Detroit's City Beautiful and the Problem of Commerce

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Edward H. Bennett and Frank Miles Day's plan for Detroit's Center of Arts and Letters in 1913 culminated the local City Beautiful movement. Cass Gilbert's Detroit Public Library and Paul Cret's Detroit Institute of Arts were built on axis, on either side of Woodward Avenue, in the middle of the center. In scrutinizing the center's origin and form, this essay outlines a broader interpretation of the City Beautiful movement, one that goes beyond explanations that focus primarily upon the formal model presented by the design of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. In late 19th-century American cities, commercial forms increasingly disrupted a traditional hierarchy in which civic, cultural, and religious buildings had dominated the cityscape and the skyline. Looking at the earlier architecture and the urban context of the institutions housed in the Center of Arts and Letters, this essay argues that the City Beautiful represented a powerful and conservative attempt to restore the dominance of civic buildings and landscapes in the face of commercial monumentality. The City Beautiful in Detroit set out to redress the "most unworthy contrast" presented to the civic landscape by commercial forms and interests.

IN THE 1890s and early 1900s, proponents of the City Beautiful movement advocated extensive changes in the form, structure, and design of American cities.[1] They envisioned the harmonious development of the civic landscape. Proposals were offered for grouping and uniting public buildings with one another and with the landscape. Generally conceived in classical architectural style, these public buildings were to provide the focal point for stately plazas and systems of embellished boulevards, radial avenues, and waterside promenades. The plans included settings for prominent public statues, fountains, and memorials. City Beautiful plans called for a thoroughgoing reconfiguration of the urban landscape.

Historians as well as contemporaries have acknowledged that the looming spectacle of Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, with its Court of Honor, provided an important aesthetic model for many City Beautiful plans and their groups of classical buildings. In the 1909 *Plan of Chicago,* the most notable expression of City Beautiful ideals, Daniel H. Burnham and his advisors declared, "The origin of the Plan of Chicago can be traced directly to the World's Columbian Exposition. The World's Fair of 1893 was the beginning, in our day and in this country of the orderly arrangement of extensive public grounds and buildings."[2] It was a narrowly formalistic account of City Beautiful origins, one that, not incidentally, credited the creative genius of Burnham and the other architects of the fair with initiating the movement. Burnham's creation chronicle suggested that the fair itself converted American philistines to a vision of urban art and beauty. As historians have noted, however, such an interpretation obscures the extent to which both the exposition and the City Beautiful participated in a common aesthetic and cultural movement—a movement rooted less in ideal models than in the complex patterns of late 19th-century urbanism. Challenging the primacy of the exposition as a source of the City Beautiful movement, these scholars have traced the important contributions to City Beautiful ideals made by American park planning[3] and by 19th-century campaigns for munic-

This essay has greatly benefited from the interest and criticism of Neil Harris and Barbara Clark Smith.

1. For overviews of the City Beautiful movement, see M. Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890,* Berkeley, 1969, 47–109; N. Newton, *Design on the Land,* Cambridge, 1971, 413–426; C. Tunnard, *The City of Man,* New York, 1953, 303–313; J. Kahn, *Imperial San Francisco: Politics and Planning in an American City, 1897–1906,* Lincoln, 1979; T. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago: Architect and Planner,* New York, 1974; P. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920,* Cambridge, 1978, 252–276; M. Manieri-Elia, "Toward an 'Imperial City': Daniel H. Burnham and the City Beautiful Movement," in *The American City from the Civil War to the New Deal,* ed. G. Ciucci *et al.,* Cambridge, 1979, 1–142; H. Kantor, "The City Beautiful Movement in New York," *New York Historical Society Quarterly,* LVII, 1973, 148–171; M. Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning,* Cambridge, 1983, 33–56; R. Wilson, "The Great Civilization," in *The American Renaissance 1876–1917,* Brooklyn, 1979, 9–72; J. Peterson, "The Nation's First Comprehensive City Plan: A Political Analysis of the McMillan Plan for Washington, D.C. 1900–1902," *American Planning Association Journal,* LI, 1985, 134–150.

2. D. Burnham and E. Bennett, *Plan of Chicago,* Chicago, 1909, 4. For a recent historical account echoing Burnham, see M. Girouard, *Cities and People: A Social and Architectural History,* New Haven, 1985, 353–354.

3. W. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City,* Columbia, 1964.

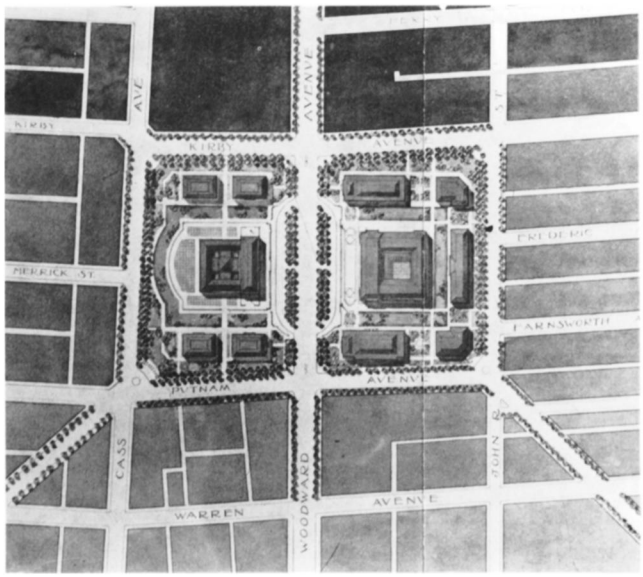

Fig. 1. Edward H. Bennett and Frank Miles Day, Center of Arts and Letters, Detroit, 1913, plan (Detroit City Plan and Improvement Commission, *A Center of Arts and Letters,* 1913).

ipal art, civic improvement, and outdoor memorials.[4] This essay explores further the social and cultural as well as aesthetic sources of the movement. It argues that in seeking to reconfigure the urban landscape City Beautiful planners hoped to redefine public life.

Focusing on one American city, this essay traces the connection between the concrete forms and dynamics of 19th-century urbanism and the recourse to City Beautiful aesthetics. It analyzes the City Beautiful plans drawn up in the early 1900s for Detroit, Michigan, and in particular the designs for the city's Center of Arts and Letters (Fig. 1). Although the focus here is local, the social and cultural issues central to the City Beautiful ideal also operated in other cities. It is not merely that national leaders of the City Beautiful movement—Edward H. Bennett, Paul Cret, Frank Miles Day, Cass Gilbert, Charles Moore, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Charles Mulford Robinson—contributed to Detroit's plans. In fact, Detroit leaders often knew precisely what improvements they wanted before calling in national figures. But Detroit planners and civic leaders were responding to a series of problems that confronted the local elite in other American cities. Like civic planners elsewhere, Detroit City Beautiful proponents conservatively sought to preserve a traditional urban order and a preferred building hierarchy in the face of unprecedented growth and change.

Indeed, City Beautiful proponents in Detroit and elsewhere were centrally concerned with restoring the dignity and dominance of the civic and cultural landscape. In pursuing this ideal, architects, planners, and civic leaders faced a rather unwieldy set of problems. Simply stated, the commercial interests shaping late 19th-century urbanism had aggressively disrupted an established hierarchy in which civic buildings, public institutions, and churches had visually dominated skylines and major urban public spaces. Sprawling railroad yards, warehouses, industrial structures, and a range of specialized buildings such as hotels, department stores, and—above all else—the skyscraper office building established a new canon of urban monumentality. In the face of this obvious challenge to civic and cultural expressions, the aesthetic formulas of the City Beautiful promised a great deal. Although generally conceding the skyline to the skyscraper, City Beautiful plans strove for extensive monumental control of the ground.

In Detroit, this strategy was most impressively demonstrated in designs for the Center of Arts and Letters. Occupying sites on either side of Woodward Avenue, the Renaissance style white marble buildings of the Detroit Public Library designed by Cass Gilbert and the Detroit Institute of Arts designed by Paul Cret form the harmonious, axially symmetrical nucleus of the center, located two miles north of Detroit's downtown courthouse. The opening of the library and museum, in 1921 and 1927, respectively, culminated years of political and architectural debate. The center's architecture and planning exemplified the desire of civic leaders to distinguish Detroit's cultural institutions and pursuits from the surrounding commercial life of the city.

