whether or not Kendall was conscious of these obligations thirty-two years earlier when he designed the Washington, the towered cupola took advantage of the building’s fortunate location.

The Washington paid tribute in its name to the historical associations of the first president with the site and to its architectural predecessor, the Washington Hotel. It was a speculative office building owned by Cyrus Field and originally leased to the Postal-Telegraph Cable Company and the United-States National Bank. The Washington was a stout Queen Anne-style building at Bowling Green’s western edge, defining the square’s southwest corner and marking the transition into or from the Battery. The salient element is the towered cupola, composed to give visual emphasis to the crucial connection between the Battery and Bowling Green. A similar visual effect was evident in the view down Broadway, where the building and its tower mark the termination of the built landscape of Manhattan (fig. 4.27). As the Broadway view shows, the roof cut the building’s silhouette against the sky at an angle, providing a softer mark for the termination of Manhattan’s built up area. The tower, too, punctuates the edge of the city and thus had a similar visual purpose to the tower of the Produce Exchange across the square.

As construction proceeded on the Washington, the next large structure to commence at Bowling Green was the Standard Oil Building (or Old Standard Oil Building, to distinguish it from its later replacement by Carrère & Hastings), designed by E. L. Roberts and completed in 1886. Standing next to the slightly earlier Welles Building, completed in 1883, the two occupied the crucial point at which Broadway intersected with Whitehall Street to form the widening space of Bowling Green proper (fig. 4.28). In the 1920s, Standard Oil Company would purchase

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the adjoining lots to the south, including the Welles Building, to construct a much larger building, discussed below.

Although slightly lower, the Welles Building was the more architecturally prescient of the two, even if its style was entirely conventional. It marked the first appearance at Bowling Green of the horizontal tripartite facade, which would become a defining motif around the square, as well as the first use of strong classical rustication at the lower level and in quoins to articulate the edges of the side pavilions. Usually described as a French Renaissance style, the building was composed as three horizontal units, the central section of which was set back from the flanking pavilions, which themselves were capped by projecting mansards and dormers. The format had been used frequently in commercial buildings since the mid-nineteenth century, although perhaps it was most elegantly expressed in an unbuilt 1867 design by George B. Post for the Equitable Building (fig. 4.29).39 Post’s design was reminiscent of his teacher Richard Morris Hunt’s design for the Pavillon de la Bibliothèque at the Louvre in Paris, which was one of the major modern classical precedents for American architects in the second half of the nineteenth century, including the briefly popular Second Empire style.40

At the center of the Welles Building a wide arch with prominent voussoirs and grouped columns marked the entrance; a pedimented doorway was later incongruously inserted into the arch (fig. 4.30). These two elements—tripartite composition and articulation with rustication—became the fundamental building blocks of design around Bowling Green. By contrast, the Old Standard Oil Building (more properly part of lower Broadway than of Bowling Green), although designed in a tripartite composition in which the central section projected forward by means of weighty pilaster-piers and balconies, was more typical of nine-to-ten story office buildings of the

39 The executed design for the Equitable was by Edward Kendall, architect of the Washington Building.
1880s in its repetition of decorative elements on each floor and its insistent horizontal divisions. As Barr Ferree observed in 1894, “It is the tendency in the East to cut up the front horizontally, and vary it with as many devices as the ingenuity of the architect can suggest.” Other prominent examples include Temple Court (1881-83) on Beekman Street (fig. 4.31) and the Manhattan Company and Merchants’ Bank Building (1883-85) on Wall Street (fig. 4.32).

After a lull of several years, one more early skyscraper was added to the square before the turn of the century: the Bowling Green Offices, built between 1895 and 1898 (fig. 4.33)—a building “quite too conspicuous to be ignored.” The Bowling Green Offices is the only known office building designed by the team of Scottish architect-brothers William and George Audsley, who took inspiration from Louis Sullivan’s exhortation to express the nature of tall buildings and to take into account the viewpoints from which the building could be seen. Accordingly, George Audsley quoted extensively from Sullivan’s essay, “The Tall Building Artistically Considered,” and declared that his intent was to create a composition “in perfect accord with the main lines and general vertical feeling of the design.” Although treated conventionally in terms of its columnar vertical composition—the tripartite division of base, shaft, capital—the decorative details are novel. The prominent Greek capitals, moldings, and deeply cut windows lend the building, at least at the three-story base, a solid, almost rock-cut effect.

More importantly from the urban point of view, the Audsley’s composed their building using the same horizontal tripartite scheme previously seen at the Welles Building. The broad center section steps back from the side pavilions, at the bases of which are identical entrance

portals (one is really the entrance, the other a shop front). Disposed in a U-shape around an open court facing to the south, the plan is organized to allow a continuous run of windows along the Bowling Green front; two setbacks for light courts and the projecting bank of elevators line the north side, visible from Broadway (fig. 4.34). Although eschewing the Welles’ classical-French Renaissance rustication for the bold ornamentation in Greek detail, the mass and compositional format initiated by the Welles was confirmed as part of the square’s distinct architectural modality at the Bowling Green Offices.

A reviewer in the *Real Estate Record* captured the urban significance of the Bowling Green Offices:

Even in a quarter which is coming to be an aggregation of skyscrapers it “collars the eye” by size and color. It is conspicuous also by the foreground provided by the municipality in the Bowling Green itself, a reservation so advantageous to the building that it seems the municipality is morally entitled to some share of the advantage. So, although it is of sixteen stories, and the top of it would not be apprehensible from the opposite sidewalk of an ordinary street, the facade can be seen all at once and judged as a whole. Moreover, there is enough of architectural novelty and of architectural interest in it to make it worth talking about.46

The architects exploited this “advantageous” urban condition—one of unusual visibility for so tall a building—in their facade design. As the reviewer stated,

The general division of the front is effective. Laterally it consists of two slightly projecting wings, enclosing a recessed center about equal in width to both together. Vertically it consists of an enriched three-story base … and an enriched three-story attic, with a plain shaft of ten stories between them…. The shaft, the main wall, is very impressive. It is made more so by the recession of the center, by the keeping of the vertical lines unbroken, so as to suggest the real construction, which is covered, and especially by withdrawing the horizontal member from the plane of the piers, so that, in any sidelong view, one sees the slender piers alone shooting upward with a really inspiring effect.47

Still, the commentator found many faults with the building, including the Audsley’s insistence that they had created a “Hellenic Renaissance” style following the “spirit rather than the letter of

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46 “The Bowling Green Building,” 826.
47 Ibid.
Grecian architecture.” Instead, the reviewer observed that the “architecturesque part of the facade, practically the lower three stories, is designated as Greek only by the literal reproduction of Greek details.” But these “Grecian” details were not consistently applied: “The entrance itself recalls at once, not any Greek construction, but an Egyptian pylon, coved cornice, battering sides and all, adorned with Greek detail, not too well chosen in the structural parts.” Condemning the columns in particular, the reviewer resorted to a gymnastic language of derision, writing that they exhibited “an irrational performance that entails the ugliness of obvious irrationality.”

“Nothing,” the reviewer concluded, “could be less Greek than this pursuit of novelty for its own sake.”

Despite the critique, the reviewer approved of the urban consequences and large-scale compositional aspects of the design. The fact that the visible north side bore “evidence, not always presented in skyscrapers, that the designer has remembered their existence” had rendered it “inoffensive to the casual view.” The nakedness of the bare side walls of tall buildings in the middle of blocks, minimally “architectured” so as to anticipate tall structures next to them, was frequently commented upon in the contemporary press. For architects and critics, the difficulty of designing a tall infill building in-the-round constituted a major hurdle for the aesthetics of skyscrapers at the turn of the century. After passage of the 1916 zoning ordinance, most critics were convinced the problem had been solved by municipal law, which now dictated setbacks and tower effects that of necessity had to be designed with the view from every angle—or at least

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 For a concise review of design concerns related to New York skyscrapers in the period before the 1916 zoning ordinance, see Robert A.M. Stern, et al., *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism, 1890-1915* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 145-77. The authors here analyze the New York skyscraper in three categories: the block infill, the freestanding tower, and the hybrid. The hybrid “combined the infill building and the tower to create the true skyscraper. With a base locked into the block and the street wall, and a tower which stepped back to dramatically pierce the sky, the new skyscraper simultaneously met the traditional urban requirement for an homogenous city fabric, the demands of a new metropolitan scale requiring a beautiful skyline, and both the tenant’s and the neighbor’s needs for adequate light and air in the office space and on the street,” 148.
multiple angles—taken into account. But before the 1916 ordinance, the problem was acute. Some critics, of course, disregarded the shortcomings of infill skyscraper design and sung romantic praises for the new behemoths, especially regarding the visual effects they could produce from a distance. One anonymous commentator in *Architectural Record* wrote in 1908, after more than two decades of skyscraper developments, “The growth of a great city skyward may be unattractive to those who see no inspiration in the new problems which it involves, or unreasonable to those who disapprove of it for economic reasons, but when one beholds these dark grey monsters at dusk, studded with a myriad of incandescent lights, the effect is one of mystery and might, which is strictly of this generation.”51 The modernity of such visual effects coincided with the broader trend of considering the city as a whole then developing in both the critical and popular literature dealing with the physical attributes of the city, as we saw in the last chapter.

Concern for the bare side walls of infill skyscrapers is related to the development of the tripartite compositional scheme around Bowling Green. The tripartite scheme with central setback has the effect of individualizing the building while maintaining the massiveness, solidity, and continuity of the street wall. This was similar to the concern voiced by some critics regarding the effects of skyscrapers on the street wall. Russell Sturgis, in particular, offered a version of this concern in two short, back-to-back “notes” in the February 1905 edition of *Architectural Record*.52 He took as his point of reference two views of the buildings just north of the Welles and Old Standard Oil buildings, at 26 to 42 Broadway (figs. 4.35-4.37). The first view shows the fronts of the buildings, including number 42, Henry Ives Cobb’s Empire Trust Building, completed in 1903. Its elaborate entrance decoration, including banded columns and an

51 “Skyscraping up to Date,” *Architectural Record*, Jan. 1908, 75.
applied, so-called “Jacobethan style” frontispiece, formed a pyramidal contrast to the dominant grid of horizontals and verticals of the rest of the building and its neighbors (fig. 4.38). While adopting up the motif of the rusticated base used nearby on the Welles Building, Cobb eschewed the tripartite scheme for a continuous flat wall marked with horizontal bands at each floor. The flat wall scheme seems to have been preferred for those buildings on lower Broadway north of Bowling Green proper, where the distance across the street would not allow as comfortable a perspective on the buildings as the square allowed, for instance, in the case of the Bowling Green Offices. The flat walls of the Broadway buildings make the rusticated tripartite scheme adopted around Bowling Green all the more salient.

Sturgis, however, was interested in the contrast between the front and back sides of the range of buildings in the photographs. He contrasts what he calls “street architecture”—the “big and ponderous thing”—with the rear of the buildings, which he says “were built up in that simple, inexpensive, unpretending, tranquil fashion.” In particular, he notes that the back of 42 Broadway “is fully as attractive” as the front. He also notes approvingly the parapet of the Broad Exchange Building (fig. 4.39): “Here in this building the pierced parapets are in their glory…. The letting of the light sky into the dark of the walls, the invading of the light sky by the dark of the parapet, are motives of never-failing charm.” In Sturgis’ view, the back of Cobb’s 42 Broadway would be improved only by the addition of a pierced parapet like that of the Broad Exchange—“something to make it a little less ponderous at the level of the roof.” In such a way, it would be “a really typical front for a skyscraper.” Sturgis’ advice for designers of tall buildings was to simplify, capture well-chosen effects of light and shadow, and unify through judicious repetition.
After the first flurry of large-scale building in the 1880s and 1890s, Bowling Green assumed a new salience on the skyline approach from the Bay (fig. 4.40). And, for those who knew something about the city’s layout, whether through direct experience or through published maps or images, the square’s role as origin point for the great thoroughfare of Broadway was emphasized. One foreign commentator wrote that the Produce Exchange “appears to me even more impressive than the [Palazzo Farnese in Rome], through the addition of the proud tower, which, with its calm and beautiful contour and effective composition, forms a far-visible characteristic feature of New York.”\(^{53}\) With the addition of the Washington Building and its towered cupola, the Bowling Green Offices, and the new buildings at the lower end of Broadway, the square began to take on a more visible prominence both within the skyline overall and as the entry point into the city. Although the shape and boundaries of the square itself did not change through these two decades of building, the formal definition of its perimeter began to create a more distinct figuration of the space: it seemed to be gaining a scale and visual impact commensurate with the growing scale of Greater New York. Views from the Battery looking between the buildings (figs. 4.41-4.43) became ubiquitous at the turn of the century. The connection between Battery and Bowling Green became the focus of design attention, such as the New York Improvement Commission’s redesign of the park (fig. 4.44)—a sure sign of the new significance of the space to the image of the city. Whereas earlier views had been taken from within the park itself, or from along Broadway, these new images emphasized how Bowling Green was transforming into a square of city-wide significance—no longer the center of the old elite, or merely a quaint reminder of early New York.

**The U.S. Custom House**

Cass Gilbert’s United States Custom House, like Carrère & Hasting’s Public Library and Richmond Borough Hall, is one of New York’s major civic buildings from the years immediately after the municipal consolidation. The Custom House anchored Bowling Green with a new civic building of national importance and further redefined the character of the square as gateway to the metropolis. Unlike the Produce Exchange, the Washington and Welles Buildings, and the Bowling Green Offices, the Custom House was from the beginning conceived as a traditional horizontal monument. Although tall by comparison to other buildings in its class—the earlier Custom House on Wall Street, for instance, and even its neighbor, the massive Produce Exchange—its breadth exceeds its height, and this, together with its crucially important location at the south edge of the Green, made it an altogether different kind of presence on the square.

By the time the design competition for the Custom House was announced, the nature and scale of shipping and commerce had been significantly transformed from the earlier nineteenth century. The buildings which the Custom House replaced along the south flank of Bowling Green, though originally built as residences, had long been used as offices for the shipping and mercantile industries (figs. 4.45-4.46). But as new office buildings went up around and near the square, these four- and five-story structures became inadequate to modern office programs. Yet, these were among the last holdouts of the previous stage of Bowling Green’s history from the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Custom House occupied the historically significant site of the colonial fort and the later Government House. Its design had in some way to acknowledge these earlier structures—bearing in mind Walter Chamber’s insistence on the “obligations” architects felt toward the square’s history—while conveying the authority of the national government. Custom houses and
mints had been the major symbols of the “federal presence” in American cities since the middle of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{54} Now, at the turn of the twentieth, with New York a newly enlarged metropolis, the building needed the physical heft, grandiosity, and visibility commensurate with these conditions. The Custom House thus had at least a four-fold representational burden to shoulder as a public building: it was an institutional instrument of the federal government’s centralized authority over commerce and the modern industrial economy; it was a critical tool in the international system of shipping, now dominated by large corporations; it was a public building fronting one of the most historically and geographically important open spaces in the metropolis; and it was planned at a time of tremendous rebuilding in the city, thus bringing with it high expectations regarding its character and contribution to the cityscape. Its exuberant Beaux-Arts classicism should be seen, then, as the response to all of these conditions. The architectural forms adopted by Cass Gilbert lent themselves to large-scale effects appropriate to the urban context and were considered fitting to the national and international purposes of the building. One might say that a bold, exuberant type of architecture was overdetermined in the case of the Custom House; anything less eye-catching would have been underwhelming as a response to the geographical, historical, and political-economic conditions.

Discussions for the replacement of the old Custom House, which then occupied the building originally built as the Merchants’ Exchange on Wall Street, were initiated in 1886.\textsuperscript{55} Citing the need for more space, improved interior access, lighting, ventilation, and technical services, and better visibility, the final decision to move the Custom House to the Bowling Green

\textsuperscript{54} See Lois A Craig, \textit{The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Building} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978). As Stern, et al., have observed, the Custom House was one of two structures connected to the city’s role as the major city representative of the nation as a whole; the second was the Immigration Station at Ellis Island. \textit{New York 1900}, 74. They write that they “were not built to serve the municipality but to reinforce its role as leading American metropolis.”

\textsuperscript{55} “New York Custom House,” \textit{Architecture and Building}, 4 March 1893, 97. For a full account of the legislative procedures to move the Custom House, and of the competition and commission for the design, see Sharon Irish, “Cass Gilbert’s Career in New York, 1899-1905” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1985).
site was taken, approved by the state legislature and the United States Congress, and a
competition for its design announced in 1899. The merchants of the City of New York—
members of the Produce Exchange—reported to Congress four reasons that enlarging and
adapting the current building would be inappropriate and offered five reasons for preferring a
new building at Bowling Green. The current building, according to their petition, was inadequate
and inaccessible in the warren of streets of the financial district; the cost and inconvenience of
temporary quarters would be too high and potentially deleterious to the work of the Custom
Service; the value of the old site at over $4 million, would, if sold, more than pay for the new
site, valued at just over $2 million; and a new building would allow the Treasury to bring in an
architect to analyze the needs of the service and provide better accommodations. The Bowling
Green site was championed because it had already received approval at various levels of
government, both state and federal; it afforded the “possibility of architectural display” and was
“almost the geographical centre, north and south, of the greater City of New York”; its larger site
was still cheap compared to the value of the old land; the functions of the Service could continue
in the existing quarters while the new building was constructed, obviating the need for expensive
temporary quarters; and the need to be physically close to the Treasury was no longer urgent.56

The petition concluded with a long and important paragraph that recapitulated these
arguments and put them in the context of the building’s public impact. The Custom House of
New York was, the petition stated,

the medium through which the United States Treasury receives by far the larger
part of its import duties, a fact which we think entitles it to a building which shall
possess every advantage possible to be gained by a reasonable expenditure. The
opportunity for erection of such a building is offered by the Bowling Green site,
and by that alone. From the standpoint of convenience of approach the situation is
unrivalled in the whole city; the Broadway cable cars pass two sides of the

56 “Petition Concerning Site of Proposed New Custom House,” in Report of the New York Produce Exchange from
July 1, 1896, to July 1, 1897 (New York: Jones Printing Company, 1897), 44-6.
proposed site, and the stations of four elevated railroads and numerous ferries are
in the immediate proximity. The adjoining parks and the width of the streets
afford in the greatest abundance those two prime requisites of comfort and health,
light and air.

The conclusion connected the geographical importance of the site to the building’s public
impact, as well:

As affording an opportunity for the erection of a public building which in its
architectural arrangements shall do credit to the United States government and the
importance of the Port of New York, it is not to be compared with the present site,
being situated on the main artery of the city’s travel, with a front on the historic
Bowling Green, and on the West the not less historic Battery Park stretching to
the harbor and bay. 57

The businessmen of the Produce Exchange presented Congress with a compact, compelling case
for the advantages of Bowling Green, encompassing all of the historical, geographical, political,
economic, and aesthetic factors that made the site so compelling. If the petition did not specify
how those “possibilities of architectural display” could best be harnessed to advantage, or detail
the reasons for the historical importance of the site, the document presented a clear case that
these favorable conditions would produce an economical, functional, and attractive new Custom
House.

