

CIVIC LIFE IN THE MAKING

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As with most matters concerning government, architecture told most.
—Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place*

For Senator Moynihan, public architecture, a term he used to reference landscape, building, planning, and infrastructural works, served as the critical underpinning of economic and cultural productivity. At its best it possessed an intimacy that brought people together in an experience of confidence and trust. It had the power to reveal and represent, to express and inculcate civic values.

Moynihan, who grew up in the New York City of Central Park, City College, the New York Public Library, and the old Pennsylvania Station, declared in a lecture to members of the American Institute of Architects in 1969:

The American polity—the experience as well as the sense of community and shared convictions has...atrophied in our time because of the retreat from architecture and public buildings as a consensus element of public policy and a purposeful instrument for the expression of public purposes....If we are to save our cities and restore to American public life the sense of shared experience, trust and common purpose that seems to be draining out of it, the quality of public design has got to be made a public issue because it is a political fact.¹

And while he championed the material and physical impact of public architecture, for him the rebuilding of cities demanded the enactment of programs and policies that enabled institution building and the strengthening of a civil society's foundations. When, for example, in 1993 he insisted on maintaining the deductibility of gifts of appreciated property to nonprofit institutions such as universities and museums, he demonstrated the necessity of these gifts as vital elements of the "unplanned flowering" of learning and culture in a huge and diverse society.² But he struggled to reconcile the oppositional forces of individual interest and common good weighing down either side of the civil ballast.

His nuanced assessment of American national character, impassioned public advocacy, and the many trajectories of his career echoed that of another New Yorker a century before. In his essay "Democratic Vistas," Walt Whitman mounted a sustained criticism of Reconstruction Era failures—the "depravity of our business classes" while unequivocally affirming "democracy's convictions [and] aspirations."³ In a great, rambling depiction of civic life, more exuberant and moving than any other, he wrote:

After an absence, I am now again... in New York.... The splendor, picturesque-ness, [its] oceanic amplitude and rush, the unsurpass'd situation, rivers and bay, sparkling sea-tides, costly and lofty new buildings, facades of marble and iron, of original grandeur and elegance of design, with the masses of gay color, the preponderance of white and blue, the flags flying, the endless ships, the tumultuous streets, Broadway, the heavy, low, musical roar, hardly ever intermitted, even at night; the jobbers' houses, the rich shops, the wharves, the great Central Park, and the Brooklyn Park of hills, (as I wander among them this beautiful fall weather, musing, watching, absorbing)—the assemblages of the citizens in their groups, conversations, trades, evening amusements, or along the by-quarters—these... completely satisfy my senses of power, fulness, motion, &c., and give me... a continued exaltation and absolute fulfillment. Always and more and more, as I cross the East and North rivers, the ferries, or with the pilots in their pilot-houses, or pass an hour in Wall street, or the gold exchange, I realize... that not Nature alone is great in her fields of freedom and the open air, in her storms, the shows of night and day, the mountains, forests, seas—but in the artificial, the work of man too is equally great—in this profusion of teeming humanity—in these ingenuities, streets, goods, houses, ships—these hurrying, feverish, electric crowds of men, their complicated business genius... and all this mighty, many-threaded wealth and industry concentrated here.⁴

Whitman's observations speak in ways that we today cannot muster the energy or the confidence to utter. The century since, with the abominable march of 1914, 1929, 1945, 1968, and 2001, has deafened and deadened our senses to such universally heroic truths. But as the cartoonist Art Spiegelman has illustrated in his book *In the Shadow of No Towers*, civic life endures, though its forms and reforms may be wholly unfamiliar and new.⁵

It was in fact a new form that Whitman witnessed and conceived, one that emerged from within a generation Lewis Mumford called "the brown decades."⁶ The term was coined to identify "our buried renaissance," a sober though charged period of American

history from 1865 to 1895 that began with the Civil War and which propelled democratic realization in the artistic practices of Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins, in the landscapes of Olmsted and Charles Eliot Norton, in the engineering of John A. Roebling, the architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson, and in the industry and philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller.