In the early 20th century, Detroit industrialists founded a national automobile industry upon a diversified commercial base that drew on the region's rich timber lands and iron deposits. Between 1900 and 1920 the city's official population rose from 285,704 to 993,675, making Detroit the fourth largest city in the United States. For many trustees of the Detroit Museum, like Frederick Stearns, a pharmaceutical manufacturer, William H. Brearley, a newspaper publisher, and Dexter M. Ferry, an agricultural seed distributor, the commercial expansion of the city raised the specter of lives and cities too narrowly devoted to the pursuit of Mammon and thus subject to decadence and decline.[5] True, fears of Mammonism and luxury had concerned many political theorists as early as the founding of the republic.[6] Yet, in the course of the 19th century as commerce and industry expanded, the terms of the debate shifted. In both private and

4. J. Peterson, "The City Beautiful Movement: Forgotten Origins and Lost Meanings," *Journal of Urban History,* II, 1976, 415–434; R. Foglesong, *Planning the Capitalist City: The Colonial Era to the 1920s,* Princeton, 1986, 124–166; W. Wilson, "The Ideology, Aesthetic, and Politics of the City Beautiful Movement," *The Rise of Modern Urban Planning, 1880–1914,* ed. A. Sutcliffe, New York, 1980, 71–98.

5. *Free Press* (Detroit), 16 December 1884; *Annual Report of the Detroit Museum of Art,* 1896, 17–18.

6. N. Harris, *The Artist in American Society,* New York, 1966, 28–53.

public life, many upper-class people came to view cultural pursuits and philanthropy as justification for lives committed to commerce; they accepted commerce not as an end in itself but as a means to some higher, more cultured and civilized purpose.

In the midst of Detroit's business expansion many trustees of formal culture feared that their initiatives would be swamped by commercial forms and pursuits. They looked to the emerging Center of Arts and Letters for a clear sign that the evolution of formal culture could parallel commercial prosperity. This framing of the relationship between commerce and culture appeared to establish a realm apart, yet it also justified the unencumbered pursuit of commerce. Cultural stewards envisioned a didactic and uplifting role for their institutions; however, since cultural institutions rose on a foundation of commercial prosperity, city boosters often pointed to cultural institutions as part of a commercial strategy to win new residents and investments. In many late 19th-century American cities cultural institutions simultaneously embodied an implicit critique of and an apology for commercial life.

Tensions between commercial pursuits and civic ideals found expression in religious sermons, political rhetoric, cultural debates, and other forms of contemporary discourse. Such tensions were interpreted and expressed architecturally as well. The relationship between civic and cultural buildings and commercial structures, both in terms of urban site and architectural style, reflected the divergence of commercial and cultural ideals. In Detroit a useful way to analyze these dynamic influences is to look at the architectural decisions concerning civic buildings made prior to the City Beautiful movement. The library and museum founders, for example, constructed their first buildings in 1876 and 1886, respectively. Scrutinizing the response of the trustees of these institutions to the changing cityscape helps clarify later decisions to abandon these buildings and sites and to adopt larger City Beautiful plans.

Civic expression and Woodward's plan of 1805

The City Beautiful was not the first attempt in Detroit at grand city planning. After fire destroyed the frontier settlement in 1805, Judge Augustus B. Woodward, one of the Michigan Territory's first officials, produced a grandiose plan for the future metropolis. Woodward developed a street and building plan based upon equilateral triangles with 4000-foot sides radiating from a central park called the Grand Circus (Fig. 2). Generated from ideal geometric forms—circles, squares, triangles—the Woodward plan also provided for the sale of standard rectilinear urban lots.[7]

Woodward's baroque plan encompassed a systematic and inventive provision for civic buildings and public spaces. The reconciliation of the Detroit plan's overall triangular forms with more-or-less rectilinear urban lots left a number of triangular plots at the center of the street system's larger triangular subdivisions. Woodward designated these areas as public parks and sites for monumental public or religious buildings. Public squares, markets, firehouses, schools, the Michigan capitol, a penitentiary, and "houses for the meeting of religious, moral, literary, or political societies, or other useful associations, and generally for such purposes of utility or ornament"[8] would fill these interstices (reference M, Fig. 2). These sites were dispersed evenly around the city and clearly provided for the dominance of civic buildings over private residences and commercial buildings.

As Detroit developed in the early 19th century, the cupolas and domes of public buildings and the spires of churches dominated the skyline and the city's important public spaces. In the decades following Woodward's design, political intrigue and more pragmatic commercial conceptions of land subdivision led

Fig. 2. Anonymous, Plan of Detroit [Judge Woodward's Plan], c. 1807, detail of Woodward Plan (4000 ft. equilateral triangle section outlined by Washington, Jefferson, and Miami avenues; see Fig. 5 for modification of plan in vicinity of Campus Martius) (*American State Papers, Public Land Series,* vol. 6, Washington, 1834, Library of Congress).

7. B. Pickens, "Early City Plans for Detroit, A Projected American Metropolis," *Art Quarterly,* VI, Winter 1943, 34–51; John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America,* Princeton, 1965, 264–272.

8. Quoted in Reps, *Urban America,* 270.

Fig. 3. Sheldon and Mortimer L. Smith, Detroit Opera House, Detroit, 1869, façade facing Campus Martius; the First Presbyterian Church, 1855, stands at the left of the photograph, adjacent to the Detroit Public Library, 1875 (Avery Library, Columbia University). The three buildings have been demolished.

Fig. 4. Henry T. Brush and Hugh Smith, Public Library, Detroit, 1875, demolished (Avery Library, Columbia University). Library is also visible to the right of the church steeple in Fig. 3.

to the abandonment of many of the grandest features of the plan. The Circus ended up as a semicircular park, broad avenues were narrowed, and a rectilinear grid intruded upon the axial grandeur of the Woodward design. Yet despite these compromises, important vestiges of the Woodward plan survived in Detroit's downtown, including the distinction between sites for commercial and civic buildings. In late 19th-century Detroit, civic buildings still generally stood as isolated monuments. However, the Campus Martius, the city square at the heart of Woodward's plan, did provide a focus for civic buildings. The city hall of 1835 had occupied a site facing the Campus, and the new city hall of 1871 stood on a section of the Campus itself. The four-story Italianate building, topped with a modern French mansard roof and a Georgian cupola, set a new standard of civic monumentality in late 19th-century Detroit. The impressive French Renaissance-style, mansarded, 2000-seat Detroit Opera House (1869) (Fig. 3), the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument (1872), and the Central Market Building (1880) all enhanced the civic qualities of the Campus. In the late 19th century the Campus Martius stood as "the admitted center of the City."[9]

Propriety of site: the library and museum

Plans for Detroit's first library fit the dispersed pattern of civic building in the Woodward plan. When the Detroit Public Library opened in 1865, it did not occupy a building of its own, but used rooms in the Capitol High School. Constructed in 1828 to house Michigan's territorial government, the brick Greek Revival structure stood on the capitol site designed in 1805 by Woodward (reference B, Fig. 2). The building's Ionic hexastyle portico, its 140-foot tower, and its political function made it one of the most notable structures in the city. In the 1870s the Library Commission considered remodeling the old city hall facing the Campus Martius but instead built upon Centre Park, one of the triangular civic sites outlined by Woodward (reference A, Fig. 2).

The library represented just the sort of institution Woodward had considered appropriate for the civic triangles in his Detroit plan. The 1805 plan had specified that Centre Park would be occupied by a penitentiary, and a jail stood on the site from 1819 to 1848. The library succeeded the jail both symbolically and architecturally; it was supported by fines imposed by Detroit's courts: libraries appropriately "diffuse[ed] the intelligence and culture by which crime is most surely prevented."[10] The library operated as a civic institution and thus appeared entitled to a site of civic prominence. After touring major American libraries and consulting with leading librarians, the Library Commission built a cathedral-stack library which had a main reading room in the center ringed by five stories of open iron bookstacks lighted by a central skylight.[11] Detroit architects Henry T. Brush and Hugh Smith designed the brick building in dignified Second Empire style (Fig. 4). Despite the eventual

9. *Free Press,* 31 May 1885; for survey of Detroit architecture, see W. Ferry, *The Buildings of Detroit: A History,* Detroit, 1980.

10. *Report of the Committee on Library of the Board of Education on the Foundation of the Library,* 1 January 1864, Detroit, 1864.

11. See F. Woodford, *Parnassus on Main Street: A History of the Detroit Public Library,* Detroit, 1965.

elimination of a central dome from the design and the substitution of wood for stone in the portico, the library exemplified the monumental civic qualities of the Woodward plan.