In early November, the Treasury Secretary announced that Cass Gilbert had won the
closed competition to design the new Custom House. The announcement came after a protracted
and acrimonious decision-making process that had been drawn out since mid-September. As one
of the first major buildings constructed after Congress passed the 1893 Tarsney Act, which
allowed design competitions for federal building projects, there was intensive scrutiny of the
process. 58 The result was to give extra publicity to an already well-covered building process.

57 Ibid., 46.
Steven Flanders (New York: Norton, 2001), 66-69; and Sharon Irish, Cass Gilbert, Architect: Modern Traditionalist
The basic layout of the building was set by the terms of the competition. As described for the public in the *New York Times*, the competition brief required a ground floor area of 64,000 square feet and indicated the general shape and exterior dimensions of the building on each of its four frontages. It called for “a large rectangular court in the centre” and specified that “the basement is to be flush with the street level, and besides the basement there are to be six stories…. The court extends through the second story, and from the third story upward the building rises in shape like a ‘U,’ with the open space between the two wings of the building facing Bridge Street.”

These terms defined both the orientation and the massing of the building, so that Gilbert’s challenge was one of appropriate scale and articulation. The adjacent Produce Exchange was large and of similar height, but it could not be a useful model for Gilbert. It was articulated as a stacked series of arcades and organized to contain a large trading floor. Instead, Gilbert took a different approach (fig. 4.47). He declared his intent “to make the building in every way a fine thing, and worthy of its place and of its object in the large sense.”

Since the place was the south edge of Bowling Green—historically the most important side, where the Anglo-Dutch fort, Government House, and first Custom House had all stood—it had to be appropriately scaled to this anchoring role and to appear as a monument befitting the historical significance of this particular locale. The building as a whole also had to manage three very different approaches with distinctive urban vistas: from the north along the turning course of Broadway-Whitehall, from the south along narrow Whitehall Street, and from Battery Park and the harbor to the west. The varied conditions of these approaches led Gilbert to the solution of engaged colonnades along the three most visible sides, opting for a different approach to the

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60 Cass Gilbert, quoted in “Custom House Architect.”
fourth, less visible side along Bridge Street, a difference which had, at any rate, been imposed by the competition brief.

Both Gilbert’s and the Carrère & Hastings’ competition designs included a rusticated basement level. In Gilbert’s it acted as a podium, lifting the building up from street level in suitably grand fashion, while in Carrère & Hastings’ version (fig. 4.48) it provided a base following the by now well-established New York office building scheme. The office-like treatment was also evident in the main body of the composition, which consisted of tall tiers of windows spanning three floors and constructed out of metal mullions and spandrels. This, too, was a feature of many commercial buildings in New York by the late 1890s, as, for instance, in the elegant Scribner’s Building by Ernest Flagg from 1894 (fig. 4.49). Carrère & Hastings would use both the rusticated base with arched windows and the tall tiers of metal-framed windows in several of their own commercial structures, including the Blair Building on Wall Street, built only three years after the Custom House competition (fig. 4.50).

Carrère & Hastings’ design was different from Gilbert’s also in not being centralized—that is, it did not give prominence to the building’s public purpose. The building would have been a fine companion to the square had it been another office building like the Bowling Green Offices or the Welles Building, but the lack of central focus did not impart a sufficiently public expression. The critical location at the southern edge of the square meant that the building would be fully visible as one rounded the turn in lower Broadway where it opened into Bowling Green proper. As Curtis Blake observes, Gilbert’s design was better at “halting the strong axis of lower Broadway.”61 By adopting a stronger horizontality and an emphasis on the center, it terminated

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the vista in a bolder fashion. Carrère & Hastings’ design was more of “a bit of street
architecture” as Russell Sturgis had described it.⁶²

Nonetheless, in both Gilbert’s and Carrère & Hastings’ designs the introduction of the heavy rustication furthered the tendency toward a relatively solid, continuous wall of stone at ground level around Bowling Green, a tendency initiated with the Bowling Green Offices and elegantly stated in French classical rustication at the Welles Building. With the imposing precedent of the Custom House having solidified the tendency, the later skyscrapers at the square—including Carrère & Hastings’ Standard Oil—also adopted the rusticated scheme, as we will see.

Gilbert put colonnades on the Custom House’s principal sides. The columns were added after Gilbert had decided to forgo the competition brief’s requirement of a street-level entrance.⁶³ Gilbert explained the colonnades to his office manager: “The idea of a great facade with attached columns (a la M. Duc’s Palais de Justice, Paris) seems to me to give a great scale. We do not mean by this to copy Duc’s design, but simply use it by way of illustration.”⁶⁴ Gilbert here referred to Louis Duc’s Harlay wing of the Palais de Justice, a building from the 1860s that also occupied a historically significant site and that had garnered attention for its treatment of the colonnade and adjacent interior hall (fig. 4.51-4.52). The attached columns at the Palais form the exterior of the Vestibule de Harlay, a portico with the wall between made solid. According to David Van Zanten, Duc’s colonnade was a controversial matter for its manner of detailing the columns’ engagement with the wall.⁶⁵ More directly important for the precedent it provided to

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⁶² Blake, ibid., uses the phrase “street architecture,” too, to describe the design—thus making it “a harmonious neighbor” to the existing office buildings on the square—but does not reference Sturgis’ article.
⁶⁴ Cass Gilbert to Stevens Haskell, 24 July 1899, quoted in ibid.
Gilbert is the fact that the Palais’ columns are fluted, whereas at the Custom House they are unfluted. At the Custom House, the banded rustication around the lower third of the columns ties the colonnade unequivocally into the base of the building, whereas at the Palais the columns rest on a continuous base plainly differentiated from the colonnade level. The visual impression between the two is thus dissimilar, so that Gilbert’s reference to the Palais was at the level of general image rather than indicating concern for structure or tectonic columnar articulation.

Also different is the function of the colonnade: at the Custom House it was, as Gilbert said, to “give great scale.” It also convincingly terminates the vista down Broadway. Both are urbanistic functions related to the fact that the building fronts the most important edge of an important square. At the Palais de Justice the colonnade is more narrowly architectural in function as it forms the exterior of a great hall—an enclosed portico—that provides connection between the various wings of a complex agglomeration of older buildings. As the plan of the Custom House reveals, behind Gilbert’s colonnade was the Cashiers’ and Collectors’ Rooms—important functions to the business transacted in the building, but not public spaces like the Palais’ great hall (fig. 4.53). Gilbert’s central exterior stairs not only rise up to push the main floor one story above the ground, but they also penetrate into the mass of the building so that the depth of the arched opening reaching to the Main Hall is nearly equal to the depth of the rooms to either side (except for the small vestibule inserted between the exterior and the Main Hall). The significant space of the interior, the Rotunda, occupies its center (fig. 4.54). In fact, the plan reveals that the Rotunda is farther from the north face of the building, fronting Bowling Green, than it is from the much less significant south face, fronting Bridge Street.

The plan reveals yet more significance of the colonnades related to how the orders were used in the code of civic classicism in New York. On the two long sides the colonnades are
framed by massive wall projections articulated by pilasters (fig. 4.55). These *antae* push forward, projecting beyond the line of the columns; the entablature breaks forward above each projection, providing decisive termination to the symmetrical composition of each side. By contrast, the columns on the Bowling Green side stand in front of the wall plane, engaged in the same manner as on the sides, but without *antae* at the ends (fig. 4.56). At the corners the entablature steps back to meet the plane of the side *antae*. Thus, the columns on the sides and the columns at the front perform different formal and urbanistic roles in the composition. The side colonnades are recessive, enveloped by the mass of the building as expressed in the robustly articulated *antae* at each corner, and treated as a kind of background. They form a continuous, monumental line of evenly spaced columns giving drama to the oblique vista down Whitehall and to the various viewpoints from which the west facade can be seen from Battery Park and the bay. On the Bowling Green front, by contrast, the colonnade projects forward from the mass of the building. The columns give drama not to the oblique view, but to the terminating vista from Broadway (figs. 4.57-4.58). They are meant to move the eye up and down the facade, from one side to the other, and are perceived as vertical punctuations with further sculptural embellishment above and below. Whereas on the sides, the columns appear to be structural units, integral parts of the wall, on the front, the columns have a less tectonic, more decorative quality, articulating the facade as a series of vertical elements to impart the scale and grandiosity required of its site—to make it, as Gilbert himself said, “so impressive by reason of the majesty of its composition, rather than by its actual size, that it should be truly a monument.”⁶⁶

Along with the columns, the great steps which raise up the building from ground level were another way to mark the distinction of the building, from the outside, as of greater civic

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importance than the neighboring office buildings (fig. 4.59). Gilbert himself hinted at this when he described how his program dispensed with grand interior stairs: “I have purposely avoided great monumental stairways between the various stories in this design, believing them not contemplated in the [competition] program, and wholly out of place in a building so largely devoted to business affairs.”67 In context, Gilbert is thinking of a division between inside and outside in terms of function and purpose. The interior purpose of the building was considered to be the economical transaction of customs business. The exterior purpose was to provide a suitable edge to Bowling Green, a monumental termination to the Broadway vista, and a fully representational civic building in contrast to the large commercial buildings elsewhere on the square. Gilbert’s conceptual distinction between the purposes of interior and exterior is an example of the larger tendency in civic classicism to accept the dictates of economical arrangement and distribution of spaces on the interior of a public building that is primarily composed of offices while developing the exterior to accommodate larger urbanistic and symbolic purposes. Something similar was accomplished by Carrère & Hastings at the Richmond Borough Hall and County Courthouse and is also a factor in the designs of the large buildings around Bowling Green. As Gilbert stated, he wanted to produce the monumental effect “without sacrificing the use and practical necessities of the structure…. It is a great Government building, which, while having a definite practical purpose, should … have a dignity appropriate to a notable public monument.”68

Although the exterior stairs are significant to the civic stature of the building, the columns and the varied sculptural program of the building were the elements that elicited most commentary. The sculpture was given considerable attention by Gilbert and his associates. As he

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 7.
wrote, the building “should express in its adornment something of the wealth and luxury of the
great port of New York.” Gilbert notably links the building’s adornment with the port of New
York—that is, the city, rather than the institution itself. This rhetorical link reinforces the
primary urbanistic importance of the building rather than its narrower institutional purposes,
which have been the subject of recent criticism of the building’s sculptural program. As Gilbert
himself noted,

>The building will be suitably adorned with sculpture and decorative painting of a
high order. The four great seated figures at the base of the main facade will typify
the four great continents which contribute to the commerce of the world, namely,
America, Europe, Asia and Africa. The single figures above the main cornice will
typify the great commercial nations of the world. The decorations of the interior
will illustrate the commerce of ancient and modern times, both by land and sea;
thus providing a series of themes of great pictorial interest appropriate to the
structure.

Gilbert situates the Custom House in a web of networks and representational contexts more
appropriately considered urban and national than merely institutional. In this way, he naturally
conforms to those “obligations” of the site identified by Walter Chambers.

While the critical reception of the completed building was overwhelmingly positive,
Montgomery Schuyler made some typically perceptive remarks about various details of the
design, concentrating on Gilbert’s treatment of the columns. Schuyler’s final verdict may have
been that “the new building is a valuable civic possession, a work of refinement and distinction,”
but he had very specific criticisms that deserve some explication since they bear directly on the
aesthetic of civic classicism as it was developing in New York architecture. Indeed, the Custom

69 Ibid.
70 See, for instance, Gail Fenske, The Skyscraper and the City: The Woolworth Building and the Making of Modern
New York (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 90-92; and Michele H. Bogart, Public Sculpture and the
Civic Ideal in New York City, 1890-1930 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 127-31. These
interpretations focus attention on what the critics see as the sculpture’s racist and imperialistic suggestions.
House had a major impact on that aesthetic, as did the New York Public Library (under construction as the Custom House was completed).

Gilbert’s building replaced the old Merchants’ Exchange on Wall Street (fig. 4.50) as the home of the Customs Service in New York. Designed by Isaiah Rogers and built between 1836 and 1842, the Merchants’ Exchange had a central dome and rotunda, while a large portico raised on a podium covered the entire front of the building. In the center of the portico, composed of free-standing Ionic columns framed by corner antae, five openings for stairs break through the podium and form tall pedestals for the four central columns. The composition may have been inspired by the porticos at William Strickland’s Merchants’ Exchange in Philadelphia, completed in 1834. An earlier exchange that had occupied the Wall Street site burned in the large fire of December 1835, which destroyed seventeen blocks in the financial district; Rogers’ building replaced it (fig. 4.61).73

The Merchants’ Exchange is important in relation to Gilbert’s Custom House for several reasons. First, the building had been converted from different uses to house the Customs Service; this was, as we saw, one of the chief reasons for the decision to build new quarters: the old Exchange, it was said, was cramped and ill-suited to the needs of the Customs Service. The new Custom House design would be judged in functional terms in comparison to its old quarters. It would also be judged in aesthetic terms in comparison to its forerunner. The old Exchange had been admired for the grandeur of its portico. In fact, as Montgomery Schuyler described it, “the architecture [of the Exchange] consists in effect of the colonnade fronting Wall Street. The other

73 “Great Fire of 1835 Marked by Exhibit,” New York Times, 15 December 1935. Then, after the Customs Service moved to Gilbert’s building, McKim, Mead & White were commissioned by its new owners to add a second level to the structure. See Virginia Kurshan, Former National City Bank Building, LP-1979, 1999.
three sides of the building consist of walls almost architecturally blank…. The order is the thing which to all intents and purposes comprises the architecture.”\textsuperscript{74}

In one sense, then, Gilbert followed very closely the precedent of Rogers’ Merchants’ Exchange: the architecture of the Custom House consists primarily in the columns and the colonnades that they form on three sides of the building.\textsuperscript{75} “The order is the thing” in Gilbert’s building, too. In fact, Gilbert expanded Rogers’ motif of the raised colonnade and applied it to three fronts rather than the one which had been allowed by the constricted site at Wall Street. But in Schuyler’s view, Gilbert was not as successful as Rogers had been: “there is no front or aspect of the new Custom House so impressive and imposing as the Wall street front of the old.”\textsuperscript{76}

Schuyler’s criticism centered on the fact that Gilbert’s colonnade is engaged whereas Rogers’ is freestanding. The visual impact of the oblique side view of the Custom House is, though, very similar to the impact of the oblique view of the old Exchange’s front (figs. 4.62-4.63), suggesting again a close study of the earlier structure by Gilbert, or at least an understanding of the affinity of urban conditions between the narrow view afforded of the Exchange down Wall Street and the same type of view available on Whitehall Street.

The effect also seems calculated to be compatible with and a response to the raised arcade of the Produce Exchange across Whitehall (fig. 4.64). In Post’s arcade, the massive piers created arresting plays of light and shade. Gilbert’s trabeated response to the arcade achieves similar effects in the right light, though none as dark and deep as those at the Exchange. This, it seems, was the focus of Schuyler’s critique: to his eyes the free-standing columns at the

\textsuperscript{74} Schuyler, “The New Custom House,” 1.

\textsuperscript{75} The Exchange seems to have provided fertile material for designers in these years. As Fiske Kimball noted, it was especially influential on McKim, Mead & White after they received the commission to renovate the building in 1904 for the National City Bank. Kimball observed that “its long colonnade, with that of the old Treasury [in Washington, D.C.], gave suggestions for the front of the vast New York Post Office and many another work.” Kimball, \textit{American Architecture} (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928), 178.

\textsuperscript{76} Schuyler, “The New Custom House,” 2.
Exchange had a greater visual power than Gilbert’s engaged columns. This powerful visual effect came, according to Schuyler, at the expense of the functionality of the building. As he wrote wryly, “If the needs of your building happen to interfere with the requirements of your architecture, you must, as a conscientious Hellenic revivalist, sacrifice your building.”

Gilbert, in this view, effected a compromise: he wanted the appropriately monumental effect of the classical colonnade while being attentive to the program’s demands for high-grade office space: “Neither Mr. Cass Gilbert, nor any of his competitors in the competition, could have had the face to propose a building for the purposes of the new Custom House, which should be fronted with and darkened by a detached colonnade…. And yet … the Old Custom House … was architecturally more successful than the new, very possibly than any could be in which a compromise between utility and impressiveness was sought.”

For Schuyler, use of the orders was “the sacrifice to architecture” at the Custom House. But Gilbert compromised, as Rogers had not, and attached his columns to the wall, withdrawing them from their (purportedly rightful) projection into the surrounding space and thereby blunting their visual impact. But, as Gilbert wrote, “An enormous columnar portico, excluding light from the interior, and many other such customary architectural motifs were, in my opinion, wholly out of place in such a structure.”

Schuyler acknowledged the practicality of Gilbert’s formal choice regarding the colonnades, but insisted that it ruined the aesthetic effects. In his words,

It is the equal insistence upon reducing its [the colonnade’s] interference with the practical purposes of the building which makes any front of the new Custom House less impressive than the single front of the old. It is the detachment of the colonnade as a portico which practically spoils the Wall street front of the old Custom House and architecturally makes its fortune. It is the withdrawal and engagement of the colonnade on the east and west fronts of the new building.

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77 Ibid., 5.
78 Ibid., 10-11.
which at once reduces the practical interference of the architecture with the buildings and weakens the effect of the architecture.\textsuperscript{80}

Similarly, the \textit{New York Times} quoted an unnamed critic who had written that although the building was advantageously situated and was “a French exotic, pleasant to look upon,” it was nonetheless “restless.” The root of its restlessness was its columns: “The pillars are not bound into a monumental brotherhood—they lack a strong, inter-fraternal, basic attachment. Fine individually, they still are not one disciplined body. They stand side by side, it is true, in admirable symmetry, but there is lacking an absolutely unifying esprit de corps.”\textsuperscript{81}

Insisting upon this point, Schuyler nonetheless sees a few improvements in Gilbert’s treatment of the colonnade. The \textit{antae} on the side elevations are more massive and proportionate to the columns which they frame, and “in the new building the angle pilasters are real reinforcements of a satisfactory robustness.”\textsuperscript{82} But on the front, Schuyler declares that Gilbert has abandoned even the pretense of a colonnade, creating instead “a collection of columns, not a colonnade.” Here, as Schuyler observes, the columns advance in front of the flanking pavilions rather than being framed between them, and, even more upsetting to Schuyler, their rhythm and “serial effect” is “destroyed by the doubling of the columns at the ends and on each side of the entrance…. To make a feature of the entrance,” he insists, “was to destroy the colonnade and to convert the order into what seems, in comparison with the flanking series, a casual assemblage of columns.”\textsuperscript{83} Taking a cue from Viollet-le-Duc’s dictum that the orders should properly express structure, Schuyler finds fault with the apparent non-structural application of the colonnade along the front; the structure “visibly exists behind it and independently of it.”\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{80} Schuyler, “The New Custom House,” 11-12.
\textsuperscript{82} Schuyler, “The New Custom House,” 12.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 14.
Schuyler does not acknowledge it, but Gilbert’s way of using the orders was typical of the method of the civic classicists in general. According to Gilbert, it was a fallacy to think that the orders should be applied only in a strictly structural way. Instead, they could be used to expressive and visual effect, as at the Custom House, to take advantage of particular viewpoints and to effectively terminate vistas; to provide relief and shadow on a building facade when seen especially from an oblique angle along a narrow street; or, if treated decoratively, to help articulate the continuity of a street wall or to dramatize one, as the Whitehall side of the Custom House does (along with its visually paired arcade directly across the street at the Produce Exchange). According to A. R. Jemmett, a British architect who published a short commentary on the orders in *The New York Architect*, the orders were not the primary elements of architectural design, but in modern buildings they could be used “chiefly as a means of artistic expression” to assist in the “process of drawing out and accentuating the expression already inherent in the general lay-out and structural grouping” of a building.

