

## A Manual For the Future

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The *Wacker's Manual of the Plan of Chicago: Municipal Economy*, first written in 1911 as a way to educate Chicago students about the City's Plan of 1909, provides remarkable insight into America's diminished socio-cultural ambitions.

In the two decades following the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 the city saw an unprecedented level of social, economic and cultural progress. Although the Fair was an oft-criticized logistical nightmare from the outset, its improbable success transformed Chicago's image as a relatively unknown and squalid industrial backwater to that of a progressive city of international distinction. Indeed, the fair brought many modern marvels to the world's attention, including the Ferris Wheel and the picture postcard, as well as dietary staples like Quaker Oats, Aunt Jemima pancake mix, Cream of Wheat, Shredded Wheat, Cracker Jack, and the first place Blue Ribbon for which Pabst is so famous.

However, the World's Fair also happened to be a seminal moment for American urbanism, as it showcased the transformative power of architecture and planning through the Beaux Arts and the birth of America's City Beautiful Movement. This is undoubtedly the Fair's greatest legacy.

The grand civic gestures made in the "White City" (named so for the overwhelming use of white stucco for the majority of the Fair's 200 temporary buildings, and the amount of electricity used to light it) influenced city planning and design across the country— from Philadelphia to Cleveland to San Francisco. Through a Grand Manner design ethos, the City Beautiful movement became the physical manifestation of a country charging into the 20th century. As such, the movement was more than just an expression of top down, large scale planning; it was a form of social, cultural, and economic expression in an increasingly prosperous nation. Perhaps this transformation was most evident in the Chicago public school system.

From 1911 through the mid 1920's the *Wacker's Manual* was required reading for all eighth-grade public school students. The *Manual*, commissioned by philanthropist Charles Wacker, was an urban history text and a contemporary treatise on the cultural and physical ambition of Chicago's 1909 Plan. Mr. Wacker, who also served as the Plan's Chairman, felt Chicago would fulfill its destiny as "the center of the modern world," only if its youth were well-educated in the far-reaching goals of the city's plan. Daniel Burnham, the 1909 Plan's chief designer, embodies this aspiration, and perhaps an additional level of hubris. Among many other things, he is famous for the canonical musing, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood."

This excerpt from the Manual's Introduction, written by Walter D. Moody, truly captures the spirit of the era.

"It is becoming a recognized fact that the power, growth and advancement of a city is limited only

by the measure of united civic interest of its people. The stronger and more vital the Community, the greater and more influential the city. It is this spirit which gives Chicago its great world distinction—an indomitable, living, throbbing love for the city, expressing a demand of its united people that the city shall deserve and achieve greatness. Conditions, then, demand that this new impulse of love for this city shall be fostered, and that our children shall be taught that they are the coming responsible heads of their various communities. We direct the national patriotic impulse into the paths of duty, and it is vital that we do the same with the new impulse for civic good.”

Following the introduction, the *Manual* explains the basis of city planning as a multi-disciplinary means to widespread cultural improvement. The text then eloquently moves through a history of ancient, European and American cities. With a proper foundation of knowledge established, the author delves into the details of street systems, transportation modes, park systems, and the implementation of Chicago’s own plan all in 135 well-illustrated pages— for eighth graders!

Now, say what you will about the City Beautiful as a design ethos, the importance of this document lies in its focus toward young adults to understand the connection between their built environment and their own roles as social, economic, and cultural stewards. It also underscores urbanism taught as the expression for cultural and economic success.

Today’s public school systems have no such manual. In fact, most students, let alone teachers, would have a difficult time explaining anything about their own cities’ plans and why it is relevant to their collective future. Nonetheless, the tremendous effect such a book (and accompanying lesson plans) could have upon the students of today and of tomorrow is undoubtedly significant.

Of course, the game has changed. Compared to a century ago, America is a fundamentally different place. Optimism and civic engagement has waned for decades. Many of our older cities are shells of their former selves, and the latest incarnations are mostly dysfunctional and incoherent forms of global sprawl. Thus, an attempt at remaking such a manual would logically explain today’s most pressing issues in a different light than the original.

Here in America, it would be wise to focus such a text on the inherent link between land- use regulation, transportation, city form and energy consumption. The grouping of these four issues alone could enlighten students on the wasteful nature of our built environment and its connection to global climate change – an issue that threatens their very future.

So, the next time your city or town revises its plan, why not share it with the local school system? Why not compile a publication explaining what city or town planning is and why students should care? I would even suggest a two-part modern-day *Wacker’s Manual* explaining the macro issues of urbanism and climate change, as well as micro issues, such as the ways in which one’s own city plan addresses the challenges of the 21st-century city.

Such bold action might create enough sparks to stir not only the next generation’s blood, but also ensure that our citizens take pride in their city and their collective future.