The museum originated as a private institution. Initially attempts were made to locate on public land, but the museum's first permanent building was constructed on lots within Detroit's rectilinear street grid—a site which lacked the distinction of the library and capitol. The museum grew out of a temporary, six-week art loan exhibition organized in 1883. The exhibition coordinator, William H. Brearley, who was the advertising manager of the Detroit *News* and later the publisher of the Detroit *Journal,* hoped that a successful exhibition would spur interest in the development of a permanent art institution. Brearley and his associates placed on view 5000 works of art gathered from private collections in Detroit and from commercial galleries in eastern cities. Over 134,000 people paid the 25-cent admission to view the show, displayed in a temporary brick structure built on Larned Street in the downtown business area. Exhibition profits permitted the purchase of Millet's *The Reading of a Story to Oeune,* which was viewed by exhibition organizers as the cornerstone of a permanent collection for the anticipated museum.[12]

Despite the museum project's private basis, the rhetoric surrounding it gestured toward a broad civic purpose and clearly articulated the idealized relationship between commerce and culture in Detroit. Senator Thomas W. Palmer contributed $10,000 toward the museum's $100,000 fund. Declaring that "Detroit has taste and wealth enough to found and maintain an art gallery which will be creditable to the culture and public spirit of her citizens," Palmer sanguinely linked commercial prosperity and cultural attainment.[13] Observing the early development of the museum, the *Free Press* suggested a somewhat less benign view of commerce but nonetheless accepted business as the foundation for culture: "It is in the building up and encouragement of such institutions that civilization distinguishes itself most from barbarism. The community which is given over wholly to the pursuit of the mighty dollar, which cares nothing for the graces of life, for culture or for advancement in anything but mere wealth, is not one remove from barbarism."[14]

In their two and one-half year search for a site the museum's incorporators debated questions of land costs and access, but their central concern was how to distinguish the museum from the scenes and setting of commercial activity. Senator Palmer warned in 1884, "a cheap lot in an unattractive locality . . . would be disastrous."[15] The incorporators devoted most of their attention to sites in the wealthy residential sections in which they themselves lived. Their interest in locating the museum in a stable, elite neighborhood, protected from the encroachment of business, reflected their attitudes toward civic monumentality as well as the history of upper-class residential neighborhoods in Detroit. Since the 1830s specialized, fashionable residential enclaves had broken the pattern of mixed, relatively undifferentiated land use which had existed in early 19th-century Detroit. Evidencing something of a proprietary attitude to downtown business and political life, wealthy residents lived immediately adjacent to the downtown area. In the 1860s and 1870s Detroit's expansion placed pressure upon the adjacent elite enclaves. The territorial expansion of commercial and industrial activity and the development of downtown areas filled with working-class boarding houses, saloons, and brothels spurred wealthy residents to move outward along the avenues radiating from downtown.[16] Woodward and Jefferson avenues, where museum incorporators concentrated their search for a site, stood in the forefront of this elite residential expansion.

In lobbying the city for a grant of public land, Brearley and the trustees showed particular interest in Case Park, one-half mile northwest of the Grand Circus (Fig. 5). Brearley, who lived one block from the park, said the "surroundings will always probably be the same as now, exclusively residence property, and of the better class at that. It is and will be exempt from the smoke and dust of manufacturing houses, which make now or *will make* in the future, many other locations very objectionable."[17] Considerations of dust and noise reinforced the incorporators' sense that propriety and refinement demanded a site somewhat aloof from the scenes of the commerce and industry that supported the museum.

When the negotiations over Cass Park failed, the incorporators appealed to pecuniary motives in seeking donations of lots along Woodward and Jefferson avenues.[18] Stating that the museum would boost adjacent property values by 50–100%, Brearley asserted that the donation of land would "enabl[e] a credit for being public spirited to be obtained where the motive would be powerfully assisted by self interest."[19] Similarly, a group of Detroit retail merchants could "expect to enjoy and

12. W. Clayton, *The Growth of a Great Museum: An Informal History of the Detroit Institute of Arts,* n.p., [1965], 11–19.

13. Thomas W. Palmer to William H. Brearley, 5 April 1883, in *Annual Reports of the Detroit Museum of Art;* (1902–1904), 63–64.

14. *Free Press,* 16 December 1894.

15. Thomas W. Palmer to Fred E. Farnsworth, 6 February 1884, Archives of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan (hereafter D.I.A.).

16. J. Schneider, *Detroit and the Problem of Order, 1830–1880; A Geography of Crime, Riot, and Policing,* Lincoln, 1980, 32, 45, 46, 66, 88–93.

17. William H. Brearley, "Several 'Pros' for Cass Park as a Site," 15 May 1886, D.I.A.

18. "Records of the Committee on Grounds and Buildings of the Detroit Museum of Art, (1885–1886)," 1 December 1885, D.I.A.

19. William H. Brearley to Collins B. Hubbard, 4 October 1884, D.I.A.

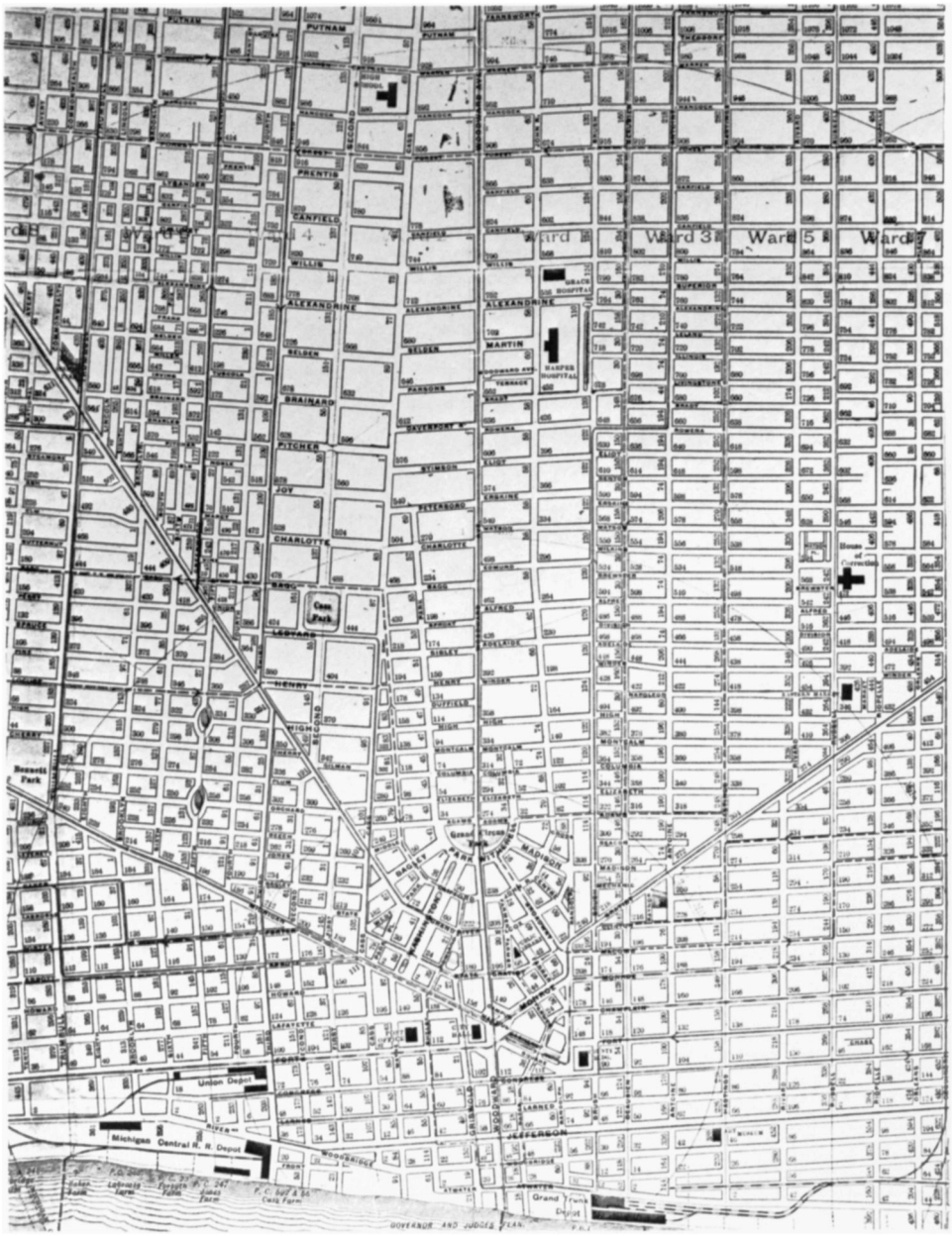

Fig. 5. Silas Farmer, map of Detroit, 1899 (Library of Congress). Cass Park is located to the left of Woodward Avenue in the middle of the map; sites of the public library, art museum, city hall, post office, and county building are also marked below, center. The site of the Center of Arts and Letters is at the top of the map at Woodward and Farnsworth.

take pride in" the museum but explained their financial support by declaring, "We believe the enterprise will be a profitable investment for the people to put their money into. The Art Loan paid. Hundreds of Thousands of Dollars were gained by the city retail trade; . . . merchants want a place that is attractive to strangers, and where our citizens can entertain their visitors."[20]

20. Mabley and Company to Detroit Museum of Art Trustees, 7 November 1885, D.I.A.

Finally the "credit for being public spirited" went to a Detroit street railway company and 49 property owners in the Jefferson Avenue area who donated a lot at Jefferson Avenue and Hastings Street. In effect, a commercial transaction secured for the group the amenity value and prestige of the nascent cultural institution. In 1891 Silas Farmer's Detroit guide directed visitors along Jefferson Avenue, with its lines of elms and maples, past the "very attractive . . . fine residences"—the Gothic style villas and detached mansions of museum incorporators like Francis F. Palms, James McMillan, and others who had prospered in De-

Fig. 6. James Balfour, Museum of Art, Detroit, 1886 (demolished), main façade facing Jefferson Avenue (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

Fig. 7. Mortimer L. Smith, J. L. Hudson Company Department Store, Detroit, 1891 (demolished), main façade of building facing public library (Avery Library, Columbia University).

troit business like Hugh McMillan, Thomas F. Griffin, and John S. Newberry. As the guide reported, "This may be called the oldest and most aristocratic thoroughfare in the city, its characteristics are French conservatism, and modern segregation. . . . It is deemed not less beautiful than Woodward."[21]

Like the churches along Jefferson Avenue, the massive, Romanesque style museum prominently stood out among the neighborhood's residential structures (Fig. 6). James Balfour of Hamilton, Ontario won the architectural competition for the museum with his entry entitled "Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty." The symmetry and simplicity of the design fulfilled the incorporators' guidelines, which declared, "preference will be given to dignified simplicity and perfect taste and harmony in the parts, rather than to much ornamentation or showy construction . . . [or] novelty of design."[22] Architecturally the building was quite distinct from the prevailing forms of exuberant, picturesque, eclectic Victorian domestic architecture.