The corners of the front of the building are especially noteworthy. They successfully create not only an arresting visual effect but a pervading feeling of massiveness and solidity; they provide a grounded, stony embrace of the passerby, imparting a strong feeling of enclosure and firm attachment to the square. The front extended the emerging urbanistic modality of the square in general, which had begun to take on the character of an embracing whole, channeling not simply traffic but also sight lines and long-distance vistas into and through the space. The phenomenological experience of Bowling Green by the end of its period of building up was such

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85 See the brief discussion in Blake, “Carrere & Hastings,” 74-75.
that, to borrow words from Michel de Certeau describing a different New York context, the citizen’s body is “clasped by the streets that turn and return it.” The tall buildings were adept at enclosing the space and clasping the visitor’s body, while the Custom House, formed into “broad shapes of stone,” was adept at convincing passersby that they were in “the presence of a great Temple of Commerce, the meeting place of all the nations to do business with the New World.” Charles de Kay captured something of this effect in his review of the building in *The Century Magazine*, where he wrote,

> Along the front, not entirely free from the wall, are twelve columns built up of drums; they are repeated on the eastern and western sides. These columns support the beetling cornice and lend a variety of shadows and upright lines to three sides of the building. As you descend Broadway and turn the bend the side colonnade is seen to the rear of the facade—truly a remarkable effect which is not often met with in architecture. Indeed from this vantage-point there is a slightly elevated view of the edifice, and fortunately not the least favorable. The powerful basement and mighty columns bear up well the weight of the superincumbent mass, and seem to perform their function instead of being merely the decorations of a wall. The three fronts have organic structural proportions.

Recalling the history of the site, de Kay speculated that “perhaps these robust walls will suggest a fort” to some future archaeologists, “and the new locality may well cause a confounding of the new Custom-house with the old fort.”

Although Gilbert’s Custom House design imposed no change on the landscape design of Bowling Green, it changed the nature of the square. As we saw earlier, the building up of Bowling Green had the effect of making the space into a channel into Manhattan when seen from Battery Park and the bay. The many aerial and water-based views of lower Manhattan from the mid-nineteenth century and into the 1920s captured the way in which Bowling Green seemed to

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90 “World’s Greatest Custom House,”

direct the flow of space into the spine of Broadway, imaginatively linking the square with the rest of the city and reinforcing its geographical centrality within the city. The Custom House added to this effect by resolutely turning the park into a forecourt for the building. After construction of the Custom House, the square was less and less considered a forecourt or space equally fronting all of the buildings around it, and more and more considered the special adjunct of the Custom House alone. Even before its construction, press reports often stated the relationship of the park and the building in this way. For instance, one article in the *New York Times*, while describing how the new building would “revive in part the historic interest of the spot,” indicated that “the Bowling Green … will form a park-like front for the new Custom House.”

The spatial effect would have been more palpable at the time, when the square did not have the tall trees that occupy it today and that both occlude views of the surrounding buildings from within the square and obscure the vistas from the opening of Broadway in the north and from along Whitehall Street to the south. The orientation of the Custom House, facing north toward the square and away from the water—the primary medium of the city’s commerce for which the building was built in the first place—meant that Bowling Green was not just an open space adjoining the building but an active partner shaping the character of the whole square and the perception of the building as actively engaging the city.

The issues of orientation and the relation of the Custom House to the water and the city bring us back to the original historical importance of Bowling Green as the urban gateway into New York. A promotional book for the Custom Service, published shortly after Gilbert was awarded the commission for the new Custom House, emphasized in its opening lines the role of the city as the “gateway to the continent”:

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93 Sharon Irish makes passing reference to the importance of the Custom House’s orientation, citing a conversation with Mary Beth Betts, in Irish, *Cass Gilbert, Architect*, 177, n. 1.
Could any more appropriate title be bestowed upon the Metropolis of the New World, into whose wharves crowd the vessels of every nation, laden with tons upon tons of merchandise destined to satisfy the needs of the many, and the luxurious fancies of the few?

Standing upon some lofty eminence and viewing the teeming water-ways of the great City of New York, her lofty buildings, her thickly populated streets and avenues, there comes the proud consciousness that here exists the Gate City of a wealthy continent!94

The ubiquitous idea of the urban gateway finds a complement in the critical reception of New York’s great train stations, the Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal, built shortly after the Custom House. Whitney Warren, for instance, likened the front of Grand Central (fig. 4.65) to the triumphal gates and arches of ancient times:

This portal was usually decorated and elaborated into an Arch of Triumph, erected to some naval or military victory or the glory of some personage. The city of today has no surrounding that may serve, by elaboration, as a pretext to such glorification, but none the less, the gateway must exist, and in the case of New York and other cities, it is through a tunnel which discharges the human flow in the very center of town. Such is the Grand Central terminal and the motive of the facade is an attempt to offer a tribute to the glory of commerce as exemplified by that institution.95

In the form of triumphal gateways into the city, train station and custom house were both imagined as scenographic additions to the urban landscape.

As the Custom House was under construction, Spencer Trask summed up the importance of its site, arguing that the historically public nature of the square was coming full circle with the new building.96 He wrote,

But at last it seems likely that this project will be accomplished, and this land, which had always been public property until 1815, and upon which the old Custom-House had been for a time, will again become the property of the public, and in place of a Fort—emblem of strife and distrust among nations—a Custom-

96 An article on the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the building noted that “the Custom House is coming back to its own again, for this building will occupy the very ground where once stood the ‘Government House.’” “Cornerstone of New Custom House Laid,” *New York Times*, 8 Oct. 1902.
House, suggestive of peaceful intercourse and friendly commerce, will be built, worthy of the nation and of the city.

Trask concisely sums up many of the themes in play at the site: the transfer of property and functions around the square as the city changed; the civic significance of its buildings over time; the symbolism of the Custom House as a bridge between public and private, or between the economy and civic life; and the building’s—and, by extension, the square’s—place in the life of both city and nation.

The Civic Dimensions of the Tall Building

Two final buildings, both designed and built after the 1916 zoning resolution and the end of World War I, completed the urban scenography of Bowling Green. The Cunard and Standard Oil Buildings, sitting across from each other at the northern wedge of the square where Broadway and Whitehall Street merge, were the final components in the sweeping transformation of the square that had begun with the Produce Exchange forty years earlier. Considered together, these two large buildings affirmed the continuous street wall modality that had been initiated earlier with the Welles Building and which, in different ways with the additions of the Bowling Green Offices and the Custom House, had fully installed itself at the square in response to the “obligations” imposed at that historic space.

The Cunard and Standard Oil Buildings resulted from changes in the real estate market and the economics of big business in the years immediately following World War I. According to a report in the Times, the physical impact of these changes promised to “create a whole new city below Wall Street.”97 The report went on to describe various real estate transactions and

noted the many older buildings that would be razed to make room for the large office towers. As it stated, “The tearing down of these old structures … and the excavation for solid construction of the twentieth century type, will not only remove landmarks of more or less interest, but will assuredly bring to light many long buried souvenirs of early Dutch and English days. Everything there is historic ground in the life of Manhattan Island.” An anonymous writer from 1836 was quoted as having said that “in a year there will be scarcely a residence or a boarding house below Wall Street. The rise in rents and the high price of board have already driven many uptown.” Over 80 years later, the process of “creative destruction” that seemed an ever-present accompaniment to capitalist development in New York was still working its machinery to transform whole districts. The literal building up of lower Manhattan into a commercial cityscape of large office buildings to the exclusion of almost everything else was a dramatic rendering of this process before the eyes of the public. Countless stories in the *Times* and other publications documented the varied economic, social, and physical aspects of the process, making the public sphere a chronicle of the astounding pace of “progress.”

Most research and debate about the origins and early history of skyscrapers has dealt with questions of structure, the functional imperatives of building tall, and the progressive aesthetics that seemed to reject historical references and precedents. But as the earlier phase of rebuilding at Bowling Green suggests, other concerns also accompanied the rise of the skyscraper and the

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98 For analysis of this process at work in New York, see Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

debates over its architectural form and urban impact. The design of the Cunard and Standard Oil Buildings brought these concerns into the 1920s, raising the issue of how civic classicists negotiated the new formal demands of the 1916 zoning ordinance to accord with their own loosely conceived ideas about the kinds of architecture appropriate to a world metropolis.

Even before the Cunard and Standard Oil Buildings were put up, a sign of change was heralded by the refacing of the Washington Building when its ownership transferred to the International Mercantile Marine Company (IMMC). The company, formed in 1902, was a conglomerate of American and British steamship companies and subsidiaries, including the White Star line that ran the Titanic.100 With the remodeling of the Washington, the west side of Broadway along Bowling Green was soon populated by other large shipping offices and acquired the name “Steamship Row”—a transfer of the name previously given to the range of four- and five-story buildings along the south front of the square, Battery Place, that had recently been replaced by the Custom House (fig. 4.66). As the Times reported, the near cessation of office building activity in lower Manhattan during and in the immediate aftermath of World War I left a shortage of space for the ever-larger corporate entities emerging at the time.101 The IMMC, like a number of other companies, considered building its own structure but found it more economical to remodel the existing Washington Building.

As S. C. Hemstreet of the Broadway Association noted, “There are still at work in these modern monuments of business, men who remember the days of the frame dwellings on lower Broadway, where in converted parlours, bookings were made for the all-important trip abroad. It was only a couple of generations ago that one of the great steamship companies, now occupying its own building, booked passages from a narrow, unimportant counter, in a remodeled

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101 “Lower New York’s Building Activity.”
Hemstreet’s brief description of Steamship Row acknowledged the historical associations of the site with ocean-faring commerce in the past and connected it to the present in another example of the “obligations” that Walter Chambers identified. Hemstreet wrote,

The early history of lower Broadway is closely associated with ocean transportation. But today, when a large number of the great structures of that section are given over to the vast interests of the great trans-Atlantic carriers, it is obvious that the steamship business occupies a commanding position on lower Broadway from which its influence radiates throughout the world…. One marvels the more at today’s steamship business on Broadway upon reflecting that little more than two centuries ago the entire maritime interests of the settlement were served by a single small pier, to which and from which it was necessary to load cargo and passengers by the use of lighters plying between the pier and the ship at anchor.

Hemstreet observes that the bay and the view of the lower tip of Manhattan had long been represented as the “gateway of freedom” to arriving foreigners. But he argues that it is just as true that lower Broadway and its surrounding district, with its steamship offices and ticket counters, worked to open the world to Americans. While there are clear undertones of commercial imperialism in the statement—making the world “open” for American investment and corporate extraction—there is also the suggestion that the district itself played a key role facilitating the international exchange crucial for modern society. In fact, Hemstreet argues that this opening of the world to Americans includes pleasure, business, education, and “the renewal of family ties in the ancestral homes” of the Old World.

These associations could conceivably have been part of the “certain obligations” under which architects at Bowling Green were obliged to work. It was a discussion of this “dominating influence” of “historical perspective” that Chambers used to preface his own remarks on the remodeling of the old Washington Building into One Broadway (figs. 4.67-4.68). In Chambers’

103 Ibid., 100-1.
view, the task set for him comprised three parts: “Converting a late-Victorian wall bearing office building into a modern fire-resistant structure; designing the fronts on three streets to typify the occupancy, that of a ship owning company, whose ships sail the seven seas; and having ever in mind the jealous regard of the public for historic localities.” Chambers’ three tasks were of different kinds. The first was technical, involving procedures to shore up the old structure and rebuild a new one on top of and in conjunction with the old structure. The second was a question of representation and symbolism, achieved by making the building “speak” to its purpose and its connection to the sea through appropriate decoration, including the compasses set into the floor of the booking hall (fig. 4.69). The third was a question of urbanistic sensitivity: how best to work in accord with the “obligations” imposed by the historic site facing both Bowling Green and Battery Park.

According to Chambers, the new facade in Indiana limestone, with details in cipollino marble, included “heraldic devices [that] are beautifully worked in colors and indicate with good taste that the building is more than local in character.” The decoration also included depictions of Neptune, god of the sea, and Mercury, god of commerce, as well as “representations of star fish, sea shells and sea plants.” The limestone and its decorations entirely replaced the red sandstone of the old exterior, which was “cut back to receive the new stone facing.” As Chambers told it, the working of those old walls of “very thick and excellent construction” demanded from the architects and workmen alike “the exercise of great care and judgment.”

The old building had been articulated by rounded corners on Battery Place, a tall towered cupola on top of a mansard roof, and a spiky series of rounded dormers at the roof line. All of this was shorn from the building in the remodeling. Severity and simplicity marked the style of

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107 Ibid., 291.
the reborn One Broadway. At the base of the building, running from its northern edge on Bowling Green around to the western corner on Battery Place, he constructed a continuous arcade of windows and doors and repeated the motif similarly near the top of the building in the floor just below the main cornice. The ground-floor arches continued the pattern of those at the Cunard Building, rising at the same time just a few steps north along Broadway; together, the two compositions suggested a new motif for the ground level of office buildings at Bowling Green (though the fine ashlar stonework of Chamber’s design contrasted with the deeply-cut rustication of the Cunard). Previously used on the Produce Exchange across the square, the motif of the continuous arcade was now brought down to street level and identified clearly with the commercial structures at the square; by contrast, the Custom House, a public building, was composed of a trabeated system of columns.

Chambers kept intact the diagonal corners of the older structure of the Washington, simply cutting out the columns of projecting bay windows. The diagonal wall still effectively brought visual attention to the special situation of the corner: it marked the transition between Battery Park and Bowling Green. By conspicuously treating the corner in this way, both Edward Kendall and Walter Chambers identified the specific urban conditions which their buildings addressed. By contrast, Chambers got rid of the various accoutrements at the roof level, most notably the cupola. This had been a visual beacon at the time of its construction, but shortly thereafter the Bowling Green Offices rose behind it, blurring the cupola’s visibility from a distance. Although it was still silhouetted against the sky from certain viewpoints in Battery Park (fig. 4.70), it would have been difficult from a distance to distinguish its profile against the taller building behind it. Chambers’ removal of the cupola diminished the visual link across the bay.

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108 Shockley describes these characteristics as typical of Chambers style in general: “International Mercantile Marine Company Building,” 1.
between Bowling Green and Staten Island, a degradation initiated by the building of the Bowling Green Offices behind it. On one hand, One Broadway became more attached to its specific location and less of a building with a larger metropolitan significance. On the other hand, the new exterior helped forge a more cohesive urban scenography for Bowling Green, which as a whole provided a model for unifying urban space in the ever-expanding metropolis. That small cupola, in both presence and absence, is evidence of the changing conceptions of urban scenography in the modern city. And its importance demonstrates the level of detail to which architects were attentive when working at this sensitive location.

At the same time as Chambers was remaking One Broadway, the Cunard Line was building new offices at the northern edge of Bowling Green adjacent to the Bowling Green Offices (fig. 4.71). A report in the Times noted, as it had done so often in recent years, that “the undertaking will mark the passing of the historic Stevens House at 27 Broadway and other famous old landmarks adjoining…. With the erection of the new building there will disappear another group of famous landmarks linking old New York with the city of today.”109 As the paper reported a year later when the architects’ plans were made public, the Cunard would “fix more firmly than ever the steamship centre in the Bowling Green area of the city.”110 The Cunard Building, like the remodeling of the Washington, was spurred by the desire for office space near the water—“compelled,” as one observer put it, like other big businesses, “to erect their own buildings.”111 As the Times reported elsewhere, “the Cunard Line has recently completed new headquarters on the river front at Liverpool, and its intention to erect a building of the same sort in this city for permanent headquarters … is indicative of the confidence felt by the company in the future shipping business of New York and its willingness to back this

judgment with a heavy financial outlay.”

It was the first large office building in lower Manhattan to be built since the end of World War I and prominently signaled the resurgence of real estate and construction activity. As a report in *Architecture and Building* put it, there was “something peculiarly fitting in the rescue of this piece of land from the base uses to which it had descended in the last generation and in the erection thereupon of a building which will … be a model skyscraper…. The building will embody the best possible practice and experience in every detail relating to a modern office building of the best type.”

The fact that the building was so visually prominent and that its architect would have to deal with unusually complicated engineering factors—it was to sit above a subway line cutting across the plot diagonally—lent great interest to the building. As its architect Benjamin Wistar Morris acknowledged, “Seldom has a single operation in building construction involved greater complications of size, unknowable costs, irregularity of plot, untoward conditions of foundations, plus a tortuous, curving, steeply sloping subway, cutting through the property and adding to the general interest of the problem.”

Morris, who had worked in the offices of Carrère & Hastings, took the design of the Bowling Green Offices as his starting point for the Cunard Building, where he was assisted by Thomas Hastings, who, according to Morris, “generously contributed to the result achieved.”