It was the transformation of civic life that Norton, also a social reformer and liberal activist, alluded to when he said of Olmsted toward the close of his career that of all American artists, he stood “first in the production of great works which answer the needs and give expression to the life of our immense and miscellaneous democracy.”⁷

As much a testament to Olmsted’s genius as a confirmation of the correspondence that exists between great works and social imperatives, and the necessity to imbue productive expression with political ideals, Norton’s elegy admits to the inherent messiness of civic enterprise and its open-ended conclusions.

Olmsted had in fact observed, “It is a common error to regard a park as something to be produced complete in itself, as a picture to be painted on a canvas. It should rather be planned as one to be done in fresco, with constant consideration of exterior objects.”⁸ And the exterior objects, boulders and bedrock, political and physical, resisted. To fulfill Olmsted’s living vision, a fundamental and total reshaping of the site’s topography was required. Workers moved nearly 3 million cubic yards of soil and planted more than 270,000 trees and shrubs, and transverse roads were blasted through rocky ridges 8 feet below the surface to carry crosstown traffic while maintaining a continuous, expansive parkscape. When Central Park first opened to the public in the winter of 1859, thousands of New Yorkers skated on lakes constructed on what had been swamps.

Mumford contends that Olmsted and Eliot “humanized and subdued the feral landscape.”⁹ But it might be more useful to consider the work as the invention of a language of inchoate public values, a crucible which, rather than tame, caused the reconstitution of the very marrow of life in the city. Whitman understood modern material accomplishments, like the Suez Canal and the Atlantic Cable, as answers to the most important “aged fierce enigmas” at the heart of spiritual questions:

For, I say, the true nationality of the States, the genuine union, when we come to a mortal crisis, is, and is to be, after all, neither the written law, nor, (as is generally supposed,) either self-interest, or common pecuniary or material objects—but the fervid and tremendous idea, melting everything else with resistless heat, and solving all lesser and definite distinctions in vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power.¹⁰

A year after “Democratic Vistas” was first published in 1871, Yellowstone became the first national park in the United States and the world—a radically new public program born of those “brown decades” and met with a veritable legion of what Olmsted had termed “exterior objects.”

One hundred years forward, the first of two urban national recreation areas was designated at Gateway, perched at the very edge of the continent at the mouth of New York’s outer harbor. But in the interval since 1972, endangered birds at Gateway have grown more so, and drowning marshes continue to do just that, as sewer outfalls fill and abandoned buildings remain empty. And it would seem that the public is, as political journalist Walter Lippmann once asserted, “phantom.”¹¹

Lament for the loss of an idealized critical publicity is not unwarranted. It may well be that the public sphere as it once was, is no longer. And yet, with no reliable end in sight nor the clarity of a perfect resolution, the efforts of philanthropic entities, citizen groups, and individual volunteers—on behalf of the tremendous challenges that are Gateway—persist. These champions of a not yet fully formed great public work, lead as they follow. Mumford insisted of Olmsted, that he had done “something more than design a park, battle insolent and rascally city appointees, and protect his plantations against vandals: he had introduced an idea—the idea of using the landscape creatively. By making nature urbane he naturalized the city.”¹²

To give expression as Olmsted did to the vitality “of our immense and miscellaneous democracy” is to produce anew its promise, and in the making to enact civic life.¹³

ENDNOTES

Epigraph: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place* (Boston: Little Brown, 1978), 65.

1 Robert A. Katzmann, ed., *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: The Intellectual in Public Life* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1998), 91.

2 Robert Peck, “Remembering Daniel Patrick Moynihan,” in *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: The Intellectual in Public Life*, ed. Robert A. Katzmann (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1998), 143.

3 Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (London: Walter Scott, 1888), 13.

4 Whitman, 13.

5 Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

6 Lewis Mumford, *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865–1895*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1931; New York: Dover Publications, 1971).

Citations are to the Dover edition.

7 Charles Eliot Norton, quoted in Mumford, 30.

8 Frederick Law Olmsted, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” lecture, the American Social Science Association at the Lowell Institute, Boston, MA, Feb. 25, 1870 (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1870), 26.

9 Mumford, 40.

10 Whitman, 10.

11 Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927).

12 Mumford, 40.

13 *Ibid.*, 37.