Commercial invasion

Detroit's library and museum were built as isolated monuments and conformed to the canon of civic distinction outlined in the Woodward plan. The buildings were expanded in the decades after their completion to house growing collections and programs. Despite these adaptations, shortly after 1900, the buildings occupied a strikingly different landscape and society than they had when first built. These changes forced the institutions to reconsider their architecture and setting within the city.

In the 1870s the library's "retired" location on Centre Park stood a block to the east of the three- and four-story business blocks lining Woodward Avenue. The park itself was surrounded by two- and three-story houses built of brick and wood. The tall, slender spire of the First Presbyterian Church (1855), standing on the corner of Gratiot Avenue and Farmer Street, had provided the focal point of this residential enclave (left in Fig. 3). In 1890, in view of the territorial expansion of commerce through the area, the congregation decided that the continued "prosperity of the church" necessitated its relocation one mile north at Woodward Avenue and Edmund Place.[23] Some of these perceptions about the surrounding neighborhood soon came to influence the Library Commission.

The "mammoth," eight-story J. L. Hudson department store (Fig. 7), one of the largest commercial structures in Detroit, took over the site of the church and several adjacent houses. Mortimer L. Smith designed the Hudson Building. The department store's handsome Romanesque arcaded façade, built of red brick and brownstone, stretched for 211 ft. along Farmer Street opposite the library. Shoppers passed by dazzling plate glass windows and entered the building through massive 25-foot arches. There was no mistaking the building's monumentality. The *Evening News* declared, "It is grand and imposing, and unlike most large business structures, the artistic beauty is more impressive than the tremendous size."[24]

Drawing upon the precedents of civic and religious architecture which had long provided Detroit's visitors with observation platforms from rooftop spires and cupolas, the Hudson

21. S. Farmer, *Guide and Souvenir of Detroit,* Detroit, 1891, 10.
22. Detroit Museum of Art, Trustees Minutes, 12 and 20 November 1886, D.I.A.
23. *Free Press,* 18 May 1891.
24. *Evening News* (Detroit), 16 September 1891.

Building provided access to the "splendid bird's eye view of the city" available from its 135-foot high roof. One journalist wryly noted that the view from the platform made the stores of Hudson's competitors "seem but pigmies."[25] Little better could be said of the contrast with the adjacent library that had formerly dominated the area. The Hudson Building, for all its impressive beauty, had taken the place of the church and now dominated the library.

The department store represented only the most notable business intrusion in this civic and residential enclave. By 1897 the blocks facing Centre Park had been occupied by the boiler plant for Newcomb and Endicott's Woodward Avenue department store, the six-story Chiera's Oriental Hotel, "with The Finest Turkish and Russian Baths in the World," the six-story Hammond Block, home of the Detroit Business University, the four-story Library Park Hotel, and other three- and four-story commercial buildings. Several of the single-family houses surrounding the library had been converted into boarding houses. Shortly after 1900 the Library Commission began to complain about having the library "hemmed in on all sides by buildings across narrow streets."[26] The librarian protested with some irony (given Detroit's automobile industry) that the "never ceasing roar of traffic, the shrieking horns of motor vehicles" intruded upon the quiet of the library.[27] High buildings cut off needed light, spread soot, and posed the threat of fire.[28] In the realm of symbolism and cultural ideals, the unanticipated forms of commercial development now clearly compromised Woodward's baroque vision of civic dignity and grandeur.

The difficulties encountered by the library also beset the museum. The Jefferson Avenue site donated to the museum abutted a growing industrial district along the Detroit River and the adjacent railroad tracks and freight terminals. Boiler shops, engine works, and small wood-frame, working-class cottages filled the area behind the museum. Jefferson Avenue itself began changing, too. In the late 1880s the large mansion and carriage house which stood across the street from the museum was razed to make way for Jefferson Avenue Terrace, one of Detroit's early apartment houses and the first built on Jefferson Avenue. After 1910 new industrial loft buildings housing ice, paper, machine gear, and laundry companies and a row of automobile showrooms occupied the blocks adjacent to the museum. The museum director lamented that the neighborhood was "slowly losing its preeminence as a residential section and yielding to the steady encroachment of automobile and other business."[29]

The skyscraper and civic group: the post office, city hall, courthouse

The expansion and monumentality of modern commerce intruded upon many important Detroit civic buildings besides the library and the museum. The late 19th-century debates concerning a new post office, courthouse, and city hall introduced architectural ideas for public buildings that influenced the design for the Center of Arts and Letters. A brief review of these local building projects suggests that they, more than the distant World's Fair model, raised public concern over the commercial eclipse of civic buildings and spaces and focused the ascendant interest in the City Beautiful aesthetic.

The plans for a new Detroit post office of the 1880s generally conformed to the tradition of major civic buildings constructed between Woodward's 1805 plan and the 1870s. Civic boosters declared, "We ought to have [an] entire block if we are to have a building commensurate with the city's size and importance."[30] Since the predominant architectural vision was of a free-standing building, unrelated to other public structures or spaces, real estate owners offered the post office commission numerous blocks of land scattered about the downtown area. Some proposed replacing Capitol High School with a new post office. Referring to the Woodward plan, they noted that "it was good enough for the Capitol of the whole territory of Michigan and it is certainly good enough for a city post office."[31]

Despite the expression of such traditional ideas about the setting of the post office, debates over the site introduced strikingly modern notions of the tension between civic and commercial forms. Building owners in the vicinity of the old post office proposed that the facility be expanded vertically on its old site at Griswold and Larned streets, in an eight- or ten-story structure supported by a metal skeleton. In attacking this proposal J. W. Finney, a Detroit lawyer, warned against the confusion of civic and commercial architecture: "[I]f you do that you will . . . get a building not at all in proportion and entirely to the discredit of our good taste and the liberality of the government. . . . The government never has built as a private individual and it never will. It builds in a solid, stately, and massive fashion."[32] This insistence on distinguishing civic structures and

25. Ibid.

26. Detroit Public Library, Memorandum, c. 1905. This document and all library correspondence and records are, unless otherwise noted, located in the Directors Files of the Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library (hereafter D.P.L.)

27. Adam Strohm, "Americanization and the New Public Library," c. 1916, D.P.L.

28. Library Commission to Thomas W. Penniman, 5 September 1912; Henry M. Utley to Sidney T. Miller, 5 January 1903, D.P.L.

29. *Free Press,* 10 December 1909, 7 January 1906; *Journal* (Detroit), 13 and 14 April 1908, 28 December 1909; H. Keep and M. Burton, *Guide to Detroit,* Detroit, 1916, 95. Keep and Burton observed: "There are many boarding houses, most of them in what, during the last generation were the homes of the most influential people of the city."

30. *Free Press,* 1 October 1886.

31. *Free Press,* 2, 14 May 1885.

32. *Free Press,* 14 May 1885.

Fig. 8. George D. Mason and Zachariah Rice, Central Market Building, Detroit, 1879–1880 (demolished 1889), rear façade on Cadillac Square looking toward city hall (Avery Library, Columbia University).

Fig. 9. Cadillac Square, Detroit, c. 1899, view from Campus Martius and city hall toward Wayne County Courthouse (1896–1902) (Avery Library, Columbia University).

high-rise commercial forms grew ever more emphatic in the following decades. In the case of the post office, maintaining that distinction triumphed. Architect James H. Windrim patterned the new post office, completed in 1897, upon Henry Hobson Richardson's "solid, stately, and massive" Allegheny County Courthouse (1884–1887). The post office stood alone on its own block, separated from the city hall and the Campus Martius by an ordinary block of downtown businesses.