The Cunard’s facade is divided into the tripartite scheme of the Welles Building and Bowling Green Offices, presenting a recessed central section framed by side pavilions. It takes from its

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112 “Cunard to Have Big Building Here.”
115 Benjamin Wistar Morris, quoted in “The Cunard Building, New York,” *Architecture and Building*, August 1921, 62. On purely stylistic grounds, it has been suggested that Hastings may have had a large, perhaps decisive, role in the exterior design of the Cunard, given the similarities with the slightly later Standard Oil Building. But the influence could, of course, have worked the other way around; that is, Morris’ successful facade could have inspired Hastings to adopt a similar approach at the Standard Oil. See Blake, “The Architecture of Carrère & Hastings,” 350; and David M. Breiner and Victoria Young, *Cunard Building*, LP-1928, 1995, 5.
neighbor a nearly identical massing and fenestration pattern, but takes further the suggestion of the Welles in articulating the base as a rusticated podium (fig. 4.72). Curtis Blake has suggested that this rusticated base is a quotation of Donato Bramante’s Palazzo Caprini, the so-called House of Raphael in Rome, a design known only through drawings and prints.116 There, Bramante had introduced the rusticated ground story composed by an arcade with a superstory of coupled, engaged columns resting above the piers of the base. The design effectively articulated the different parts of that low building: the ground level given to shops open to the street, and the upper piano nobile for living.117 At the Cunard, this Bramantean scheme has been transformed because the colonnade is comprised of free-standing columns creating a raised portico with deep shadows, and because the columns span two floors. Still the Times stated that the facade presented “simple but dignified lines, suggestive of the Italian Renaissance style, freely adapted for metropolitan commercial needs.”118

As Royal Cortissoz observed, “The home offices of the Cunard Line in Liverpool … have a square-built, almost fortress-like aspect. Mr. Morris has followed in New York the same motives of weight and dignity. His massive course of rusticated stone, broken by five monumental arches, may have an Italian precedent, but the perfect base they provide is in harmony with all the ideas of might lying behind the assertion that ‘Brittania rules the waves.’ 119 There is something surprising in the fact that what is really a branch office of the Cunard Line, erected primarily for ticketing, is treated more grandly than the home office (fig. 4.73). At the Liverpool building, as Cortissoz notes, there is a similar treatment of classical rustication and massiveness. So, while Rome and Liverpool may have provided precedents for

118 “Monumental Broadway Building.”
the design, its large-scale treatment, greater depth of wall articulation, and formal connections to other buildings on the square must be attributed to Morris’ interest in the immediate context. Its function was nothing exalted and its precedents were diminutive in comparison; Bowling Green itself must hold the key to the distinctive treatment of these “motives of weight and dignity.”

The Bowling Green Offices next door suggested the general treatment of the tripartite massing. But Morris’ design departs in many ways from its predecessor. Corroborating Barbara Lane’s argument about the trajectory of design in the decades around 1900, the Cunard is streamlined and articulated by large-scale elements. Whereas the Bowling Green Offices was articulated by deep window reveals that cut up the facade into a distinct cell-like grid pattern, the Cunard’s windows are set close to the face of the wall and unornamented, creating a “towering mass of plain wall surface”\(^{120}\) that gives a sheer vertical effect (fig. 4.74). The side pavilions, each about fifty feet in width, exactly half of the central mass, are framed like the Welles at their corners by quoins—another Renaissance and French Beaux-Arts motif—visually setting them apart from the central recession in a more emphatic manner than is evident at its neighbor. And while the recession is only slightly greater at the Cunard, Morris has managed to insert windows into the thickness of the projection. The clear proportional relationship between center and pavilions, and the clear demarcation of sections at their joints—the quoining—accentuates the building’s vertical mass in a way much less evident next door.

Along with the rusticated podium, the treatment of the top of the Cunard also departs significantly from the Bowling Green Offices. The composition of the latter is completed by a strong cornice, above which was originally a parapet in the form of a continuous balustrade (by the time the Cunard was built another story had been added above the cornice, replacing the shorter parapet). At the Cunard, the “central mass, a sheer cliff wall without break” rises “to a

\(^{120}\) Morris, quoted in “The Cunard Building, New York,” 62.
height sufficient to dominate the entire composition. One cornice only, of appreciable dimension, is permitted on the building line; and this was placed at the fifth floor, terminating the composition of the base.”\textsuperscript{121} The portion of the central mass that rises above the pavilions is articulated by a loggia similar to, though larger than, the one in the podium. Above the cornice of this loggia is a low parapet, similar to the one originally built at the Bowling Green Offices, followed by two relatively short and low setbacks culminating in a solid parapet over the central mass. From Royal Cortissoz’s point of view, the upper cornice was the only problematic portion of the exterior, and he regretted that only the central section was capped by one, thereby renouncing “the full force of an ideal climax” to the building: “A great cornice is a joy by itself. But Mr. Morris has made the best of the situation imposed upon by the zoning resolutions and the stepping of the topmost stories. If he could not let himself go in a cornice worthy of the base on which his building rests he has at all events played with his varied roof lines so skillfully that they hold together and adequately crown the whole.”\textsuperscript{122}

The impact, then, is one of simplicity and imposing mass. Cortissoz concisely summed up the visual effect: “There are no teasing details to disturb the calm of these noble walls. The arched base, like the pillared stage it carries, is refined very nearly to the point of austerity. As the facade soars to its height there are no decorative littlenesses to mar the broad and powerful sweep of the design.” Morris, Cortissoz insists, has designed “without having recourse to any specious ‘picturesque’ expedients.”\textsuperscript{123} He followed, as Lane observed, the trend toward large-scale treatment, in this case suggested by the site and the absolute dimensions of the building itself.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Cortissoz, “The Cunard Building,” 2.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
The effect finally achieved was remarkably different from earlier design iterations, which had begun in April 1917. In two earlier versions, published in *Architectural Forum* in 1920, the “sheer cliff wall” was less pronounced in one (fig. 4.75), and “picturesque expedients” were evident in the other (fig. 4.76). The tripartite division and the taller central section were there from the beginning, but the articulation changed significantly. The former design inserts into the central section a free-standing colonnade at ground level, framed by arches and pilasters on the pavilions and a tall parapet containing a broad field for inscriptions. This design was “abandoned,” according to Morris, “because of its obstruction to light.” The colonnade bears a close resemblance, if compressed in the horizontal dimension, to McKim, Mead & White’s U.S. Post Office, completed before the war (fig. 4.77). At the top, Morris’ early design was treated more simply in terms of mass, terminating in a large volume articulated by a long arcade that recalled both the Produce Exchange nearby and another McKim, Mead & White building, the Boston Public Library. In the latter design, which Morris described as a “study with pilaster treatment,” the ground-level columns turned into pilasters between which were inserted arched openings as in the side pavilions. At the top, an “immense beacon light” terminated the central mass, and a more elaborate parapet with sculptural enrichment framed its base. In both schemes, the fenestration was irregular, with some windows grouped into bays of two, three, or four openings, creating patterns of squares or horizontal rectangles across the facade.

The rusticated podium of the final design may have been suggested by the Welles Building, but the Cunard has a greater urban impact. For Cortissoz, it was the unity of the composition as a whole, “the binding of the building, line and mass, into one beautiful chord,” that gave the building an unavoidable presence from any viewing angle. The composition—

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unified, streamlined, and massive—imparts a “living quality.” “Gone,” says Cortissoz, “is the deadness, the inertia, the banality, of the skyscraper …. Gone is the empty gesture of adventitious ornament. This is indeed organic architecture. The facade holds you by its beauty and at the same time it persuades you that it is the outward, visible sign of an inward interest, a good plan.”126 What Cortissoz means by “organic” is obviously something different from what the term had come to mean by that time in the work and polemics of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance. He suggests that organic refers to a quality connecting plan and exterior as well as the building’s unforced relation to its site.

In this view, the phrase “holds you by its beauty” is a key idea. Like the Custom House’s stony embrace, the Cunard’s seems to make the viewer acutely aware of their presence in the square. Cortissoz wrote, “All manner of far-reaching implications suggest themselves in the grandiose nature of the facade and the great hall.”127 Among these implications is the importance of the viewer’s perspective on the building from various vantage points around Bowling Green. “Fortunate in its site,” Cortissoz observed, the Cunard was unique in the vista provided by the widening of Broadway into Bowling Green proper: “For once, a skyscraper may be seen in something like perspective.”128 Just as the Audsleys had taken advantage of the broad space in front of the Bowling Green Offices, Morris successfully exploited the position of the Cunard at the entrance to the square.

The ability of the design to “hold” the viewer, as Cortissoz observed, is clear in early views of the facade from the Whitehall approach into Bowling Green. Photographs from just after the building’s completion show how captivating the sight was, framed by the Custom House to the left and the Produce Exchange to the right as the viewer moved north on Whitehall.

127 Ibid., 8.
128 Ibid., 1.
(fig. 4.78). The scenographic effect would have been especially captivating compared to the small four- and five-story buildings that lined the approach up Whitehall until the 1970s (fig. 4.79). Today, with the tall trees of Bowling Green obscuring much of the facade, the impact is blunted. But the original visual effect is also evident by drawings of the Broadway facade published at the time. For instance, one by Chester B. Price (fig. 4.80) and another by Hugh Ferriss (fig. 4.81) dramatize the sheer mass and the play of light and shadow. Both dissolve the wall surfaces into unobstructed masses; in the Ferriss drawing the windows are completely omitted. The drawings treat the building as a mass of stone pierced by the colonnades and arcades, creating deep shadows in voids that seem to be cut into the mass. They both emphasize the building as offering up a seat, an urban throne, that is nobly situated at the apex of Bowling’s Green northern edge. This seems to be what Cortissoz was suggesting by the building’s ability to “hold the viewer.” The building does not simply terminate the vista, it visually offers a seat to the viewer from which one would become immersed in the bodily experience of the square’s scenography. Morris took full advantage of the urban situation to create a powerful visual impact. The Cunard Building terminates the vista along Whitehall as convincingly as the view of the Custom House from the turn on Broadway—coincidentally at the spot just in front of the throne-like Cunard.

From the view north along Broadway on the west side of the square, on Battery Park, the Cunard Building joins with the Washington Building and the Bowling Green Offices to create the “sheer cliff wall” of stone that encloses and gives figural shape to the square itself (fig. 4.82). If we compare this to another view from about 1870, before any of these buildings there (fig. 4.83), we can see not just the enormous changes in scale and function at the square over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the way in which Morris and his
predecessors at Bowling Green actively shaped the space to dramatize the viewer’s experience. As the walls around Bowling Green grew taller, the figural shape of the square came into sharper focus, and the buildings around it reacted reciprocally to take advantage of the latent visual possibilities within the space.\footnote{Craig Whitaker observes how, from the view down Broadway, the Washington Building steps down to provide an appropriate visual transition from the sheer cliff wall along the street to the lower height of the Custom House. He writes, “Without this mediation, and had the Customs [sic] House been located directly on axis with Broadway, it would have seemed hopelessly undersized, its details, even its overscaled windows, lost over the great distances involved. From farther up Broadway, the Customs House would have disappeared entirely, blocked from view by the rolling topography of the street.” Whitaker, Architecture and the American Dream (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1996), 241.}

Similar conditions affected the design of the Cunard’s companion across Broadway, the Standard Oil Building. The two must be considered together because of both the similar design features they share and the ways in which they take advantage of their sites. As a pair, they articulate the narrowing of the wedge of space at Bowling Green’s northern side, making the turn of Broadway into a funnel-like urban channel (fig. 4.84). And together the Cunard and Standard Oil Buildings complete the series of design decisions taken under the influence of the “obligations” that Walter Chambers noted when he described his work transforming the Washington Building.

The Standard Oil Building was the product of a complicated series of real estate transactions on the property bounded by Broadway, Beaver, and New Streets (fig. 4.85).\footnote{See Betsy Bradley, Standard Oil Building, LP-1930, 1995.} Work was executed in three major stages as existing buildings were bought, torn down, and the lots incorporated into the new structure. As one commentator noted, the existing hodge podge of “architectural styles of several decades” was to be replaced by “a single structure, representing the highest type of development of a modern American office building.”\footnote{Ralph W. Chambers, “The New Standard Oil Building,” The American Architect-The Architectural Review, 27 Sept. 1922, 282.} Because Standard Oil had operated out of an existing building at 26 Broadway, originally opened in 1885 and...
subsequently expanded, management opted to retain the visible presence provided by the open expanse of Bowling Green. The company saw an opportunity not only to consolidate its offices—the company had been split by a major anti-trust decision in 1911—but also to contribute to the collection of “towering buildings at the lower end of Manhattan Island, which provide a unique picturesqueness to the skyline characteristic of the enormous business activity” in that area of the city.  

The Standard Oil Building replaced five earlier structures on the site, including the Welles Building and Ernest Flagg’s 12-story Produce Exchange Bank, completed in 1905 and described by Mardges Bacon as one of the architect’s “prestige office buildings” (fig. 4.86). Flagg’s building appeared as a fragment from viewpoints within Bowling Green proper, as only two bays were carried around Beaver from the longer Broadway side. Its combination of materials and patterns was unusually rich: enamel-faced brick at the upper stories and limestone at the base, iron details such as the balcony at the 11th story and the brackets under the stone cornice (fig. 4.87), and terra cotta panels between the windows. Even the Washington Building appeared restrained next to the florid Produce Exchange Bank. Flagg’s design incorporated an elegantly rusticated base of two stories over a raised basement, wide projecting bay windows from floors four through ten—giving a flavor of the type preferred in some Chicago commercial buildings—and an asymmetrical fenestration pattern on both of its principal elevations. An observer praised the “artistic effect” of the extensive ironwork, especially the structural brackets supporting the stone cornice, and described the composition as “most effective and something that deserves credit.” The commentator found that the building “excites favorable comment”  

because of “its originality of design, which distinguishes it from all its fellows about Bowling Green.”

Flagg’s bank building had some elements in common with the architectural patterns of the square as they existed at the time. For instance, the rustication complemented its neighbor to the north, the Welles Building, although Flagg’s design appeared more animated and projected further from the face of the wall by means of the heavy brackets under the stone balcony of the base (fig. 4.88). The width of a bay was about the same in each building, as well, lending a continuous rhythm to that short stretch of Broadway.

Despite these compatible elements, the building was a curious addition to the square. It eschewed the patterns, materials, and motifs of its familial predecessor, Post’s Produce Exchange across Beaver Street. That it stood for only eighteen years before being cleared to make way for the enlarged Standard Oil Building—the structure that confirmed and completed the square’s emergent aesthetic—suggests that it was not well attuned to its surroundings (and, given its size, not economical relative to the real estate surrounding it). Beginning with Walter Chambers’ refacing of the Washington Building, the trend at Bowling Green was toward reduction of surface treatment rather than a profusion of details, as Lane observed about the period more broadly. From this view, Flagg’s admirably individualistic design was out of sync; the square’s aesthetic center of gravity went in the opposite direction, toward broader, more massive forms and streamlined details. Except for the rusticated base, which linked it to its neighbor and to its successor on the same site, the Produce Exchange Bank was a graceful but incongruous addition to Bowling Green.

Both the Standard Oil and its immediate predecessor, the Cunard, were early responses to the 1916 zoning ordinance. According to the Final Report of the Commission on Building

Districts and Restrictions, “New York City has reached a point beyond which continued unplanned growth cannot take place without inviting social and economic disaster. It is too big a city, the social and economic interests involved are too great to permit the continuance of the laissez faire methods of earlier days.”135 Planner George B. Ford summarized the new law in a pamphlet designed for popular circulation, writing that its purpose was to “provide greater safety in buildings and in the streets, and in general to make the city more beautiful, convenient and agreeable.”136 While the zoning resolution has often been regarded as a economic tool for maintaining property values and a utilitarian tool associated with the emerging post-war “City Efficient” planning paradigm, as Ford emphasized the aesthetic component of the law was not insignificant.137

The zoning resolution was passed at an inauspicious time: with the American entry into World War I in 1917, building almost came to a halt across the nation, and tall building in particular was effectively suspended until the economic recovery began in late 1919. When large-scale construction resumed in the new decade, architects were forced to come to terms with the law’s impositions on building form and its implicit repercussions for urban scenography. Quickly, though, the consensus was that the law provided opportunities to clarify and reimagine tall building design in a more appropriately urbanistic framework. As Carol Willis has shown, the zoning resolution was at first a reaction to urban problems but quickly emerged in architectural discourse as a stimulus to design.138 Earlier laissez faire conditions had given architects both too much and too little freedom: they could design as they pleased but they had to

maximize the building outline in order to satisfy the economic imperatives considered foremost by building owners and developers. The zoning resolution imposed new restrictions on building outlines that most architects welcomed.

Extrapolating from Willis’ scheme, tall building design has been seen as having gone in two directions in the 1920s: the visionary and the pragmatic.139 The visionaries were led by Hugh Ferriss and Harvey Wiley Corbett, who, in many articles in the popular and professional press through the 1920s, popularized their views on the aesthetic possibilities of tall building design under the new law. Their crusade on behalf of the setback skyscraper culminated in Ferriss’ *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, published in 1929.140 In this scheme, the civic classicists were in the pragmatic camp, preferring to modify their historical references to suit the law’s new demands, but avoiding radical statements about wholly new departures in design. But the architecture touted by Corbett and Ferriss and the many publications of the time concerning skyscraper design reveal a less dichotomous opposition of visionaries and pragmatists. For instance, Corbett’s article, “High Buildings on Narrow Streets” (1921), opened with an illustration of Carrère & Hastings’ Fisk Building (fig. 4.89) and contained illustrations of their Liggett Building (fig. 4.90) and Warren & Wetmore’s Heckscher Building (fig. 4.91). Corbett described these as having illustrated “very successfully the improvement which this law has made in the contour of buildings as compared to the old idea of the box.”141

The Fisk and Liggett Buildings, built simultaneously from 1919 to 1921, codified what Robert Stern calls the “big base, small tower type” of setback skyscraper.142 In addition to illustrating Corbett’s 1921 article, the two buildings appeared numerous times in the architectural

press as exemplars of the new direction in tall building design under the zoning resolution.\textsuperscript{143} Hugh Ferriss even managed to romanticize the Fisk, a very plan design in red-brick with limestone trim, in his drawing to accompany a major popular article on the new setback skyscrapers (fig. 4.92).\textsuperscript{144} Despite later critics’ attempts to neatly box skyscraper designs into discrete and opposing categories, this overlap between visionary and pragmatic camps suggests that at the time the range of acceptable and exemplary alternatives was wide.

Buildings such as the Fisk and Liggett show that the civic classicists were less interested in expression of height as a primary value than they were in the visual impact of their buildings within the cityscape. Proportion, mass, and the possibilities of three-dimensional design were the most important elements. According to Thomas Hastings, “One considerable advantage we may foresee in the outcome of the new zoning resolutions for New York applied to our high buildings, is the fact that there will be fewer wide expanses of side brick walls without windows, ugly in themselves and ugliest when the owners will sell out such spaces for advertising purposes.”\textsuperscript{145} And as he wrote early in his career, tall buildings forced architects to give renewed attention to proportions, wall surfaces, and divisions of elements in a facade. The new building type, he wrote, “should demand, first of all, that we know how to make openings in a wall so as to have a proper and agreeable relation between them, and to leave well-proportioned wall-surfaces”; they also meant that architects would “of necessity resort to combining some stories in one motif.”\textsuperscript{146} These principles were still operable under the new conditions. Rather than enforcing an emphasis on height, the regulations would allow architects to recommit their


creative energies to fundamental architectural qualities. Civic classicists such as Hastings would have agreed with Paul Cret when he criticized the later dominant modernist attitude toward tall building as based “on a conception of steel construction which assumes that in a system of a girder resting on two posts, the posts have a metaphysical nobility which entitles them to a special magnification.” Hastings and other architects in his milieu sought to create agreeable correspondences between a building and its urban setting, regardless of height. The expression of the constructive apparatus was less important than the building’s relation to the cityscape.

In general, Hastings held an ambivalent attitude to the skyscraper that was typical of the civic classicists. He recognized that the “originality and modernity of these monstrous palaces of industry” had transformed city streets “into canyons of human habitation.” If the relation of building to city was the basis for his approach to skyscraper design, then novelty for its own sake was considered an error. He defined originality in architecture as “a spontaneous effort to do work in the simplest and most natural way.” That he contributed to the canyon effect with his tall buildings, especially the Standard Oil, testifies to both the conflicted attitude of the civic classicists and the economic realities of professional work. Buildings such as the Standard Oil and Cunard avoided emphasis on height as a primary expressive value in an effort to temper the disintegrating, scaleless effects of speculative development and provide an alternative way of imagining coherent urban space that gave priority to civic expression. In this context, concern for height only came after concern for street-level scenography.

The differences between the Standard Oil and the Cunard Buildings are partly a result of their plots and frontages. Whereas both buildings have three street facades joined on the fourth

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147 Paul Cret to Fiske Kimball, 6 May 1925, quoted in Shepherd, Skyscraper, 224.
149 Hastings, “Modern Architecture,” in ibid., 111.
side with their respective tall neighbors, the exposed facades are situated differently. At the Cunard, the “front” is clearly the Broadway facade, while the Morris and Greenwich Street fronts are “side” facades. The Morris side faces north, away from Bowling Green. The Standard Oil’s site is configured as nearly the opposite of the Cunard’s. While Standard Oil has a long facade on Broadway/Whitehall with the central entrance giving access to the long, high corridor that runs through to New Street (figs. 4.93), its Beaver Street front is the most visually prominent. Its third side, along New Street to the east, is functionally similar to the Morris Street front of the Cunard; it is the “back” side. The Beaver Street front faces south and is visible from Bowling Green and from the entrance into the square from Battery Park, thus giving the building’s corner at Broadway and Beaver the greatest visual prominence (fig. 4.94). Effectively, there is no corner of the Cunard visible from Bowling Green; its northern edge has no visible return. It simply ends at the narrow opening to Morris Street. The exterior of the Standard Oil, by contrast, had to respond to two different conditions of visibility: the long primary facade of the Broadway front, which visually if not functionally is both front and side, and the secondary front on Beaver Street, which is visible from within the square itself. Because of this, the corner appears as a prominent angle that joins the two sides into a continuous surface and binds the building into one coherent unit.

The Beaver Street facade stakes a claim for visual preeminence, being composed in the throne-like manner of the Cunard’s main front (fig. 4.95). Because the Childs Restaurant held out to the end of its lease in 1925, Thomas Hastings had to abandon his first design, a large cubic mass rising from the corner of Broadway and Beaver (fig. 4.96). To accommodate the small building on Beaver, Hastings borrowed from Morris’ Cunard design the throne-like, tripartite composition, except that the central mass of the Standard Oil would be set farther back from the
pavilions to each side (fig. 4.97). As the design progressed through 1922, Hastings introduced additional refinements, including the more felicitous handling of the setbacks and the crown.

Hastings incorporated into his Standard Oil design a number of elements that were basic building blocks at the Cunard: the podium as a rusticated base with arcade; the quoins articulating edges of the pavilions; the upper colonnades comprised of engaged columns, both at the crowning section of the pavilions and as the penultimate motif of the tower; and even the addition of the obelisks punctuating the corners at the second setback in the tower proper (fig. 4.98). At the Cunard, Morris had placed stout obelisks above the coupled columns of the loggia (fig. 4.99). Hastings’ final design for the infill between the pavilions on Beaver Street—added when the restaurant lost its lease—was a Giulio Romano-inspired interpretation of the Cunard’s loggia that in miniature echoed the tripartite division of the Beaver Street elevation as a whole (fig. 4.100).

Many of the early published views of the Standard Oil Building captured the way in which it locks into the formal architectural conditions of the site as they had been established by the existing buildings. A telling feature is the viewpoint chosen in many of the images, including Hastings’ design drawings (figs. 4.101-4.103, 4.96): elevated above the square, the views are taken from the steps of the Custom House. That particular viewpoint seamlessly joins the Standard Oil Building with its surroundings not only by emphasizing the way in which the building anchors the visually dominant corner and mimicks the Cunard’s throne-like stance, but also by visually establishing its lower arcade at the same level as those of the Cunard to the left and the Produce Exchange to the right. That particular viewpoint, available to any observer who ventures up the Custom House steps, captured the Standard Oil’s essential adherence, despite its much larger absolute size, to the scale and forms that had been previously built up around
Bowling Green. From this angle, the Standard Oil was a natural addition to and completion of the scenographic effects already established at the square. By so conspicuously adopting elements of the existing commercial architectural language of the square, the Standard Oil Building consummated the transformation of Bowling Green into a corporate urban center. But it also was one of the most conspicuous examples of the way in which civic classicism imposed itself on commercial buildings in order to create harmonious surroundings and a cityscape that privileged public buildings.

Both the Cunard and the Standard Oil, despite the exuberance of their upper reaches, were conceived as “street architecture” for the bulk of their height—at least as far as the first major setbacks. At the Standard Oil Building, the functional-visual ambiguity between front and side facades was largely the result of the urban conditions of the building’s visibility in relation to the square. The Broadway front, although it accommodates the large arched entrance, is treated continuously as a “sheer cliff wall.” The false front on Beaver Street was treated in the manner of the Cunard not only because of the complicated property dynamics of the site, but also to exploit the fact that the privileged view of the building could be had from the southwest—either from the steps of the Custom House, as the images indicate, or from the entrance into Bowling Green from Battery Park, where the best photographic views of the building are taken. Since there was no privileged viewpoint toward the building that would allow a similarly advantageous revelation of the Broadway front to the one allowed by the viewpoint from Whitehall toward the Cunard, the Beaver Street front of the Standard Oil could be treated as the main facade despite its subordinate functional position. The decisive factor was the building’s orientation, compelled by the site, toward the square and the Custom House. Thus, a corporate headquarters meets face-to-face with a public square and civic monument in a distinctly
deferential way. Like the Cunard, the building’s mass forms a throne-like pile of cubic forms, with a recession at the center. This was by consensus the commercial typology for Bowling Green, a direct and visible contrast to the rhythmic variety of the engaged colonnade that pushed forward from the face of the Custom House—the element that disturbed Montgomery Schuyler but which justifies itself in context as a commendable civic gesture.

As an observer wrote in the *New York Times* at the time of the Custom House’s completion, “Recent years have been remarkable for the erection of great, monumental buildings in New York, and this to such an extent that the city may be said to have entered upon an era of architecture that aims to harmonize the utmost demands of utility with an aesthetic beauty and appropriateness of design that enhances the value of the total effect.” With the completion of the Cunard and Standard Oil Buildings at the apex of Bowling Green’s triangular space, this “total effect” can be understood to have included commercial architecture, as well. As architecture’s relation to the city was changing over the course of the early twentieth century, the civic classicists argued that unity of effect was the preeminent value. They argued, for instance, that

street architecture is social architecture, and ought surely to conform to those rules of convention by which all society is governed. It should not be possible for any one freeholder to erect some vulgar monstrosity as an advertisement, when by such building he entirely destroys the artistic harmony of the street…. It is of course not essential that each building be an exact repetition of its neighbor. Rather, an effort should be made to obtain a symmetrical arrangement by blocks of similar design, and monotony of detail should be avoided by minor variations in the elevations without destroying the design.

Similarly, Thomas Hastings wrote that the most important factor for urban architecture was the “ensemble of the general line of building.” A beautiful city would result neither from

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following prescribed rules nor from unfettered fantasy but from pursuing “the artistic expression of what is both reasonable and practical” within the given contours and imperatives impinging upon a site. Balance had to be struck, according to the civic classicists, between variety and regularity in the cityscape.

Two final illustrations demonstrate full extent of the particular urbanistic modality at Bowling Green: Jules Guérin’s drawing showing the Battery Park facade of the Custom House with, at left, the northern edge of the Bowling Green Offices (fig. 4.104), and the photograph (fig. 4.105) of the Cunard Building viewed from Whitehall Street, framed on the left by the Custom House and on the right by the Produce Exchange. Both show the formal reciprocity that was designed into the buildings surrounding Bowling Green. The projecting side pavilions of the Custom House respond to the projecting side pavilions of both the Bowling Green Offices and the Cunard Building. The Bowling Green Offices, as we have seen, had been the first large building to employ this composition, borrowing but greatly increasing the scale of its nearby model, the Welles Building. Cass Gilbert then adapted this motif for the side elevations of the Custom House. On the front, as we saw, the colonnade pushes forward from the wall rather than being framed and contained by it. Now, with these two other images in mind, we see that the treatment of the side facades in an identical manner, different from the Bowling Green side, was a deliberate move on Cass Gilbert’s part (even if he was only dimly conscious of the urbanistic reasons for the move). It was not done to simply provide formal variation or to merely differentiate front from sides. The particular composition of the side facades—colonnade framed by projecting pavilion antae—suggested itself as a felicitous way to compose a facade that would be largely seen from oblique angles. And, in its turn, the pattern served to suggest itself as a general type of “street architecture.” Just as the colonnade had been effective, in Montgomery

Schuyler’s view, at the old Merchants’ Exchange in providing a substantial oblique view down Wall Street, the pavilions-colonnade motif at the Custom House gave visual interest to the primary views that could be had of the building from the space along Battery Park to the west and along narrow Whitehall Street to the east. The motif was then picked up by Morris in his design for the Broadway front of the Cunard Building and by Hastings for the Beaver Street front of the Standard Oil Building. This motif was suited to the distant, oblique view, imparting to the building a sense of recumbent masses and emphasizing the role of the building in framing streets—providing a continuous street edge—rather than occupying space and of “holding the viewer,” as Cortissoz observed. At the front, the Custom House’s colonnade could push forward to emphasize the building as a free-standing civic monument. By the same civic code, the commercial buildings surrounding the square could not do so.

The Standard Oil Building’s tower had a further urbanistic significance, as suggested in Craig Whitaker’s study of urban patterns in lower Manhattan. As he observes, the towers that marked the Broadway axis connecting the Battery to City Hall were all different but nonetheless effective at visually indicating the connection between these historic civic spaces (fig. 4.106). The stepped pyramid of the Standard Oil Building, the bulbous mansard of the Singer Tower, the spiky pinnacle of the Woolworth Building, and the geometrical Romanitas of the Municipal Building created a spectacular series of pinnacles guiding the eye, right to left, left to right, from one point to another as one moved along Broadway. With the removal of the long-despised Post Office at the southern wedge of City Hall Park, the view to both City Hall itself and to the tower of the Municipal Building from the approach on Broadway was now open, consummating the series of vistas and towering visual connections that began at Bowling Green. It made of

154 Whitaker, Architecture and the American Dream, 261-64.
Broadway a kind of civic processional space, confirming Francisco Mujica’s characterization of the Standard Oil and Cunard Buildings as “sentinels” watching over the gateway to the city.\textsuperscript{155}

With construction of the Standard Oil Building, the architectural ensemble at Bowling Green was complete: a continuous range of mutually inflected and cooperatively conceived buildings had emerged from a long period of rebuilding to form a unified urban space with a character, or an urbanistic modality, entirely different from any earlier period of its existence. Under the sway of the “obligations” recognized as formative at this historically sensitive location, Bowling Green was articulated as the entrance to the city, as the origin point of its history, and as a scenographic alternative to the individualistic and less unified urbanism in other parts of the city. And it formed a visual counterpoint to the Richmond civic center just visible across the bay, vividly connecting the new civic spaces of the metropolis. Given the emphasis on chaos, individualism, and \textit{laissez faire} that characterizes much of the commentary on New York’s architecture and urbanism,\textsuperscript{156} the evidence of Bowling Green and Staten Island suggests that other, civic-minded visions helped to create the cityscape of the modern metropolis.

Spencer Trask ended his history of Bowling Green, written as the Custom House competition was underway, with an apt evocation of the square’s significance, connecting the square to the momentous urban changes spurred by the municipal consolidation of 1898:

While all these changes have been going on around it, the Green has quietly, and with the proud conservatism of age, preserved its own dignified existence. Always ready to give itself to the public, whether for play or rest, in peace or war, it has been the centre of the busy life of the village, of the fashionable life of the town, and now of the commercial activity of the city. The Produce Exchange, controlling the grain trade of a continent, looks down upon it. The offices of the largest steamship companies of the world surround it. The Custom-House, registering the commerce of the Western Hemisphere, will face it. Some of the greatest modern office buildings, overtopping the spire of “Old Trinity,” hem it in. Broadway, the longest street in the world, starts from its oval. In this year of

\textsuperscript{155} Francisco Mujica, \textit{History of the Skyscraper} (Paris and New York: Archaeology & Architecture Press, 1929), 64.

\textsuperscript{156} For one widely cited instance, see Rem Koolhaas, \textit{Delirious New York} (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994).
grace, 1898, New York has greatly enlarged its borders; the city of Brooklyn and many of the surrounding townships having united in the one city now called colloquially “Greater New York.” Of this new city our little friend, the Bowling Green, has become the heart.\footnote{Trask, “Bowling Green,” 206-7.}

After two and a half more decades of major change, Trask’s assessment of the square’s importance remained relevant at the time of the Standard Oil Building’s completion—perhaps even more so then.
Chapter Five

Podium and Park against the Grid: A Third Way at the New York Public Library

The New York Public Library’s central building (fig. 5.1) illustrates a third urban modality in New York’s civic classicism: the monument on a podium.¹ This modality is distinguished from the others, exemplified at the Richmond Civic Center and at Bowling Green, respectively, by its attention to the single building relative to the Manhattan street grid. In the monument on a podium, a single public or institutional building stands isolated from its surroundings, designed to accommodate the restrictions imposed by, but also challenging the logic of, Manhattan’s street grid. Set on a podium, the library accommodated and challenged the grid, although the podium was not always part of the modality. For instance, McKim, Mead & White’s Municipal Building (fig. 5.2), completed two years after the New York Public Library, confronts the given street pattern (though not part of the grid plan in this case) in a distinctive way. But the New York Public Library is the city’s paradigmatic example of the type.

Architects and planners in New York City at the time of the library’s design and construction were frustrated by the structural constraints imposed on architecture by the city’s gridiron plan. In parts of the city not crisscrossed by the gridiron, other urban modalities could be pursued more easily. The ensemble of buildings surrounding Bowling Green was one alternative,

resulting from the use of concatenated facades; compatible materials, patterns, textures, and
details; a strong sense of enclosure; and the effort to arrest movement through closed vistas and
engaging architectural forms such as the “recumbent,” throne-like facades of the Cunard and
Standard Oil Buildings. At the Richmond civic center another alternative resulted from the
unified urban plan that controlled the placement of several public buildings along a terraced
range, visually and symbolically connecting the distant island to Greater New York. The New
York Public Library’s urban scenography emerged as a third alternative, an attempt to overcome
the gridiron plan’s limitations: the building on a podium, set off from its commercial
surroundings by an elevated parterre or podium, and further distinguished by the formal park
behind it. Within these three modalities of urbanism, civic classicism negotiated a rift between
two traditions of city space to which American architects were heir: roughly, the enclosed space
and continuous building frontages of premodern cities, and the open space and disengaged
buildings of modern urbanism.2 In the former, street facades are primary components of the
urban fabric and exteriors are treated as continuous and contiguous with each other. The ends of
facades are flush, or nearly so, with neighboring buildings and the effect is one of a continuous
wall of buildings enclosing space. Bowling Green followed this pattern. In the modern tradition,
buildings are free-standing objects set apart from the rest of the urban fabric and, if they are close

2 See Michael Dennis, Court and Garden: From the French Hôtel to the City of Modern Architecture (Cambridge,
dichotomy can be mapped onto two broad traditions of urbanism that informed nineteenth- and early twentieth-
century practice: the medieval-Renaissance conception of unified space and the neoclassical-modern conception of
individuated space. In neoclassical urbanism, buildings assert their individual presence as disengaged, pavilion-like
objects, pushing out or setting back from plot lines, sidewalks, or streets. Neoclassical urbanism emphasizes the
free-standing quality of a building, its autonomous form uninfluenced by urban context. Emil Kaufmann and, more
recently, John Archer have seen this eighteenth-century development as indicating architecture’s close relation to
modern identity-formation. The “architecture of isolation,” or neoclassical autonomy identified by Kaufmann,
expressed modern individualism. On the issues of autonomy and modern individualism in relation to architecture,
see Vidler, “Neoclassicism and Autonomy,” in Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural
Modernism (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 21-32; and John Archer, Architecture and Suburbia: From English
Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
to surrounding buildings (that is, not separated by streets, plazas, or other large, distinct
openings), the ends of facades are treated as discontinuous with their neighbors.

The Richmond civic center was an adjustment of civic center ideas finely tuned to the
circumstances of its site. By contrast, the New York Public Library, also designed by Carrère &
Hastings, represented a different urban potential. Organized by a private foundation but
dedicated to public purposes, the designers, trustees, and the public it served all cast the building
as a civic asset for the city and the nation at large. If it was sometimes described in hyperbolic
language, this reflected the fact that it was earnestly considered an extraordinary public good, a
“municipal ornament” and a “civic jewel” in the rhetoric of the time. Although such language is
foreign to our times, it was central to rhetorical practice at the time of the library’s construction.
These terms of praise should be considered not just mere boosterism but as providing insight
into the public discourse and the civic concerns of the early twentieth century. Like the
Richmond civic center, the Public Library was understood to be a material contribution to the
civic ethos of the metropolis. A monument born of paternalistic philanthropy, it also expressed
the vitality of the urban public realm in the early twentieth century. At the same time, it resulted
from new thinking about the role of public buildings in an urban grid plan considered inherently
hostile to monumentality. The library and its site plan signaled a new willingness by architects
and the public institutions for which they designed to reimagine the relationship between
buildings and urban form. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, architects such as Carrère &
Hastings had the chance to rethink the place of civic buildings in the cityscape because the
modern urban public was at that very moment gaining visibility.