The debate over plans for a new courthouse during the early 1890s raised for the first time in Detroit the formal architectural possibilities of designing civic buildings in proximity to one another. The county courthouse and offices had long been located in the city hall. In the early 1890s the Wayne County Board of Supervisors sought to build a separate courthouse. Following the older isolated civic building tradition, Detroit officials, led by reform Mayor Hazen Pingree, proposed the alternative of a new monumental, combined city-county building to be built on the Campus Martius site of the existing city hall. Mayor Pingree declared that "the city hall site [is] one of the finest in the country. Visiting committees from other cities ha[ve] testified to this point."[33]

Pingree's proposal prompted Morgan E. Dowling, a Detroit lawyer, to suggest an alternative combined building located on the block just west of the existing city hall; the proposal explored the monumental possibilities of grouping civic buildings that characterized later City Beautiful plans. The new structure "would be on a line with, and adjoining the splendid new post office, with enough grounds around it to set off its fine architectural proportions." This plan would end the isolation of the post office from Detroit's other public buildings, it would introduce a new element of clarity to the civic landscape, and it would "restore the Campus Martius to its original integrity—a wide expanse of ground like the great space in Paris, where 50,000 troops can parade, or ten times that number of citizens assemble on patriotic and civic occasions."[34]

Dowling's plan as well as the county board's plan for a separate courthouse required the purchase of a block of downtown real estate. Mayor Pingree charged that plans that ignored the publicly owned city hall site were backed by "interested real estate speculators."[35] In 1895, in what the editors of the *Free Press* declared a "shameful abuse of delegated authority," the county purchased the business block bounded by Fort, Congress, Brush, and Randolph streets for the new courthouse. Despite their criticism of a separate courthouse, the editors did praise the site chosen at the eastern end of the newly designed Cadillac Square. By demolishing the Central Market Building and the adjacent produce market (Fig. 8) Detroit officials had, in the 1890s, opened a landscaped square extending southeast from the city hall on the Campus Martius to the site of the courthouse (Fig. 9): "the view between the two will never be unpleasantly interrupted, both are centrally located and each adds to the attractive scene of which it is a part."[36] The county commissioned John Scott to design a massive four-story classical, Renaissance style building fronted with a Corinthian portico and topped with a cupola (Fig. 10). The plaza between the city hall and the new courthouse lacked the formal clarity of later American civic centers, and it emerged amid charges of boodle and graft rather than amid celebrations of aesthetic ideals; nevertheless,

33. *Free Press,* 4 April 1895, 30 January 1894.
34. *Evening News,* 2 June 1895.
35. *Free Press,* 9 January 1895.
36. *Free Press,* 4 September 1895.

Fig. 10. John Scott, Wayne County Courthouse, Detroit, 1896–1902, view of c. 1920 from vicinity of Campus Martius looking across Cadillac Square toward courthouse (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress). Turrets of the Museum of Art on Jefferson Avenue are just visible between the flag poles to the right of center. The surrounding industrial and warehouse facilities are visible at the back of the museum.

it tentatively explored the spatial possibilities of the emerging City Beautiful movement.

Plans for replacing the city hall, raised in the midst of the courthouse debate, aimed at a more emphatic assertion of civic form in and around the Campus Martius. Dissatisfaction with the 1871 city hall and plans to replace it with a grander structure or to link it with a new courthouse stemmed in part from the eclipse of the city hall by adjacent privately developed monumental buildings. In 1890 the Hammond Building, designed by Harry W. J. Edbrooke, opened across the street from the city hall. Supported by a metal frame, the ten-story office building disrupted the dominance of the city hall over the commercial structures fronting on the Campus Martius. The cupola of the city hall stood higher than the roof of the Hammond Building; however, the mass of the city hall was dwarfed by the new building. As if to make the commercial ascendancy unmistakable, the owners of the Hammond Building hired a tightrope walker to cross from the roof of the Hammond Building to the top of the city hall for an opening day publicity stunt.[37] The *Free Press* declared that the Hammond Building "must, in its imposing magnitude, always remain a landmark in Detroit."[38]

In fact the Hammond Building's prominence lasted only a few years. In 1895 Mabley and Company constructed a 14-story building on a lot facing the Campus Martius, adjacent to the city hall. Designed by Daniel H. Burnham the combined department store and office building was known as the Majestic Building (Fig. 11). One newspaper article announcing the building, which would "overlook anything in Detroit and give metropolitan air to the most prominent corner in the city,"[39] furnished a bar graph comparing the height of the Majestic, at 211 feet, with the lower city hall and other major Detroit landmarks.[40] From the Majestic's observation deck the visitor looked over the city and down upon the city hall. This fact shaped future discussions of public buildings in Detroit.

Elite visions and the civic center ideal

The growing competition between civic and commercial monumentality in late 19th-century Detroit stemmed, in many

37. Ferry, *Buildings of Detroit,* 135.

38. *Free Press,* 3 November 1889.
39. *Free Press,* 21 March 1895.
40. *Evening News,* 1 June 1895.

Fig. 11. Campus Martius, Detroit, c. 1897 (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress). At center: James Anderson, City Hall (1868–1871), demolished; at the left: Harry W. J. Edbrooke, Hammond Building, 1890, demolished; at the right: Daniel H. Burnham, Majestic Building, 1895, demolished; in the distant left: James H. Windrim, United States Post Office (1890–1894) with tower.

cases, from the diverse building projects supported by the same group of wealthy people. In the 1890s, for example, William H. Brearley led the Board of Trade campaign to construct the 12-story Chamber of Commerce Building. He pursued this project with the same energy and enthusiasm he had earlier devoted to building the museum. The Chamber of Commerce Building was constructed on a site adjacent to the Capitol High School, thus overshadowing one of the major civic structures outlined in the Woodward plan. Christopher R. Mabley, the founder of Mabley and Company, builder of the Majestic Building, had been a museum incorporator. George A. Hammond, a wealthy meat packer, who outlined the initial plans for the Hammond Building before his 1886 death, had also contributed to the founding of the museum. J. L. Hudson, whose department store rose above the library, served as a museum trustee.

These commercial projects and their intrusion on civic settings cast some doubt on the depth of the commitment to civic and cultural life espoused publicly by Detroit's commercial elite. However, the architectural and urban issues paralleled the elite idealization of the relationship between commerce and culture—without a fully developed commercial prosperity there would be little room for civic virtue or cultural attainment. The elite resolved the apparent tensions between their commercial pursuits and their cultural commitments by campaigning for new and grander courthouses, museums, libraries, and city halls. Such proposals would redress the problems of civic expression while leaving the commercial building interests relatively unfettered.

Beyond these individual public building projects Detroit's commercial elite supported and commissioned broader City Beautiful plans aimed at resolving the conflict between commercial and civic monumentality. These plans provided the immediate rationale for the arts center improvements. In 1905 the Detroit Board of Commerce invited Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Charles Mulford Robinson to prepare reports on major public improvements in Detroit. Upon the advice of Charles Moore, who assisted Olmsted, McKim, and Burnham in their work on the McMillan Commission plan for Washington, D.C.,[41] the Board of Commerce asked Olmsted and Robinson to consider plans for a quay and promenade along the Detroit River, the monumental improvement of the lower end of Belle Isle Park and of Cadillac Square, and the development of the boulevard system.[42] Civic grandeur, dignity, unity, and harmony formed the keystone of these plans.

Olmsted's proposals for the riverfront subtly distinguished commercial sites from those for public leisure. He proposed to isolate ground-level, dockside freight operations from the pleasure drives, promenades, and boat passenger terminals constructed above waterfront docks and warehouses. Olmsted also looked to the waterfront as an ideal place for reasserting the hierarchical dominance of public monuments among Detroit's buildings. Pointing to the place where Woodward Avenue met the river, Olmsted declared, "Detroit will here erect a great and monumental structure dominating all the aggregated buildings of the city and typifying to the traveler from afar the City's own dominion. Rising from the base which will be formed by an orderly dignified treatment of the River Front and spanning

41. See Peterson, "The Nation's First Comprehensive City Plan," 134–150.

42. Charles Moore to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., 9 February 1905, Olmsted Associates Papers, Box B-64, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 12. Armond H. Griffith, plan for expansion of Museum of Art, Detroit, 1905 (*Detroit Free Press,* 31 December 1905).

the axis of Woodward Avenue, such a structure will demand a recognition of unity throughout the heart of the city."[43]

With the Campus Martius and Cadillac Square, Olmsted and Robinson showed the same interest in creating a unified, harmonious setting for public monuments. Charles Moore, Olmsted's unofficial collaborator, advised, "When you come to the center of the City, . . . you should treat the center as a single composition, . . . along the various lines laid down by Judge Woodward in 1805."[44] Olmsted applauded the siting of the county courthouse in relation to the city hall but he deplored the "utter shapelessness" of the public spaces between them. He proposed the construction of many new public and quasi-public buildings around the Campus Martius: "a very imposing group, *provided that they BE grouped* . . . [and brought] into agreeable architectural relationship."[45]

Robinson's report called for demolition of the line of buildings on the north side of Cadillac Square to open further the area between the county building and the city hall. He also recommended opening a plaza, framed with columns, on the block between the city hall and the post office: "[T]hrough the bringing of these buildings into a single comprehensive scheme, Detroit would take its place among the beautiful cities of the world."[46]

In his influential book *Modern Civic Art* (1903), a classic statement of City Beautiful ideals, Robinson had declared that since public buildings "officially stand for the town," they were entitled to the best sites regardless of the passing claims of private commercial interests. In Detroit and other cities, civic monumentality would be compromised if a city's public buildings "were scattered about the town and lost in a wilderness of commercial structures."[47] Civic centers established for the grouping of public buildings around grand public spaces would answer the challenge of commercial interests that so often "put in jeopardy the beauty and dignity of public structures through the possibility of mingling inharmonious architecture, of making a squalid and unworthy outlook, or of destroying scale by the erection of a 'skyscraper,' or any colossal building, that would dwarf the public structures."[48] Despite the failure of many of Olmsted's and Robinson's more ambitious City Beautiful plans, their proposals prepared the ground for the Center of Arts and Letters.

Detroit's Center of Arts and Letters

In 1905, prior to deciding to abandon the Jefferson Avenue museum, officials had proposed a $500,000 improvement which reflected the influence of recent planning discussions. Hoping to buttress the museum's position amid the business expansion along Jefferson Avenue, Director Armond H. Griffith proposed that the museum acquire and build upon its entire Jefferson Avenue block. Griffith's plan preserved the symmetry and dignity of the original 1886 building by constructing a duplicate of the museum on the other Jefferson Avenue corner of the block. A Roman baroque arcade with colossal Corinthian columns and surmounted by monumental groups of bronze statuary would link the original museum with its addition (Fig. 12). For the back of the block Griffith proposed a new municipal music hall or convention center. The grand courtyard at the center of

43. F. Olmsted, Jr., *Improvement of the City of Detroit, Reports Made by Professor Frederick Law Olmsted, Junior, and Mr. Charles Mulford Robinson to the Detroit Board of Commerce,* Detroit, 1905, 43. The plan recalled aspects of Stanford White's unexecuted 1899 Detroit Memorial Column project for the western tip of Belle Isle; see L. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects,* New York, 1983, 248–249; *American Architect and Building News,* LXVIII, 16 June 1900, 88.

44. Charles Moore to Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., 9 March 1905, Olmsted Associates Papers, Box B-64.

45. Olmsted, *Improvement of the City of Detroit,* 38–39.

46. Ibid., 51–52.

47. C. Robinson, *Modern Civic Art or the City Made Beautiful,* New York, 1903, 82.

48. Ibid., 87, 132.

the block would have a fountain and sculpture garden. This plan for a group of civic buildings and monuments was clearly capable of enhancing the museum's civic presence and expression in the face of a changing neighborhood;[49] however, it did not answer the trustees' concerns over the menace of soot, smoke, and noise from the adjacent industrial area.

The Library Commission's discussions around 1900 concerning a new library and site continued to explore, as they had in the 1870s, the monumental possibilities of the original Woodward plan. Several observers favored building a new library upon or facing the Grand Circus park. A Circus location was "best calculated to 'show-off' a building whose architectural splendors should be one of the chief beauties of this city."[50] Proposing to surpass the heights recently established by commercial structures, one contributor to the Library Commission's deliberations suggested a Grand Circus building topped by "a white dome that shall rise above every other object in the whole city."[51]

The Library Commission initiated its search for a new site around 1900, several years before the museum trustees discussed relocation. Yet delays in library plans meant that the museum trustees' decision regarding a new site influenced the location of the new library. Part of the new delay involved resistance among Detroit residents to the acceptance of $750,000 from Andrew Carnegie for building the library. People questioned the propriety of funding civic monuments with the questionable commercial exploits of an individual—of constructing "a mausoleum for the steel king."[52] As the magnitude of the plan for the library expanded, however, the prominence of Carnegie's contribution diminished. After eight years of debate, the Common Council accepted the Carnegie money.

William C. Weber, a museum trustee and a wealthy timber and real estate developer, helped select a new site for the museum and proposed a Center of Arts and Letters. Weber guided the museum trustees in their 1910 decision to buy for $216,400 the 8½ acre Palmer-Merrill-Ferry tract on Woodward Avenue, two miles north of the downtown area. The lot stood in the midst of what in 1910 was Detroit's undisputed elite residential neighborhood. Compared with the unsettling changes taking place in the Jefferson Avenue neighborhood, the apparent stability of Woodward Avenue proved attractive. One newspaper reported, "It is about the safest part of the city . . . for a public enterprise of this magnitude. In these days of magical industrial growth, it is not always safe to prophesy where a factory may or may not appear. But that particular portion of Woodward Avenue will undoubtedly remain a section of beautiful homes."[53]

Museum trustees enlisted the support of the mayor and of the City Planning and Improvement Commission in successfully lobbying the Library Commission to build opposite the museum's lot. The Library Commission's decision to abandon an option on the Detroit Athletic Club's Woodward Avenue property raised the immediate outlay for a site from $185,000 to $413,785. Later additions to the site that further enhanced the formality and symmetry of the relation between the museum and library brought the total cost of the library land to $1,194,350.[54] Formal architectural grouping, it is clear, fostered monumental architecture as well as monumental costs.

The museum's tentative plans for the Woodward Avenue site anticipated the coordination of architecture, design, and landscape planning which had thus far eluded the planners of Detroit's downtown public buildings and spaces. As debates over the museum's design revealed, the grouping of buildings in a formal landscape setting was viewed as a counter to commercial form. In 1912, after visiting museums in the eastern United States, the museum president, Detroit architect John M. Donaldson, proposed that a single art building be constructed in a classical style across from the library. A central spine would house a museum gallery and a 3200-seat auditorium for lectures and musical performances. Two U-shaped side wings would enclose courtyards and house allied cultural institutions.[55] Criticizing Donaldson's plan, Weber argued in favor of separate buildings for an art school, a music school, a library, a museum, and a music hall. Weber's plan would form "a grand whole," preserve hundreds of mature trees on the site, and ensure a design precisely adapted to each institution's requirements. Weber asserted that Donaldson's combined building would stand too close to the street "without proper settings of trees and shrubbery" and would "present the appearance of a warehouse." He concluded, "We can never obtain distinction by . . . falling in with the old prevailing notion of bigness, and not necessarily of use, nor beauty, as prime motives."[56]

In countering "mere bigness" with an architecture of classical decorum and quiet response, Weber was promoting more than aesthetic taste. His elite vision of high culture and social uplift sought its architectural expression in classical styles and connection with a European architectural tradition.[57] The separate, classical style buildings, harmoniously grouped in a landscaped setting, would contrast with those buildings housing modern commercial entertainment, pressed to the lot line and designed in an architecture of contemporary fantasy. Weber hoped that the center would provide "higher pleasures," "higher ideals"—

49. *Free Press,* 17 August 1908.
50. John Hennison to Library Commission, 20 December 1902, D.P.L.
51. E. C. Le Puy to Library Commission, 27 March 1910, D.P.L.
52. Quoted in Woodford, *Parnassus on Main Street,* 189.
53. *Journal,* 2 July 1910.
54. Library Commission memorandum, n.d., D.P.L.; Woodford, *Parnassus,* 217.
55. *Journal,* 10 December 1912.
56. W. Weber, *Our New Liberal or Fine Arts Center, A Few Thoughts As to Buildings,* Detroit, 1912, 20, 23, 29–30.
57. Wilson, "The Great Civilization," 26–37.