3 On paternalistic philanthropy and its relation to library design in the early twentieth century, see Abigail Van
Slyck, “‘The Utmost Amount of Effectiv [sic] Accomodation’: Andrew Carnegie and the Reform of the American
“This Glorious Thing in Common”: The Library and the Urban Public

“The library begins with the citizen”—so declared Herbert Putnam, then Librarian of the Boston Public Library and soon-to-be Librarian of Congress, just a few months after the New York Public Library’s design competition had been won by Carrère & Hastings.4 Attention to the relation between citizenship and libraries developed rapidly in the late nineteenth century as public libraries opened across the country.5 Libraries, in effect, became a new focus for debates about the urban public and the role of institutions and their buildings in shaping and responding to that public. What Neil Levine has recently written about Henri Labrouste’s nineteenth-century Paris libraries applies equally well to the New York Public. Levine concludes that “their distinct expressive forms and compositional types represent carefully calibrated responses to the varied needs of a new reading public at the moment the public library itself was emerging and being theorized.”6 The podium modality was particularly appropriate for New York’s library because it dramatized this new public in a way that moved beyond the traditional limits to architectural expression imposed by the gridiron plan of Manhattan. And the library’s “carefully calibrated responses” to its site and its larger role in the cityscape make it a paradigmatic example of the urban concerns of the civic classicists.

The language of citizenship and concern for the public’s relation to libraries pervaded the rhetoric surrounding the New York Public Library’s opening. In a speech at the library’s cornerstone-laying ceremony on November 11, 1902, Mayor Seth Low linked the institution with

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concern for good democratic citizenship. Exhorting the assembled crowd to reflect on the relation of education and urban life, Low argued that the combination of the Astor, Lenox, and Tilden libraries demonstrated “great breadth of vision, a large public spirit, and a fine sense of the fitness of things.” The mayor drew a parallel between the formation of the library and the nation’s federal structure, contending that just “precisely as the States of our Union have retained their individuality, while multiplying, beyond calculation, their power and their influence by uniting,” so, too, would the combined libraries exert a greater influence on the course of New York’s civic development. The building would represent, according to Low, “not only the city’s wealth” but would be “equally a fine illustration of the quality of its citizenship.” By providing access to the “rich accumulations” of human knowledge, the library would make the city “the center of a literary and scientific life” and “serve mankind in the days to come as never before.” In this vision both the institution abstractly and the “superb building” that physically contained it were agencies of publicity—that is, modes of bringing together and making visible the new urban public.7

John Bigelow, President of the library’s Board of Trustees, opened the ceremony with similar sentiments. After describing the legal travails to establish the combined library foundation, Bigelow, too, emphasized the library as an agency of publicity:

The choicest part of the most valuable park land in our city is to-day being consecrated as the site on which our Conscript Fathers are proposing to erect for you an edifice monumental in its architectural proportions as well as in its dimensions; capacious of a larger collection of books than is yet to be found in any one structure, I believe, in any part of the world, and destined to make our city, famous though it be already as the commercial center, yet more famous as the intellectual center of the continent.8

7 Seth Low, Manuscript of speech given at the cornerstone-laying ceremony of the New York Public Library, 1902, Seth Low Papers, Box 25, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. This was published in modified form as “Address of the Mayor,” in The New York Public Library, Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundations: Ceremonies on Laying Its Corner-Stone (New York: R. W. Crothers, 1902), 21-29.
8 “Address of Mr. Bigelow,” in ibid., 15.
And eleven years later, at the library’s opening ceremonies, Mayor William Gaynor made the same point even more explicitly:

It is for us in each generation to do our part, little or much, to keep that growth of the human race, mental and moral, moving forward all the time…. The great agencies which bring about that gradual growth in the human race are the churches, the schools, an honest and intelligent public press, the administration of justice by the jury system, which De Tocqueville said was a free school always open, and last, but not least, the diffusion of knowledge by means of our public libraries.9

Gaynor’s listing of libraries among “the great agencies” of human development indicates the extent to which they had become central to the definition of the modern public. As a 1902 commentary from The Outlook declared confidently, “This movement [toward free public libraries] is a fresh illustration of the democratic spirit, a new revelation of that sense of social obligation which is one of the logical results of the democratic conception of society.”10 This republican vision of the “social obligations” that attached to the democratic spirit saw the library as a result and representation of the democratic public; it was a tangible means for the democratic citizen “to set free the original force within him.” The free public library was “the most accessible and efficient instrument” of this process.11

New York Governor John Dix also spoke at the library’s opening about the relation of library and public, observing that before the advent of public libraries in New York, “the old library waited for the people to come to it; the new library goes to them.” Referring to both the Central Building and the series of Carnegie branches built in the previous decade,12 the governor invoked the idea of the library as an active presence in the city, reaching out to the people rather

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10 “The Library in a Democracy,” The Outlook, 24 May 1902, 206.
11 Ibid., 207.
than passively waiting for them to find it themselves. Echoing Herbert Croly’s idea of New York as a city destined to gather, decipher, and disseminate national energies and cultural tendencies, Dix declared that the library “becomes the pulsating heart of the city’s intellectual activities, not only because it will contain the rich collections which have been and will be gathered, but also because it … will respond to the needs of the city before they have become apparent ….”

Seth Low, too, had spoken in terms similar to Croly’s idea of the gathering and disseminating force of New York as metropolis:

The city, therefore, that supplies the books to meet the craving of the student, and at the same time makes provision to develop this craving wherever the basis for it exists among the multitudes of the people, is a city certain to confer lasting benefits upon mankind. For experience teaches us, on every hand, that the benefactors of the race come from the most unexpected quarters. A community can do nothing better for itself, therefore, and nothing that is likely to perpetuate its name more gratefully, than to see to it that such opportunity is offered with a free hand to all its people; because the opportunity involved in the use of books is an opportunity to develop the intellect and the spirit of man. The cities of the world that have exerted age-long influence have not been those which have simply gathered into their laps the world’s wealth. They have been those that have been able to minister permanently, in some important way, to the welfare of mankind.

I value the New York Public Library … especially because it supplies to the city of New York one of those fruitful, spiritual influences that are surely helping to give to our City an imperishable renown among the cities of the world.

Low’s vision of the permanent ministry of great cities adds a deeper dimension to the library as an agency of publicity. For not only did the library help to gather and make visible the new public, it had a broader historical importance that would play out over a long time horizon, helping to realize the intellectual capacity latent in the city’s rapid growth in the half century leading up to the library’s opening. From this point of view, the library was a world-historical agent, contributing to improving the city of which it was part.

13 “Address by the Hon. John A Dix, Governor of the State of New York,” in Proceedings at the Opening of the New Library Building, 22.
14 Seth Low, Manuscript of speech given at the cornerstone-laying ceremony.
The sense of the fitness of a library to the surrounding city was both metaphorical—a sense of the social or cultural fit—and spatial or physical. Librarian John Cotton Dana came closest to directly expressing this idea of fitness of institution and society, and of building and city, when he inveighed against the “individualist opponent of that system” of public provisions who is “happiest when he has the maximum of freedom.” The individualist, Dana proposed, must be content to endure “his own failure to adjust himself to men and things about him.”

This idea of adjustment between citizen and urban environment is a clue to the relationship of civic buildings and the public realm as understood in early twentieth-century New York.

According to Dana, the library “must be fitted to public needs.” It must “be open to its public; it must invite its public; it must attract its public; it must please its public.” Dana, however, ridiculed what he thought were grandiose visions of the public library: “The whole monumental style of library architecture is almost of necessity the greatest of handicaps on library administration.” His vision of efficient library science, which led to a view of the library building as a “modern book laboratory,” brooked little room for “architectural effects, for imposing halls, charming vistas, and opportunities for decoration.” His vision was more severe and utilitarian.

Nonetheless, his understanding of the publicity of the library building as constituted by a sense of openness and invitation can seen in the “architectural effects” rendered by Carrère & Hastings at the New York Public Library. Such a library could be, as he wrote elsewhere, “a center of civic pride, of fuller life, of wider views.” And just such a conception of “wider views”—in a more literal, spatial sense—guided the architects in their design of the library in relation to its site.

17 Ibid., 247-8.
18 John Cotton Dana, “The Reading Public As I Know It—In a Large City,” The Outlook, 24 May 1902, 251.
A compelling personal view of the relation of the public library building to both the individual citizen and the public as a collective was Mary Antin’s description of her early encounters with the Boston Public Library (fig 5.3). The Boston library was the major American precedent for Carrère & Hastings’s library by that firm’s own mentors, McKim, Mead & White. Antin described the library in her autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), as one of her favorite places in Boston, a home away from home that encouraged an enlarged sense of her self-understanding as a citizen. Antin first described the building in its urban context:

A low, wide-spreading building with a dignified granite front it was, flanked on all sides by noble old churches, museums, and school-houses, harmoniously disposed around a spacious triangle, called Copley Square. Two thoroughfares that came straight from the green suburbs swept by my palace, one on either side, converged at the apex of the triangle, and pointed off, past the Public Garden, across the historic Common, to the domed State House sitting on a height.

Then she described her encounter with the building as a revelation of its publicity:

It was my habit to go very slowly up the low, broad steps to the palace entrance, pleasing my eyes with the majestic lines of the building, and lingering to read again the carved inscriptions: *Public Library—Built by the People—Free to All.*

Did I not say it was my palace? Mine, because I was a citizen….

I loved to lean against a pillar in the entrance hall, watching the people go in and out…. And I loved to stand in the midst of all this, and remind myself that I was there, that I had a right to be there, that I was at home there. All these eager children, all these fine-browed women, all these scholars going home to write learned books—I and they had this glorious thing in common, this noble treasure house of learning. It was wonderful to say, *This is mine*; it was thrilling to say, *This is ours.*

As Thomas Augst has argued, the democratic metaphor referenced by Antin, the now-familiar idea of “the palace of the people,” was a result of the new public itself, formed through compulsory public education and the rise of the commercial public sphere which made thousands...

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of publications, books and periodicals alike, available to readers of all stripes. For Augst, Antin’s profession of wonder toward the building and her sense of inclusion in its civic mission was “an expression of a historically particular secular faith,” one that made “habits of reading central to the rituals and pieties of secular modernity.” The public library, from this perspective, was “a temple to a civil religion,” a place not only about books but also a site “to practice devotions of self-realization that embody freedom in liberal democracy.” Such buildings, and the practices they encouraged, sheltered, and exposed to public view, helped to shape the modern democratic citizen’s identity as well as that citizen’s understanding of their relation to the larger urban public.

Beyond these “devotions,” however, public library buildings, and the New York Public Library’s central building in particular, helped to make the democratic public visible to itself. Political theorists of the day, from Herbert Croly to Frederic Howe, argued in various ways that the identity of the individual as a citizen was established and made apparent in the shared spaces of the city itself, an idea recovered in more recent political theory, as we have seen. Mary Antin expressed this idea explicitly. She recalled sitting “on the granite ledge” of the library and contemplating her relationship to the building, its people, and the city. Then, she wrote, “I had a vision of myself … creeping slowly into the light of civilized existence.” The building’s purpose and effect, according to Augst, was one of “making transcendent goods of citizenship feel true” for the individual. This suggests not just the “production of subjectivity” familiar to

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22 Antin, The Promised Land, 364.
23 Augst, “Faith in Reading,” 182.
historians of art in the modern period, but more specifically the production of urban citizenship in relation to individual experience. In this sense, then, public libraries were bulwarks of liberal republicanism: they encouraged a sense of the citizen’s stake in the polity and offered evidence against the individualist, *laissez-faire* vision of society. Such a vision was, indeed, elicited by the construction of the Central Building of the New York Public Library. Shortly after its opening, Richard Garnett, Keeper of printed books at the British Museum, wrote in the *North American Review*:

> It is to be hoped that New York will take care that the serious inquirer within her precincts into any department of human knowledge shall, so far as may be, find the materials ready to his hand. That such a conception makes a heavy demand upon the resources and public spirit even of such a community as that of New York is evident; but New York is not only a wealthy and enlightened but a highly cosmopolitan city, with a population to which all civilized countries have contributed some element and a host of crowding and jostling interests, religious, political, commercial, financial, scientific, and literary. It will probably be found that none of these tastes and pursuits of a myriad-minded community can with justice be neglected or postponed to others.

The library created a space for the urban public to become visible, to magnify its visibility to itself and to others in a way commensurate with the city’s newfound national and international status. Its visibility in spatial-visual terms, as well as its metaphorical visibility in discourse (as the object of intense scrutiny and debate in the public sphere) made the building a powerful agency of publicity. The library’s visibility and the knowledge it gave citizens of their relationship to one another and to the collective polity helped citizens see themselves *qua*

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25 This is a broader version of the argument, advanced by Augst, that public libraries were an “expansion of liberal welfare,” which, in the minds of anti-Progressive conservatives, “represented a dangerous turn to socialist paternalism.” Augst, “Faith in Reading,” 165.


citizens. It was a process of mutual recognition of each other as part of a larger whole. In the urban and architectural spaces created by the library, the urban public began to see itself as constituted not by social types or classes, but, through its simultaneous unity and diversity, as a collective of citizens.28 The library constructed a physical “space of appearance,” to use Hannah Arendt’s conception, through which the urban public could see itself—and be represented—not as a mere collection of atomized individuals jostling for advantage in an intensely competitive society, but as a collective, an ordered polity of citizens, a body politic. This understanding of the urban public represented at and made visible by the library does not easily fit the Habermasian model of a rational public sphere constructed abstractly out of circulating texts; nor is it easily reconciled with another abstraction, Benedict Anderson’s influential concept of the “imagined community.”29 As Augst insists, the urban public in the years around 1900 was identified visibly by and emerged out of the real spaces of the city itself, and particularly spaces such as the new public libraries. The metaphorical “space of appearance” was a space where, Arendt writes, “I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly.”30 But this metaphorical space can be identified as a concrete, physical space through the agency of public libraries. The New York Public Library and its urban site staged publicity in visible, tangible ways. The approach to and movement through the library and its surrounding spaces dramatized the way in which the library

28 Augst, “Faith in Reading,” 172.
was understood at the time, and can be seen again today, as an agency of publicity. The library was one of the most effective elements in creating the “shared horizon of civic experience” that was at the core of republican-progressive concerns about the democratic public at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Site: Challenging the “Fatality of Formlessness”

In his officially sanctioned history of the New York Public Library (1923), Harry Lydenberg succinctly captured the widespread understanding that the location of Carrère & Hastings’ building was a critical urban crossroads. He wrote, “The strategic advantages of the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street for any great public institution were obvious, and as the growth of the city foreshadowed the removal of the Croton distributing reservoir … many eyes were turned toward the corner.” An implicit understanding of the unique publicity of the library seems to have influenced the way in which it is designed to occupy its site and present its face to the city (fig. 5.4). In particular, Carrère & Hastings’ design deliberately offered up the building to wide views from and toward its surroundings, in a spatial parallel to the intellectual “wider views” provided by public libraries, as John Cotton Dana argued. Surprisingly, the role of the urban context and its “strategic advantages,” as Lydenberg put it, have been little studied, and the complete set of elements that compose its site—building, terrace, and park—as a strategically interconnected unit has received very little consideration in the literature on the building.

Just as they did at the Richmond Civic Center, Carrère & Hastings created an alternative scenography at the New York Public Library. In this case, the architects developed an approach

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comprising a podium or terrace that lifts the spreading mass of the library proper up from street level, setting both building and terrace against the surrounding streets and the park behind them. Analyzing how these design features built upon the “strategic advantages” of the site helps us see how the building functioned as a particularly effective agency of publicity.

The site of Carrère & Hastings’ library had been important since the Revolutionary Era, when, on September 15, 1776, Generals Washington and Putnam “observed and directed the operations of here making a stand against the British and covering the American retreat,” as one *Times* article put it in 1909 just as the exterior of the library was nearing completion. It became municipal land in 1822, still several decades before Manhattan’s real estate development had reached this district (fig. 5.5), and the Croton Reservoir was built there, facing Fifth Avenue, between 1837 and 1842 (fig. 5.6). The impact of the structure and its system of water delivery was undeniably enormous. Construction of the reservoir elicited interpretations from a range of politicians, boosters, and other commentators. For example, Philip Hone wrote in the year it was completed that “Nothing is talked of or thought of in New York but Croton Water…. It is astonishing how popular the introduction of water is among all classes of our citizens …. Water! Water! is the universal note which is sounded through every part of the city, and infuses joy and exultation into the masses.”

The “elaborate structure and local marvel” of the New York Crystal Palace occupied the open site behind the reservoir in 1853. Even then the reservoir site marked only the very northern edge of significant development on Manhattan. In 1871 a formal park was laid out

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35 “Bryant Park in City’s History.”
behind the reservoir, taking the name of Bryant Park in 1884. From the late 1880s until 1900, when “the picturesque old Reservoir” was demolished, it was a focus for redevelopment as the library foundation and commentators in the press debated the library’s best location.36

With legislative approval in 1897, the double-block Croton site was transformed from an agency of public infrastructure—a water reservoir serving the earlier and much smaller city—to an agency of publicity as a repository of books reaching out to the entire public of the large metropolis, and beyond.37 Clifford Smyth succinctly described the transformation of the site as tracking the changing needs of the public:

The massive pile of Egyptian architecture was long a familiar landmark in New York. Its vine-clad walls, severely simple in outline, were typical of the city of half a century ago; and when its architectural style became obsolete, and its dimensions inadequate to the needs of the rapidly growing metropolis, the old New Yorker was not without his regrets that is must be torn down. It had served him well in its day; … but now a new era had come, when the antiquated reservoir of water must give place to the modern reservoir of books.38

Selection of the site was a long process of public debate, legal maneuvers, and legislative action. The press covered every aspect of the process and, on the whole, supported the Croton site.39 For instance, in 1892, when John Bigelow published a major article in *Scribner’s* announcing plans for the Tilden Foundation’s public library, the *Times* supported his views about the suitability of the reservoir site.40 The paper noted that a particular “advantage of the Bryant Park site would be, that, when the reservoir, which seems according to the opinion of most people to have survived its usefulness, would be torn to pieces, the 80,000 cubic yards of stone and other material could be used in erecting the library building.” The article further supported

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36 Ibid.
39 Numerous articles were devoted to the debate about appropriate locations for the library. See, for instance, “Now Discussing a Site,” *New York Times*, 15 March 1895.
Bigelow’s contention that the site, “which is in that part of the city that has no rival in appropriateness,” would increase its share of park space with his library plan. It stated, “One objection which any project of the kind had to contend with would also be urged in regard to this—the taking up of any of the people’s breathing space for any purpose. This objection Mr. Bigelow meets in another part of the article, and shows that the park space will be enlarged and not reduced by his plan.” Three years later, the paper declared confidently that few arguments could be made against the Bryant Park site:

Hardly a dissenting voice is raised against the selection of Bryant Park as the best possible and nearly perfect site for the great library that is soon to be New-York’s glory and ornament. The arguments in its favor are numerous, weighty, and definite; those against it are few and vague…. The trend of general opinion is obviously and decidedly toward Bryant Park. In not a single feature is it inferior to any other available site, and its advantages over them all are manifest. While not in the geographical centre of the city, it is easily and cheaply accessible from every direction…. The regard for public convenience and opinion which the selection of this site will show cannot fail to win instant favor and support for an undertaking that promises sooner or later to absorb a very large amount of the city’s money.

Bryant Park is the place for the Astor-Lenox-Tilden Library.

As Phyllis Dain has noted, Bigelow’s plan for Bryant Park was not the first time either cultural institutions or private developers had proposed building on the site: as early as 1872 the Metropolitan Museum of Art had proposed its home at the site, William Waldorf Astor had proposed turning it over to private development, and the New-York Historical Society had interest in it, as well. By early 1896, the Board of Trustees was convinced of the reservoir site’s advantages over any other available place. The Committee on Site wrote to the full board, “In view of its central location, its large area, its immunity from fire and its convenience of access from all parts of the city and suburbs, your Committee believe that it presents special advantages

to a greater degree than any other locality in the city for the site of a great library.”44 Accessible “from all parts of the city and suburbs,” the site would prove an effective agency of publicity by providing a focus to the growing city, gathering its energies as Herbert Croly had demanded of a great metropolis.

The selection and legislative processes for determining the library’s site did not constitute its only public significance. In a city that was widely thought to lack a sense of urban aesthetics, the two full blocks occupied by the library and the adjoining park made a powerful counterstatement. Carrère & Hastings purposefully manipulated their building in relation to its context to achieve a maximum visual impact within the given constraints. In this way the library is similar to another of the architects’ major buildings on the same street: the Henry Clay Frick House (fig. 5.7). As Hilary Ballon has provocatively argued, the house, often considered merely a staid example of architectural “historicism,” was “a subversive building, purposively estranged from the urban form of Fifth Avenue.”45 The architects of the New York Public Library arguably had less creative scope to subvert the city’s urbanism when dealing with a civic institution rather than a private residence, but the library was nonetheless conceived in part as a critique of Manhattan’s gridiron plan. Designed and built in the decade before the Frick House, it can be seen as an earlier, more tentative critique on the part of the architects than Hastings’ later residence, which, from this perspective, would have benefited from the lessons learned at the library.46

The two buildings, although entirely different in purpose, size, and location, had similar urban histories and employed similar design tactics. For instance, the Frick’s site has held only

44 “Report of the Committee on Site,” 6 Feb. 1896, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, Box 1, New York Public Library.
45 Hilary Ballon, Mr. Frick’s Palace (New York: Frick Collection, 2009), 7.
46 Carrère died in 1911, only months before the library opened, and had no part in the Frick’s design. For an account of the Frick House’s design and transformation into a museum, see Colin B. Bailey, Building the Frick Collection: An Introduction to the House and Its Collection (New York: Frick Collection and Scala, 2006).
three buildings over time: the 1817 farm of Robert Lenox; the Lenox Library, named for
Robert’s son James, and which opened in 1877; and the Frick House itself, completed in 1914.47
A similarly small number of ownership and building changes took place at the site of the public
library. In terms of design, both buildings violated certain “rules” that Ballon identifies as having
constrained the otherwise variegated patterns of the city’s streets in the early twentieth century.
The most fundamental rule was that buildings were to be built to the same line, extending their
mass to the edge of their lots at the sidewalk.48 The library violated this rule because of its
podium and deep setback, and it made prominent use of its Fifth Avenue frontage as the
termination of an axial vista (fig. 5.8). This was unprecedented and practical: unprecedented
because no other public building in the city could claim so much frontage along an avenue (two
full blocks), and practical because it took advantage of the site as given, with its center line
marking the missing length of 41st Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues (fig. 5.9). Although a
minor cross street, functionally equivalent to 40th Street or 43rd Street or any of the other
secondary east-west streets, the transverse axis provided by the two-block arrangement of the site
gave the center of the composition a prominence that could not be achieved in a typical one-
block site. Other public or quasi-public buildings in the city were configured differently: City
Hall was a free-standing monument in the middle of a park (fig. 5.10); the Custom House, as we
have seen, formed the edge of a square and occupied a block in a very different urban plan than
the gridiron, and libraries such as the Lenox occupied much smaller sites, usually only one north-
south block long (or less) and never the full length of an east-west block between two avenues
(fig. 5.11).

47 Ballon, Mr. Frick’s Palace, 8-9.
48 Ibid., 15.
The gridiron plan of Manhattan streets was under scrutiny at precisely the same time as
the library’s design and construction. In this context, one can see the library’s design as a way to
“mitigate the mischiefs of the street plan imposed upon New York” by the Commissioners’ Plan
of 1811, as Montgomery Schuyler wrote in a commentary on the McMillan Plan for Washington,
D.C.\(^49\) Architects, urban reformers, and other observers criticized the gridiron on three grounds:
urban aesthetics, economic efficiency, and physical mobility around the city.\(^50\) This was a
moment when the received form of the city as it had developed under \textit{laissez-faire} conditions
was the object of sustained challenge and rebuke.

The 1811 plan established the gridiron plan of Manhattan streets and terminated the
further northward spread of the more haphazard street layouts at the southern end of the island.\(^51\)
As Edward Spann has shown, the plan signaled a shift toward more purely utilitarian and real-
estate management concerns, away from political-aesthetic concerns that only a few decades
earlier had informed the design of Washington, D.C., for instance. This shift can partly be
attributed to the fact that the city was neither a political center, which would have demanded
some accommodation to its symbolic monuments, nor a large and heterogeneous metropolitan
area, which it would become over the course of the nineteenth century.\(^52\) In 1811, the city was
still much in the character of an eighteenth-century mercantile port city. The shift is also partly


explained by growing concerns for property rights and the waning republican ideology in the face of increasing *laissez-faire* industrial economics. As Peter Marcuse has described it, the grid of *laissez-faire* capitalism facilitated the buying and selling of land and the rapid expansion of development, and it assumed minimal regulation and government interference.53

In traditional European urbanism, the building and the city are generally bound by continuity or reciprocity between architectural and urban forms. This was expressed axiomatically in the fifteenth century in Leon Battista Alberti’s famous equation of city and house, wherein each are composed of elemental units such as courtyard, hall, parlor, and portico.54 These typological elements form a common basis of architectural articulation. In such conditions there is a “formal resonance,” as George Wagner puts it, between buildings and the urban fabric of the city: “One inflects to the other.”55 As Manfredo Tafuri, Mario Manieri-Elia, Alex Krieger, Mario Gandelsonas, and others have shown in different ways, in the American city the reciprocity between architectural and urban elements is severely attenuated, at best. For Tafuri, the grid plan “does not seek an architectural correspondence in the forms of single buildings.”56 And as Manieri-Elia documents, the typical nineteenth-century way of “counteracting the undifferentiated character of the grid plan and the banal form of the building

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lot” was through the individualistic expression of single buildings either volumetrically, which was possible in relatively few circumstances, or stylistically, which was more common.57

The grid critics at the turn of the century dismissed this flamboyant, individualistic approach to urban architecture. This turn away from flamboyant expression played a large part in fomenting the “battle of the styles” debate about a national American style in the 1890s and early 1900s and was, as well, part of the changing attitude to monumentality identified by Barbara Miller Lane.58 These critics were vociferous even as they acknowledged they had little opportunity to effect large-scale changes to the urban plan of Manhattan given the entrenched real-estate interests and the near-complete building coverage by their time. A few decades earlier, when more of the island was still undeveloped, there might have been an opening for more radical changes, but the constituency for such changes was unorganized and the recognition of the problems of the grid was the concern of few.59 The fact that before the 1880s the organs for dissemination of public discourse on issues of urban design and development were extremely limited should also be considered a factor in the general uninterest in the problems of the grid. The increasing scale of the city coupled with the new outlets for public discourse on architectural and urban planning issues provided the necessary conditions for the grid to become a matter of public concern. In the years of the library’s design and construction, the emerging concerns for

the visibility of the urban public and the role of educated public opinion contributed to criticism of the grid plan as unfavorable to the demands of the new publicity.

According to Jean Schopfer, the 1811 Commissioners’ plan had been devised on a “sombre day” by “grave men with shaved upper lip.” The plan of these purportedly dour men resulted in a “monotony of eternally straight and parallel lines,” of streets “each with its number like a convict in a prison.” The long north-south avenues “stretched onward, onward indefinitely.”60 This indefiniteness, the lack of boundaries and termini, was a key point for the architectural critics of the grid plan. Over and over, they reminded their readers that the gridiron plan provided few advantageous sites for public buildings. Their focus was on visibility, on the difficulty of seeing important buildings in the city. They lamented the way in which the grid reduced the possibilities for architectural display to a narrow range of non-scenographic tactics—the flamboyant approach of earlier generations. As Schopfer wrote, under the conditions of a grid plan such as New York’s, “there is not a single monument that can be said to be suitably located.” Instead, monumental buildings were relegated to

> the interior of blocks. For them there is no perspective; one only sees them when they are within a yard of one’s nose. The result is that instead of embellishing the whole district surrounding them, they simply ornament a block; and instead of seeing them from a distance, one discovers them suddenly, right before one. A more unfortunate arrangement could not be imagined.61

Arranged in such a way, the city resulted in “a fatality of formlessness.” Its layout meant no building could “obtain a location which is exceptionally appropriate”; important buildings were “lost in a wilderness of uniformity or eccentricity.”62

The official proposals for reimagining the city’s urban form—the New York City Improvement Commission’s 1904 and 1907 reports—pictured the new non-grid-aligned

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61 Ibid., “Art in the City,” *Architectural Record*, Nov. 1902, 583.
boulevards and plazas within an undifferentiated fabric. The report’s illustrations show the existing cross-streets of the grid disappearing into the mass of the urban fabric (fig. 5.12). As William Taylor and Thomas Bender have argued, this resulted from the Beaux-Arts insistence on ensemble. In New York, the shift toward ensemble meant not a focus on a single dominant building, as in some of Daniel Burnham’s city plans, but on the “the pattern of construction perceived collectively.”63 One version of this was evident at Richmond’s terraced civic center, but the mostly unbuilt City Beautiful proposals, much vaster in scale, took the idea to an extreme.

As with the Custom House, Montgomery Schuyler proved to be a perceptive critic of architecture’s encounter with the New York grid plan. Schuyler not only wrote about the “mischiefs” of the grid plan but took account of the several architectural tactics used by designers in the early twentieth century to help soften its hard-edged aesthetic effects. Schuyler documented three “methods of circumventing the street system and mitigating its asperities.” These were: rounding the corner of a building, as at the Cotton Exchange (fig. 5.13); “stopping the streets,” or terminating a vista, as at Trinity Church (fig. 5.14); and bridging the street, as at the lofty pavilion marking the terminus of the Manhattan Bridge proper—significantly, a work of Carrère & Hastings (fig. 5.15). That three out of fourteen of his examples, one for each method, were the work of Carrère & Hastings—the other two being the New Theatre (fig. 5.16) and the New York Public Library—indicates the range of their efforts across building types in

reimagining architecture’s encounter with the grid plan, as well as the fact that they were recognized as doing so by their contemporaries.\textsuperscript{64}

For Schuyler, these mitigating tactics were “lucky interruptions of the rectangular street system.” The impact of these tactics was not intended solely to enhance the visibility of a single building, important as this was; it also had a larger urban significance. Each one of the interventions Schuyler documented “‘tells’ almost all across Manhattan Island, is visible and impressive and interesting” to the passerby; each one gives the viewer “a notion that New York is better worth living in than they would otherwise have imagined, that there is more in it to look at.” Each of the examples was a “benevolence” to the city.\textsuperscript{65}

By interventions that could “tell” across the Manhattan cityscape, Schuyler seems to have meant that they had a broader impact than simply ornamenting a single block, as Schopfer lamented was too often the case. Because architects recognized that they could not hope for a massive reorganization of the street system, they turned to more practical ways of working within the parameters of a given site, of exploiting the possibilities for scenographic effects that were not simply individualistic, isolated flourishes, but that also had the potential to change the character of a whole district. Few opportunities presented more potential for broad impact than the site of the New York Public Library.

John Carrère and Thomas Hastings counted themselves among the sharp critics of the grid plan. Hastings, for instance, described the “so-called gridiron scheme of city planning” as “neither planning nor the result of natural evolution” but “simply a disease.” The resulting urbanism emerged “without regard to the usefulness or beauty of proposed streets.”\textsuperscript{66} And according to Carrère, “in our [American] cities, and in fact in our whole mode of life, we

\textsuperscript{64} Winkler, “Mitigating the ‘Gridiron’ Street Plan,” 386.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 390.
separate work from pleasure, the practical from the beautiful, instead of blending them as is so skillfully done by the older nations of the world. A street is apt to be nothing but a thoroughfare, so that we must go and come and travel upon it without enjoyment, which we must seek elsewhere at given points laid aside for this particular purpose.” The resulting city was artificially fragmented by an utilitarian urban structure.  

Given this context of gridiron criticism, the site of the New York Public Library was subject to intensive study and debate. As the *Times* noted after the combination of the Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations had been approved in 1895, “the interest in the consolidated library has now centred on the question of a site.” The general conclusion was that, despite the “asperities” of the grid plan, the site itself along with the building conspired to make one of the most successful interventions in the urban landscape of New York. Commenting on the construction of a full-scale, on-site model of a single bay of the library (fig. 5.17), the editors of *Architectural Record* observed that the architects were “very fortunate … in a site which enables them to transcend the trammels of the New York street system. Their central pavilion will interrupt and close, as the central feature of the Reservoir before it interrupted and closed, the vista of Forty-first Street.” Considering the model of the single library bay, the editors took the opportunity to question the city’s urban plan:

> If the center of the Public Library shall prove worthy of its framing, the question will arise with renewed urgency, why do we not provide more such architectural opportunities? At present, they can only be had when part of a public park is given over to a public building, as is the case here with the Reservoir Square and in the other instance with Central Park. Why should not such opportunities be provided by the closing of cross streets when an architectural project worthy of such an operation is under consideration?… One or two object lessons, such as are afforded by the Metropolitan Museum and the Public Library, of what might be done by disregarding the street system ought to prove of high practical value in

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the education of the public towards demanding a multiplication of such opportunities.69

The reference to the Metropolitan Museum of Art was not casual. Just a few months earlier, the editors published as their first “architectural appreciation” a review of the museum’s new entrance wing by Richard Morris Hunt (5.44). Contrasting Hunt’s design favorably to the smaller, earlier building that had been subsumed into the newer, much larger structure, the anonymous reviewer—the rhetoric of Montgomery Schuyler is evident in the article’s language—wrote that Hunt “took his architectural problem as what it had really come to be, the erection in a wide and frequented avenue of a monumental and imposing front which had nothing to do with rural scenery.” Such scenery, given by the location in Central Park, was assumed to have influenced the earlier building. The site was, then, a large part of Hunt’s successful design. Hunt resolutely oriented the museum away from the park and toward Fifth Avenue; the earlier building had been tentative in its relation to both park and street. Hunt, instead, designed the front as an uncompromisingly urban facade—in other words, street architecture, designed in relation to the viewer on the avenue or approaching from 82nd Street rather than to the natural scenery of the park. As the reviewer noted, “The opportunity to stop the vista of a street with a monumental building, and to frame its central feature with the riparian building of that street is very rare under our rectangular and unvaried street system.”70 Hunt urbanized the stretch of Fifth Avenue onto which the museum faced much as he earlier proposed to urbanize the entrance to Central Park (fig. 5.18).71

The library’s site was more conducive to the demands of publicity than either a more remote or more park-like campus setting—as at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—favored for some types of public and institutional buildings by City Beautiful advocates.\footnote{Ingrid A. Steffenson-Bruce, \textit{Marble Palaces, Temples of Art: Art Museums, Architecture, and American Culture, 1890-1930} (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1998), 82-98.} A site within the urban grid helped visually dramatize the difference of the building from its surroundings. The New York Public Library, from this perspective, was an elegant disruption of the grid, like the Frick, rather than a stridently individualistic outburst. It created a caesura in the commercial and residential development of Fifth Avenue with very particular means that make it a paradigmatic example of New York’s urban scenography. As one source wrote before the design was completed, “Scarcely any existing public building has the same combination of advantages in magnitude, detachment, conspicuousness.” Its design, if it was successfully commensurate with its advantageous site, would be “as creditable to New York as the Boston Public Library is to Boston, or the new Library of Congress to the National capital.”\footnote{“Our Public Library,” \textit{New York Times}, 25 May 1897.}

From the beginning, the library on the Reservoir site was conceived as a free-standing monument lifted up on a podium. In John Bigelow’s description of his initial concept, the building was imagined “as a cross, the upper part lying toward the Fifth Avenue; the lower and longer part toward the Sixth Avenue; the arms extended, one toward Fortyeth Street, and the other toward Forty-second Street.” Further, and importantly, the building would be set back “150 feet from the Fifth Avenue and 50 feet from the Sixth Avenue” providing a “terrace with which it should be surrounded.”\footnote{Bigelow, “The Tilden Trust Library,” 293, 295-6.} The accompanying illustrations by Ernest Flagg showed a lushly planted park-like setting, very different from what was ultimately built, but having in common with the completed plan a surrounding terrace (fig. 5.19). As built, Carrère & Hastings’ library
occupied only the Fifth Avenue half of the site—and even less of it, in fact, than had the Reservoir—and was “a combination of a square and T in plan.” In one sense, then, the library accommodated rather than challenged the constraints of the grid plan. Its geometrical disposition—square and T shapes in plan—responded directly to the rectilinearity of the site.

Bigelow, too, presented the site as full of advantages in order to garner public support for his Tilden Library proposal. He acknowledged the “wise reluctance of the people to any reduction of the breathing spaces of the city” and argued that a library on the Reservoir site would preserve its openness and enhance its public function. The site itself had no rival, in his view: “No site better adapted for a structure of suitable proportions for a metropolitan library could be carved out of any part of the city than this of Bryant Park…. It is, and will continue to be, central as long as any place in New York is ever likely to be central,… and is precisely of the shape and proportions best calculated to combine all the required accommodations for a library, without restricting the present privileges of the park.”

But despite the built-in “advantages” presumed by Bigelow and many press accounts during the protracted site selection process, the building also strongly challenged the logic of the grid by means of particular formal devices and design tactics. In addition to “stopping the street” by the projecting pavilion at the center of its two-block-long facade, there were several other elements that mitigated the grid. The terrace surrounding the building was a key part of the challenge. It was to provide “plenty of ground space all around the new building, so that it will not be difficult to get a complete view of it.” Concern for the visibility of the building, which permeated discussions of the design, was addressed by the setback and the elevated stature provided by the terrace. These devices allowed the library “to be a great addition to the

76 Bigelow, “The Tilden Trust Library,” 293.
architectural features of the centre of the city, and in the full view of travelers from every quarter.”78 The terrace, before the trees which now obscure a large portion of the sides of the Fifth Avenue front, quickly became a viewing platform for public parades (figs. 5.20-5.21), providing sufficient room for a crowd arranged on tiered seating naturally accommodated by the steps. Not only the view toward the building, then, but also the view provided from the terrace toward the street, was a key part of the building’s visibility.