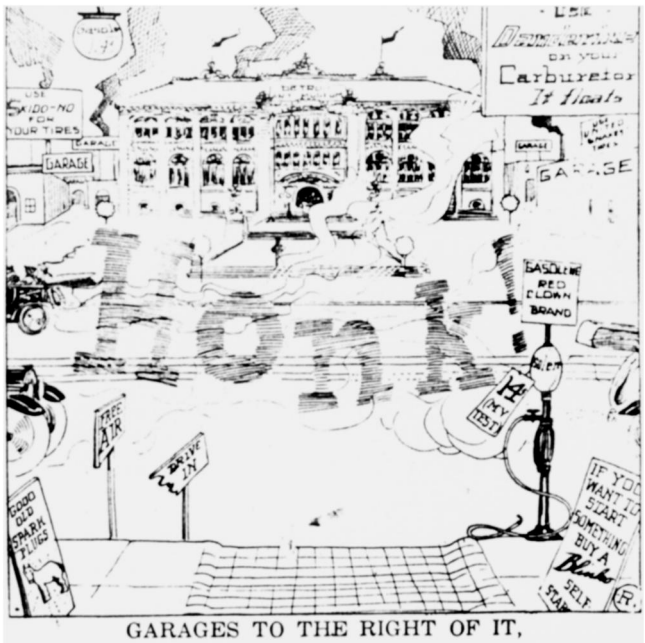

Fig. 13. Cartoon of art center, Detroit, 1914, vision of art center without proper control of surrounding land (*Little Stick,* 19 December 1914, Detroit Institute of Arts).

grand opera, art, and literature—to Detroit residents who could not afford to travel to Europe or New York. "It is not merely my love of music and art," he said, "which causes me my efforts here, but my desire to educate the American masses to something better than having picture shows, nickelodeon, variety etc."[58]

Beyond Weber's ideal of cultural stewardship lay the vision that orderly public architecture would promote harmonious social relations.[59] In a growing industrial city pervaded by class conflict, City Beautiful proponents hoped to temper strife and realize a degree of social cohesion by rallying various classes and ethnic groups around common civic and cultural institutions. In 1909 the *Free Press* cheerfully headlined an article on the museum, "Wonders in Wonderland: Varied Types of Humanity Can Be Encountered at Detroit Museum Where All Nationalities Meet on Commonground."[60] The librarian's dedication speech was titled, "The Detroit Public Library—A Municipal Temple of All Faiths."[61] When Librarian Adam Strohm reflected on the social possibilities of a memorial auditorium built as part of the arts center, he declared, "[I]t should prove a factor for Americanization of, and will serve to unify more than all other influences, the varied elements that go to make up our population."[62] In the classical quiet of City Beautiful forms, the wealthy stewards of formal culture sought an architectural inspiration for, and an expression of, social order.[63] Just as City Beautiful plans did not control or challenge the sanctity of private property development, formal culture would temper but not disrupt established commercial relations.

During the trustees' debate public sentiment supported Weber and favored a "campus of various smaller and more beautiful structures set about."[64] In April 1913 Charles Moore, in his capacity as president of the Detroit City Planning and Improvement Commission, asked Edward H. Bennett, Burnham's former partner, and Frank Miles Day, a leading Philadelphia architect, to develop a "broad scheme" for the arts center.[65] Given the criticism of Donaldson's plans, Bennett and Day, somewhat predictably, set the library and museum on axis to either side of Woodward Avenue, and surrounded them with nine secondary structures housing schools of art and music as well as historical, horticultural, orchestral, and various learned societies (see Fig. 1).[66]

The Bennett and Day plan did not rely upon the hope that Woodward Avenue would remain a neighborhood of elite residences and institutions. It recommended enlarging the size of the arts center to 29 acres in order to preempt the construction of stores and automotive garages which would present "a most unworthy contrast" (Fig. 13).[67] The center's nine peripheral buildings framed the library and museum and created an enclave of classical structures within the less predictable cityscape. Bennett and Day also proposed height restrictions for adjacent buildings, thus protecting the center from being overshadowed by

58. William C. Weber to Walter Damrosch, 8 May 1912.

59. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order,* 252–276; B. Rubin, "Aesthetic Ideology and Urban Design," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* LXIX, 1979, 339–361; Foglesong, *Planning,* 124–166.

60. *Free Press,* 31 January 1909.

61. A. Strohm, "The Detroit Public Library—A Municipal Temple of All Faiths," *Architecture,* XLIV, 1922, 203–205.

62. *News* (Detroit), 13 January 1919; A. Strohm, "Americanization and the New Main Library," October 1916, D.P.L.

63. See Edward H. Bennett, "General Statement," 6 April 1920. This letter and all manuscript materials related to Bennett are located in the Edward H. Bennett Collection, Burnham and Ryerson Library, Art Institute of Chicago.

64. *News,* 16 February 1913; see also *Free Press,* 16, 26, and 29 January, 3 and 4 February 1913; *News,* 27 and 30 January, 2 and 3 February, 25 March 1913; *Journal,* 1 January 1913.

65. T. Glenn Phillips to Edward H. Bennett, 17 November 1911; Ben E. Holden to Edward H. Bennett, 3 February 1912. See also *Free Press,* 15 April 1913; *News,* 15 April 1913; Detroit City Plan and Improvement Commission, *A Center of Arts and Letters,* Detroit, 1913 (a draft of this report appeared in the *Annual Report of the Detroit Museum of Art,* 1913, 11–17).

66. Hinton E. Spalding to Detroit Common Council, 11 November 1912; Adam Strohm to Cass Gilbert, 1 May 1914; Cass Gilbert to Adam Strohm, 5 May and 7 August 1941; William Pitkin to Adam Strohm, 23 February 1920, all D.P.L.

67. For early statement of point see Hinton E. Spalding to Detroit Common Council, 11 November 1912, D.P.L.; *News,* 12 and 30 November 1912.

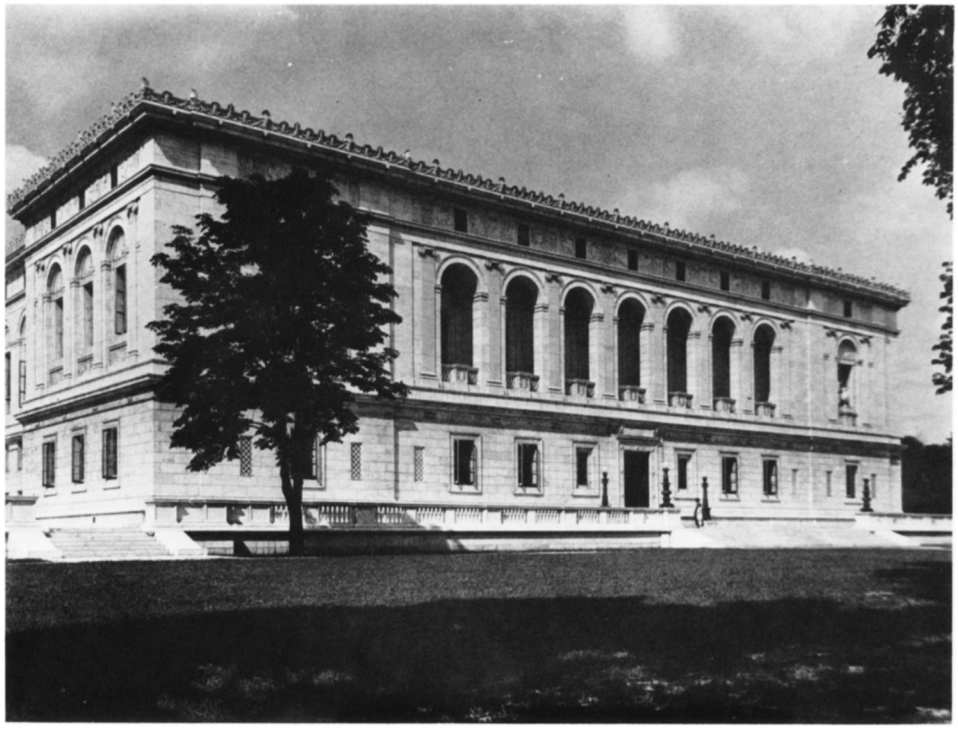

Fig. 14. Cass Gilbert, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, 1913–1921, exterior view from Woodward Avenue (Avery Library, Columbia University).

"buildings of a height unrelated to the modest heights of the monumental structures."[68] In this way the arts center plan addressed, or redressed, the unsettling history of the museum, the library, and the city hall on the Campus Martius.

In his more theoretical writing Bennett identified the tensions between commercial and civic monumentality as a central element in City Beautiful plans: "Formerly public buildings may be said fairly to have represented the height of achievement of constructive science, as well as artistic expression. In this they were only rivalled by the church." In Bennett's view steel skeleton, high-rise building technology altered this hierarchy and order. The architects' "natural clinging to old or recognized monumental types" for public designs created a "striking anomaly of one and two story public buildings contrasted with surrounding great commercial structures. . . . The public building, like the church, has been submerged by the flood of business blocks."[69] Bennett asserted that public buildings "which cannot vie in vertical mass with commercial buildings . . . [must] find distinction by strength of design in contrast to their surroundings."[70] Bennett concluded that the grouping of harmoniously designed public structures, built according to a coordinated plan, provided the desired order and contrast.

The ambitious arts center plans converted the museum from a private corporation into a public institution. In 1919, in order to further the plans for a monumental new building as well as for an extensive arts center, the museum trustees turned the museum property and its collections over to a municipal arts commission. The museum, renamed the Detroit Institute of Arts, would thus take its place in the arts center with a clearly defined civic identity—one worthy of the idealization of public life which surrounded the central institutions of the City Beautiful.[71]

In the broadly conceived arts center plan the central two buildings, the library and museum, were of utmost importance. Although the buildings were designed by separate architects,

68. Detroit City Plan and Improvement Commission, *Center of Arts,* 11.

69. Edward H. Bennett, "Public and Quasi-Public Buildings," manuscript in Bennett Collection, published with some revision in J. Nolen, *City Planning: A Series of Papers Presenting the Essential Elements of a City Plan,* New York, 1916, 103–116.

70. Bennett, "Public Buildings and Quasi-Public Buildings"; E. Flagg, "Public Buildings," in *Proceedings of the Third National Conference on City Planning,* Boston, 1911, 45–52. There were of course a few notable civic skyscrapers such as McKim, Mead, & White's New York Municipal Building (1909) and Palmer & Hornbostel's Oakland City Hall (1911). Flagg urged public building architects to adopt skyscraper forms.

71. William C. Weber to Dexter M. Ferry, 16 September 1914; William C. Weber to Clyde Burroughs, 12 July 1914, D.I.A.; *Free Press,* 21 September 1914. From the 1890s the museum had received small annual appropriations from the city. In 1915 the Michigan Supreme Court had ruled the city's support for a private museum unconstitutional.

Fig. 15. Paul P. Cret, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, 1919–1927, view from the terrace of the Detroit Public Library (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress).

the implied classicism of the plan ensured a degree of harmony. In 1913, after a national architectural competition, the Library Commission selected Cass Gilbert to design the new building. The Italian Renaissance style of Gilbert's white marble library conformed to the arts center plan (Fig. 14). A seven-bay loggia with a colonnade of Ionic pilasters gracefully resolved the Woodward Avenue façade into a quiet, symmetrical composition. String courses, a frieze, and a projecting cornice visually united the exterior architectural elements repeated across the individual floors while the studied alignment of window openings created lines of vertical integration. Gilbert's library plan suggested locations for adjacent arts buildings and projected an embellished, formal entourage and landscape of terraces, balustrades, candelabras, statues, and fountains. Although many elements of the landscape plan were eliminated as too costly, the library's classical lines implied formal connection with future buildings.[72]

Gilbert's library design embodied a Renaissance conception of artistic collaboration. The library's community of artists provided something of a model for ideals of civic unity and coalescence around the standard of elite culture. Gilbert's design incorporated an extensive decorative program, executed in close collaboration with painters, sculptors, and mosaic and stain glass window designers. Muralists Edwin Blashfield and Gari Melchers and mosaic and glass designer F. J. Wiley worked closely with Gilbert in presenting a didactic, allegorical decorative program promoting cultural uplift and improvement.[73]

This appeal to ideals of civic monumentality, to interests beyond simple public library service preserved the richness of Gilbert's plans in the face of a doubling of its projected costs after 1910. The project was halted by lack of funds on several occasions as the Library Commission was forced to appeal to Detroit voters for approval of additional construction bonds. Gilbert placed discussions of the bond issues in their broader civic context; the library should not be housed in an ordinary structure because it would not "respond to the just civic pride of the City. It is one of the structures which will be noted by citizens, and strangers alike as the evidence of the civic spirit, the progressive character and the intelligence of the community."[74]

The civic challenge worked. With additional bonds the library was completed in 1921 substantially according to plan. In 1922 Gilbert sent his thanks to the Library Commission: "A good building is not possible without a good client." Gilbert then grandly linked himself and the library with an artistic tradition which transcended commercial Detroit. "It was doubt-

72. For formal description and discussion of building see P. Federman, "The Detroit Public Library," *Classical America,* IV, 1977, 85–111.

73. W. Paris, "Italian Renaissance in Detroit," *American Architect and Building News,* CXXIII, 3 January 1923, 15–21; W. Paris, "The Mosaics in the Frontal Colonnade of the Detroit Public Library," *Architectural Record,* XLIX, April 1923, 301–309; M. Holden, "The Story of Mind's Progress Told in Mural," *Arts and Decoration,* XIX, October 1923, 18–19.

74. Cass Gilbert to Adam Strohm, 28 March 1917; see also Cass Gilbert to Adam Strohm, 28 April 1915, D.P.L.

Fig. 16. Campus Martius, Detroit, c. 1935, view of city hall (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress). The four tallest buildings are from right to left: Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, Guardian Building, 1929; Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, Buhl Building, 1925; Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, Penobscot Building, 1928; Daniel H. Burnman & Company, Dime Building, 1910.

less due to this spirit of cooperation in ancient days that the arts of architecture, painting, sculpture, music, poetry, literature and drama reached such perfection that 2000 years later we are still finding our best exemplars in the work of that time."[75] As in the case of the earlier library and museum projects, Gilbert's building suggested commitments beyond Mammon but built firmly upon it.

Complimenting the library's "combination of elegance and strength," Edwin H. Blashfield wrote to Gilbert, "I am full of bitter disappointment that you are not to do the whole great square."[76] In October 1919, upon the recommendation of Detroit architect Albert Kahn, Paul Cret, a Philadelphia architect and jury member for the library competition, was given the commission for designing the Detroit Institute of Arts.[77] Although simpler and quite distinct from Gilbert's library, Cret's museum shared the central arcaded loggia and the Renaissance classical elements of the library (Fig. 15). Cret fully appreciated the formal context of the museum project. He hoped to create with the library "a dignified and impressive ensemble."[78] The extreme simplicity of the window fenestration, three great openings on either side of the entrance loggia, would in Cret's opinion create an "easy and restful" impression.[79]

Cret's innovative interior plan extended, architecturally, the more broadly public character of the Detroit Museum. Cret's design aimed at ending the problem of "museum fatigue." The absence of a monumental stairway signified the commitment. Cret objected to the modern scientific approach to museum planning, which sought to discover the proper proportions and lighting for a gallery and then simply multiplied the unit in tiresome succession.[80] The Italian Renaissance palaces serving

75. Cass Gilbert to Adam Strohm, 4 March 1922, D.P.L.
76. Edwin H. Blashfield to Cass Gilbert, 20 October 1922, D.P.L.
77. Clyde H. Burroughs to Paul P. Cret, 21 October 1919, D.I.A.
78. Paul P. Cret, "Report on Plans for the New Museum of the Detroit Institute of Arts," 27 December 1920, D.I.A.
79. William R. Valentiner to Ralph H. Booth, 21 November 1921, D.I.A.
80. Paul P. Cret, "Detroit Institute of Arts," *Art and Archaeology,* XVII, March 1924, 98; Benjamin Ives Gilman, "Museum Fatigue," *Scientific Monthly,* II, January 1916, 62–74.

as public museums inspired the Detroit design. Here a limited selection of paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts would be exhibited in rooms whose architectural design complemented the material on display. The museum would be "like a private collection in a large private house."[81]

The library and institute represented the nucleus of the ambitious arts center plan. Yet the slow and uncertain development of the early center led the builders of Orchestra Hall to abandon the center site and build independently nine blocks south on Woodward Avenue. Various plans for a memorial hall auditorium for the arts center failed during the 1920s. Then the economic depression of the 1930s curtailed the building of other cultural institutions in Detroit. The construction of the Rachman Educational Memorial (1941), the Historical Society (1951), the International Institute (1951), and the Society of Art (1958) preserved the notion of a cluster of arts institutions; however, these later buildings failed to observe the earlier plans for the harmonious integration of the center's secondary buildings.

The search for an architectural distinction between commerce and culture which had characterized Woodward's 1805 plan and the initial 19th-century library and museum projects assumed a new monumental expression in the arts center plan. On the eve of the Institute of Art's ground breaking ceremony the *News* reported that the library and museum "for many generations to come will form an oasis of beauty in the desert of commercialism." The "nobility and sublimity" of the architecture, the suggestion of "ancient and eternal things" would "rest the soul . . . [of those] absorbed in the inartistic pursuit of making ends meet."[82] Wealthy Detroit residents could continue to take moral comfort from these institutions which signified that their commercial pursuits provided the basis for some higher and more noble end.

The City Beautiful mitigated the tensions between civic ideals and commercial pursuits in turn-of-the-century American cities. Nevertheless, the movement did not resolve those tensions either culturally or architecturally. Detroit's Center of Arts and Letters impressively reflects the City Beautiful's aesthetic and urban goals. Yet, as built, it represented only a fragment of a grander vision. City government's limited powers in the early 20th century to sell bonds, condemn land, and finance grand civic centers severely compromised the success of the City Beautiful. In grouping the library and museum in the center, outside of downtown, the architects of the civic landscape conceded to commerce not only the skyline but also the central position in the city. Commercial interests introduced novel and increasingly monumental forms for skyscrapers, factories, and warehouses to modern cities (Fig. 16), and the City Beautiful foundered on the shoals of high downtown land costs, relatively low building budgets, and an unwillingness to restrict private land and architectural development in the interests of municipal beauty, order, and civic expression. Conservative efforts to restore the dominance of the civic landscape could only partially stem the tide of commercial monumentality in the American city. The movement's failure reflected the ambiguity of its vision, a contradictory ideal that embodied both a critique of and a rationale for commerce.

81. William R. Valentiner to Paul P. Cret, 21 November 1921, D.I.A.

82. *News*, 24 January 1921.