What Alex Krieger has identified as the two “primal elements” of the American landscape, the gridiron and the garden, were established in juxtaposition at the New York Public Library’s site.79 Carrère & Hastings transformed, rather than passively accepted, the primal gridiron condition of the library site, and did something similar with the garden condition, which they also inherited from the site’s earlier incarnation. The building was unusual within the grid because it could be seen from two avenues. That the architects considered this an advantage is apparent from their design of the Bryant Park-facing front. A raised terrace also spans the length of this front, although articulated differently from the Fifth Avenue terrace (figs. 5.22-5.23). On the park side, the terrace was more simply treated, with two sets of stairs leading into the park and space set aside for a central sculpture. Although the architects had designed a formal park to accompany the library (fig. 5.24), this was unbuilt; the park was left as a quasi-romantic garden, with winding paths suggesting the grounds of a suburban villa, the scenic qualities of a mid-nineteenth-century rural cemetery, or even Central Park’s romantic landscaping (figs. 5.25-5.26). But the rectilinear grid, already filled out in the surrounding streets with houses and commercial structures, offered no adequate terminations or revelations for the naturalistic scenography (fig. 5.27). Whereas in Central Park great effort was made to visually separate the border of the

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naturalistic park from the surrounding rectilinear frame, the absolute dimensions of the reservoir park were much too small to allow a clear separation between park and city. The very visibility of the rectilinear streets from within the park made the artificiality of its naturalistic layout much more apparent than at Central Park (fig. 5.28).

Carrère & Hastings’ Bryant Park design sought to take advantage of the one opportunity for vista alignment offered by the surroundings and to extend the logic of the library’s cross-axial planning. Their rear terrace aligned with the portal of the Gothic church across 42nd Street, the only monument in a long row of mostly brownstone rowhouse fronts at the time of the library’s design (fig. 5.29). The Reservoir had extended deeper into the park than the library now did; with the library’s completion the church had direct exposure to the park. The terrace plan exploited this by aligning its central axis to terminate the vista—another way of “stopping the street”—for visitors as they faced north on the terrace.

In the opposite direction the vista changed over the course of the library’s construction and the resulting building, completed in 1906, seems to have been influenced by the architectural forms of the library. While not as picturesquely captivating as the opposite church portal, the Engineers Club, now The Columns apartment building, did at least align with the terrace to terminate the southern vista (fig. 5.30). The building’s lower section, composed as a rusticated base supporting two-story Corinthian pilasters, clearly borrowed from the formal language of the library’s Bryant Park elevation (fig. 5.31). In this way, the library started to impart some of its logic to its surroundings, radiating its forms and commanding obeisance to its spaces in ways that mitigated the traditional development and architectural patterns within the grid. The Union Dime Savings Bank, completed in 1909 on Sixth Avenue opposite Bryant Park, is another example of a bordering building that reflected the forms of the library proper, a “handsome
edifice” composed of rusticated corner piers and round-arched windows treated similarly to those of the library’s upper central section (fig. 5.32).  

When Bryant Park was redesigned in 1933-34, completed under Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, the plan followed a formal layout similar to the one originally proposed by Carrère & Hastings. It effaced the picturesque winding paths but extended the geometry and axiality of the building into the park, thereby more effectively displaying the library’s widely-admired rear facade (fig. 5.33). According to the Times, the formerly “half-hidden assets in the western facade” would be given greater visibility by the proposed park design. And landscape architect Charles Lowrie, who had earlier been part of a committee that proposed a similar redesign of the park, declared in a letter to the Times that the new design, of “great value as a solution of a difficult small-park problem,” had as a virtue the fact that it would show off the rear facade of the library. Noting the “orderly arrangement” of the parallel rows of trees on the north and south sides, as well as the “dignified greensward on a central axis” with both the library and the new Lowell Memorial Fountain by Charles Platt, Lowrie wrote that landscape architects had “agreed on this general type of treatment as being the best” for small city parks. Even Lewis Mumford appreciated the “appearance of order” in the park as befitting its urban conditions. But he also criticized the open vista beyond the fountain toward Sixth Avenue where “the solemn beauties of the Elevated” were revealed, “perhaps as dingy a piece of urban architecture as was
ever used to close a vista.”85 By 1934, however, tall commercial buildings had almost entirely replaced the low-rise rowhouses and Gothic church of the nineteenth century, and the radiating power of the library’s forms was no longer sufficient to influence architecture along the park’s borders (fig. 5.34).

“An Invitation to Enter”: The Urban Scenography of the Library

Consistently in illustrations, the library was depicted in perspective rather than elevation. Most common was the view taken from the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street (figs. 5.35-5.37). These views emphasized the spreading, broad horizontality of the building and the way in which the design addressed its site. Elevation views tend to flatten the depth of the setback provided by the terrace (fig. 5.38), whereas oblique perspectives capture the recumbent quality of the building on top of its carefully articulated terrace. Additionally, at the corners the two pavilions punctuate the front composition with pediments and rusticated stone courses. The pavilions pin down the design at its ends, the parts that most immediately strike the pedestrian or carriage passenger moving along Fifth Avenue (fig. 5.39). The effectiveness of the composition on a long stretch of avenue is confirmed by a similar composition by McKim, Mead & White for Pennsylvania Station (1902-10), built on another two-block site at the same time as the library (figs. 5.40-5.41). Even the motif of corner pediments and flat central entablature was the same in both. The motif had provoked a strong objection by the rail station’s anonymous reviewer in *Architectural Record*, who asked why “the otherwise unbroken horizontality of the design [should] be subjected to the single exception of the projected pediments of the terminal pavilions … when the pediment does not reappear at the centre, nor on the sides of the same pavilions, nor

anywhere else throughout the vast structure.” These pediments, the reviewer complained, had “an anomalous air.” That these “anomalous” pediments appeared on the library’s end pavilions, as well, suggests that the visual effect of pinning down the building to its site at its corners was a large part of the reason both architectural offices had settled on a similar design.

While the alignment of the library’s central portico with 41st Street was important—a “stopping of the street” as Schuyler would have it—this element was relatively less striking from the perspective view that most passersby would have on the major streets surrounding the library. But from the terrace itself, the central pavilion was a prominent scenographic device to draw forth the visitor (fig. 5.42). As Herbert Croly recognized, the library “is not, then, intended to be a great monumental building, which would look almost as well from one point of view as another, and which would be fundamentally an example of pure architectural form.” Instead, the library’s form was adjusted to its long avenue frontage and modified by the podium: “It is designed rather to face on the avenue of a city, and not to seem out of place on such a site. It is essentially and frankly an instance of street architecture.” For Croly, then, the difference between “pure architectural form” and “street architecture” was found in how a building adjusted itself to its site, in the ways in which it lured the public in, and in its attention to “magnitude, detachment, conspicuousness,” as the Times had written.

The concern for visibility worked in tandem with the adjustments to “mitigate” the grid plan. Just before its opening, the Sun wrote that the library’s site “makes it visible to the thousands who daily pass up and down Fifth avenue. Its architectural beauty makes it so different

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86 “The Pennsylvania’s New York Station,” Architectural Record, June 1910, 521.
89 “The Public Library.”
from the surrounding structures that it never fails to attract the notice of pedestrians.”

As librarian Arthur Bostwick wrote, “That a library should be a conspicuous, monumental structure seems to be now taken for granted.” The danger was one of creating an intimidating rather than a welcoming visibility. According to Bostwick, “Too many library buildings look as if intended to keep people out instead of luring them in.” Bostwick prescribed exactly the kind of site on which the New York Public was situated: “The best site for a library building, large or small, is one with light, and preferably with ground, on all sides, situated centrally in a residence or retail business district.” Neither a park-like setting nor a civic center, preferred by City Beautiful advocates, were optimal: “A good location for a city hall and a courthouse is not necessarily a good location for a library.”

Herbert Croly recognized just these qualities in the New York Public Library. He described it as a particularly appropriate kind of street architecture commensurate with the institution for which “it will provide a fitting habitation.” “Designed to be seen from Fifth Avenue and from the side streets,” its particular combination of terrace, frontispiece, colonnades, and pavilions “has poise, as well as distinction; character, as well as good manners.” As a whole, the building “looks ingratiating rather than imposing.” Through the “fundamental impressiveness and attractiveness” of the facade it “issues to the people an invitation to enter rather than a command,” in accord with Bostwick’s view. This particular invitational stance would, according to Croly, endear it to its public: “The public has reason to like it, because it offers them a smiling countenance; and the welcome it gives is merely the outward and visible sign of an inward grace.” Answering to the demands of publicity, the New York Public Library, in Croly’s discerning estimation, was “a great triumph.” The “realism of its plan” and “the mixture of

90 “New York’s $8,000,000 Public Library; The Building on Fifth Avenue Nearly Ready to Receive Readers,” The Sun, 9 April 1911.
dignity and distinction” in its outward design had secured for it a “well earned” popularity, in Croly’s view.92 From a master of public philosophy, this was the highest praise imaginable.

The library’s exterior design was not entirely without fault in the eyes of contemporaries. Croly, unlike most of his contemporaries and later critics, seemed unimpressed by the Bryant Park facade. He concluded that the most “progressive” part of the design by virtue of its long vertical strips of windows forthrightly expressing the book stacks inside “merely takes care of itself.”93 Other critics found the colonnade along the front wings to be under-scaled, diminutive in comparison with the great breadth of the building. When the model bay had been put up in 1902, for instance, Architectural Record declared “that there is a general error, in point of scale, on the side of deficiency,” and that “much of the delicate detail is incomprehensible from the other side of Fifth Avenue, and can scarcely be said to count even as a vague general enrichment.” In this view, the “crowning balustrade” was “trivial” and “would gain by an increase in the size and a diminution in the number of the balusters. And apparently the same remark may be safely made upon the fluting of the columns.”94 And while under construction, William R. Ware, who had been a member of the design selection committee, sent an unsolicited commentary to the library’s director, John Billings, in an unsuccessful attempt to effect a modification of the design. Ware observed that “the upper gable, which sets so far back from the main front that it might be expected hardly to count in the main composition, is really, as things come out, its most prominent and predominant feature. But this part it seems ill fitted to play, being both too bare and uninteresting for so conspicuous a role, and also designed on too large a

92 David [Croly], “The New York Public Library,” 147-49.
93 Ibid., 148.
scale, as to its details, to comport with the more delicate treatment of the Order below.”

Such criticisms hardly diminished the widespread perception of the building’s success. These minor grievances seem almost perfunctory, as if the critics were fishing for faults in a design that was otherwise unimpeachable. As Croly seemed to imply, the effectiveness of any one of the building’s exterior details of itself was distinctly subordinate to the building’s larger urban impact. If its “expressed purposed” was, as Clifford Smyth claimed, “to make it representative, as far as possible, of modern New York,” then its urban scenography was the critical point of reference in evaluating the building’s success.

In an important essay on the relation of architecture to public space, Kenneth Frampton differentiated traditional processional architecture from modern processal architecture (and the larger urbanistic contexts of both). Processional architecture, as at the New York Public Library, encouraged a distinctly civic type of movement through urban space. It choreographed visitors’ movements to allow members of the urban public to share the same space without exclusive claims to it on the part of any segment or class. The public would be obliged to acknowledge its own diversity and to accommodate the movements of its varied members. At the same time, this processional architecture contrasted directly with the processal urbanism of the library’s surroundings.

The inviting stance of the New York Public Library, recognized by Smyth and Croly, was connected to this processional purpose. With its wide, welcoming steps leading up to the first terrace level and then further to the entrance portico articulated by a triumphal arch—which at that moment was a common way of indicating public accessibility and ennobling sense of

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95 William R. Ware to John Billings, 5 December 1908, Box 2, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, New York Public Library.
welcome, used as well at Grand Central Terminal and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (figs. 5.43-5.44)—the library orchestrated a processional approach beginning at and encompassing the street. The podium design raised the processional space above the street and connected it to the rear of the building and Bryant Park in a way no other site plan in the city had done before. These moves marked a caesura in the commercial and residential length of Fifth Avenue, but they also rendered the library’s processional civic space distinct from the mere traffic of the commercial street’s processal space. The design differentiated the movement of traffic and the movement of citizens, the latter elevated and ennobled by the steps and podium. Even as the library’s design rose out of and expressed in its rectilinear formalism the constraints imposed by the double-block site plan, it also challenged the developmental logic of the grid plan with its traditional lack of civic provisions. It forced a break in the ever-flowing movement of traffic facilitated by the grid plan, a break meant to elevate the public, at least for a moment, above the grid’s commercial-processal imperatives. The break in the grid enabled by the setback and the terrace compelled the approaching citizen to slow down, to experience a distinctly civic mode of time and space different from that of commercial time and space, which seemed to be the dominant logic of the grid plan.

The steps and terrace, then, were critical parts of the site’s processional scenography. Because of these elements it was very unlike two of its most important precedents. The Boston Public Library and the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève defined edges of urban squares in their respective cities, and both were designed to defer to a larger, older church on their squares. At the New York Public, there was no square to define, only a street edge that could have been

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continued. Instead, the podium extended the public space of the sidewalk and elevated and articulated it as civic space through a range of supporting elements: a framing balustrade, flag poles, and the exterior sculptural embellishment of the library’s facade. Continuing into the interior, the understanding of the library as directing and shaping processional civic space led the architects to develop a formal route to the functional and symbolic heart of the building, the reading room at its summit (figs. 5.45-5.48). By means of these scenographic and processional characteristics the library acted as an agency of publicity, an incubator, in John Cotton Dana’s words, “of civic pride, of fuller life, of wider views.”

Like the Richmond civic center and the buildings around Bowling Green, the New York Public Library is a paradigmatic example of civic classicism from the early twentieth century, the clearest example of the modality of architectural design concerned with free-standing buildings set apart from their surroundings. Carrère & Hastings’ library and its adjoining park were intended to “mitigate” the gridiron plan’s “asperities,” as Montgomery Schuyler put it. And with the growing concern in the period’s political thought for the agency of the modern urban public, the library’s podium and processional space were effective in making visible the urban public to itself. In few other places—St. George and Bowling Green among them—was the public realm of the metropolis so carefully shaped and tended to express a civic ethos.

100 Dana, “The Reading Public As I Know It,” 251.
Conclusion

In *The Phantom Public* (1925), Walter Lippmann, Herbert Croly’s former colleague at *The New Republic*, sketched his vision of “a polity marked by active insiders and a passive public.”¹ It marked a turn in political theory away from the democratic public articulated by the previous generation of progressives. Instead, Lippmann offered an understanding of politics that not only curtailed the role of the urban public in defining citizenship but also submitted politics in general to tests of efficiency administered by apolitical bureaucrats.²

Responding to Lippmann’s challenge, John Dewey, who was also a frequent contributor to *The New Republic* after 1916, published *The Public and Its Problems* (1927).³ In the book, he sought to clarify and extend the republican-progressive understanding of the public realm that had been operative in the two decades before World War I.⁴ Dewey considered Lippmann’s book a harbinger of the total eclipse of the public realm by the bureaucratic state, technocratic experts, and the aggressive and privatizing forces of professional marketing, communications, and the field that would later be called public relations. In fact, the 1920s marked the time when *publicity* itself underwent a fundamental change in meaning—from having to do with making things public in a political and broadly social sense to a much narrower sense related to the expertise of

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marketing. Dewey wrote, however, that “the clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.” This consciousness of public life—of the requirements of a common horizon of civic experience, as Ronald Beiner puts it—was the big casualty of Lippmann’s narrowed understanding of publicity.

Progressive optimism in the prospects of the architectonic public realm as it had developed in the years up to the first world war did not survive the new emphasis on manipulating public opinion, the increasing power of the corporate economic model, and the strains of depression and a second world war. In the late 1940s, the United States emerged from almost two decades of hardship purged of its pre-World War I republican progressivism and its attendant interest and faith in cities. The resurgent individualist liberalism of the post-war era seemed closer in spirit to nineteenth-century laissez-faire liberalism with its romantic emphasis on individual fulfillment in free-standing houses in the suburbs. The city was no longer the signifying core of the American polity as republican progressives such as Howe and Croly had tried to make it at the turn of the century. What had been considered large and unwieldy urban development around 1900 seemed a vast improvement over the ever-growing scale and extension.

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9 A harbinger of these changes is John R. McMahon, *Success in the Suburbs* (New York: Putnam’s, 1917).
of the city in the 1920s and 1930s. New methods of urban regional planning were developed to cope with it.¹⁰

Civic classicism had developed in a very different time. The optimism of the municipal theorists, the concern on the part of Herbert Croly for the connections between metropolitan and national citizenship, and architects’ own interest in refashioning New York into a metropolis physically worthy of its international status and commensurate with the positive outlook on the urban public realm had together created fertile conditions for this architecture’s development. From the 1890s to the early 1920s, the architectonic public realm was characterized by the intensity of efforts to address the visibility, vitality, and scale of the urban public. New York’s civic classicism should be seen, then, as the attempt to create an urban scenography corresponding to and expressive of these concerns. The three design modalities that adapted classicism to its particular physical contexts in the romantic suburb, the historic urban square, and the functionalist gridiron plan are evidence of the architects’ engagement with the practice of urban architecture, a concern which had not been so urgent earlier in American history.

The new urgency developed at a moment of unusual clarity of thought about and optimism toward cities. And it issued in a kind of architectural reformation wherein a group of New York architects, impressed by Paris and other European cities and anxious to address what they perceived as the shortcomings of American urbanism, developed a civic architecture responsive to the varied physical and political conditions of the modern metropolis and its uncontestably important public realm. The apotheosis of the public realm that we can trace in republican-progressive political theory found its physical expression in some of the most

impressive buildings and spaces of early twentieth-century New York City. Analogous to John Dewey’s understanding of philosophy, architecture was not just a rarefied and insular professional practice among experts, but was concerned with politics broadly conceived. This, certainly, was Herbert Croly’s view, as we have seen. Dewey wrote that philosophy became a matter of public interest “when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.”

Substituting architecture for philosophy in Dewey’s statement, a similar point can be made about civic classicism, which took a restricted, even esoteric, practice—Beaux-Arts classicism as defined by academic standards—and applied it to the conditions of the modern metropolis, submitting it to the scrutiny of professionals and public alike. The civic classicists, in contrast to the usual view of a placeless, universal Beaux-Arts classicism, took the historical, geographic, and urbanistic contexts of their work seriously, as the defining and in some ways limiting conditions of architectural practice. As this dissertation has shown, civic classicism was one part of the broader effort to articulate and expand the common horizon of civic experience for a modern, urban polity.

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