

## Charles Mulford Robinson: A Tribute

By Emily Talen

Charles Mulford Robinson, the first urban planning professor at UIUC, is sometimes viewed as one of those over-moralizing City Beautiful-style planners whose views hold little relevance for urban planning today. But I've always admired the complexity and nuance of his views on cities. In fact, I would position him as a forebear of those now seeking sustainable urbanism in all its various forms, whether termed new urbanism, smart growth, or livable cities.

Elsewhere I have argued that American urbanism evolved out of four distinct cultures.<sup>1</sup> Some have focused on small-scale, incremental urban improvement, like the provision of neighborhood parks and playgrounds. Some have had larger-scale visions, drawing up grand plans and advocating for new systems of transportation and arrangements of land use. Others have looked outside the existing city, focusing on how to build the optimal, new human habitat. And some have emphasized that urbanism should be primarily about how the human settlement relates to "nature." Multiple meanings of urbanism have, for over a century, been forming in the minds of American planners and others who have endeavored to define what urbanism in America is or should be in specific terms.

Charles Mulford Robinson was one of those unique individuals who straddled more than one of these cultures. Referring to himself as a "city improver," Robinson was simultaneously a promoter of small civic improvements, independent of grander plan-making, and a later proponent of coalescing these efforts into the City Beautiful. In his second major work, *Modern Civic Art* (1903), his theme was the need to organize small scale improvements into a harmonious general plan. He was, in a sense, a modern-day tactical urbanist who advocated small scale, incremental improvements to the existing city intended to happen "organically" and from the bottom up, but in the spirit of pragmatism, saw the potential of the City Beautiful to effectuate broader change. Most importantly, he viewed the existing city as ameliorable – unlike urban reformers like Ebenezer Howard, and later, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.

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<sup>1</sup> Talen, Emily. 2005. *New Urbanism and American Planning: The Conflict of Cultures*. London: Routledge.

He began as a leading proponent of the municipal arts movement (he counted 2,400 municipal arts societies in 1906), a movement that was focused on small-scale adornment and decorative art – stained-glass and murals in public buildings, sculpture and fountains in public places. Essentially, the movement was devoted to getting municipal government involved in art patronage. Backed by municipal art commissions, promoters sought artistic influx in all city domains. Although they pushed as well for street tree plantings, smoke ordinances, and billboard eradication, their main legacy was a call for the installation of art wherever possible. Thus Robinson wrote: “If drinking fountains, for man or beast, band stands, or lavatories have the conspicuousness in site of a public statue, their artistic character should be scrutinized as rigidly. Utility should not excuse ugliness.”<sup>2</sup>

The approach was more progressive than it sounds. Proponents admired European cities and especially Paris, but they did not condone Haussman’s ideas about slum eradication. Neither did they dismiss the value of diversity. Robinson saw the potential of urban diversity in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century and labeled parts of the inner city “picturesque.” By this he meant that the complexity of multiple immigrant residential environments, juxtaposed in a way that celebrated rather than homogenized the city, was to be preserved, not eradicated. Robinson expressed his desire for greater articulation of the diversity of peoples – i.e., immigrants – living in American cities, lamenting that “Russians and Italians live in the same sort of houses, of a style that is foreign to both, starving their own natural yearnings and depriving the city of beauty. All national characteristics are crushed to one monotonous level of architectural utility, until a part of the city that might be most attractive and interesting becomes the dullest of all.”<sup>3</sup>

In a manner Jane Jacobs would have appreciated, Robinson stated that the density of population in tenement districts was not necessarily an indication of overcrowding if the buildings were “safe and commodious” themselves.<sup>4</sup> He also argued that cities, as heterogeneous settlements, should not be treated as relationships between two variables, like the ratio of open space to population. In 1903, he complained that population density and park distribution “all

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<sup>2</sup> 1901, p. 212

<sup>3</sup> 1901, p. 211

<sup>4</sup> 1903, p. 258

counted for more than a mere ratio.”<sup>5</sup> He reflected on the problem of specialization and used it as a rationale for his 1901 treatise: “The specialist, seeing much in little, does not see far. In zeal for pavements one forgets the trees; in zeal for parks the thoroughfare is forgotten. It has seemed well, then, in the great new awakening of enthusiasm and concern for city beauty in a score of directions, at last to grasp them all, to group them logically in a single volume and show the relative positions.”<sup>6</sup>

Jane Jacobs is often credited with postulating a credible justification for cities, but Roberson was similarly committed. He wrote about how Americans loved their cities, not about defecting to the countryside or suburbia. Where city and nature converged, he was content that a project like a harbor “be made richly urban.” The respect for urbanism showed through in the attention to every city detail: street paving and cleaning, the positioning of street trees, the function and placing of sculpture, the need for color. Presaging Lynchian imageability, he wrote about the need for recognition of the city threshold, and that the contrast between city and country should not be obscured.

But in a manner Jacobs would not have condoned, Roberson evolved to become just as fervent about the City Beautiful movement as he had been about small-scale municipal improvement. Given the aesthetic connections, this was not inconsistent on Roberson’s part. He made the case for the City Beautiful in his second book *Modern Civic Art, or, The City Made Beautiful*, published in 1903 and republished 3 times in the next 15 years. Here was the glorification of the city through art restated in bigger, bolder terms than before, and with a more fervent integration of beauty and utility. What Roberson wanted was a plan that would guide city development according to “good sense, attractiveness, sanitation, and convenience,”<sup>7</sup> goals that he had previously relied on small civic improvement groups to accomplish.

With Roberson’s help, the 2,400 civic improvement associations he earlier identified started to view themselves as part of a larger, organized movement. Roberson moved away from reliance on the citizen activist, the foundation of civic improvement activities, toward a reliance on the “expert,” motivated by “disgust with the inept, piecemeal, patchwork efforts to stay

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson, William H. 1989. *The City Beautiful Movement*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> 1901, p. viii.

<sup>7</sup> 1906a

abreast of urban needs.”<sup>8</sup> This can be viewed either as a dangerous giveaway of public power, or as an understandable response to the frustration of trying to enact change. It was an arrangement between citizen watchdog and expert plan-maker intended to move through an evolutionary process that must have been inspired by Robinson’s study of Darwin. It was fervently optimistic. Robinson believed that the perfection of the city was ultimately possible.

A century later, few of us would share that kind of optimism. But in the era a digital media and other non-place urban realms, we can admire, and learn from, his intense commitment to the physical manifestation of civic consciousness.

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<sup>8</sup> quoted in Wilson, 1989, p. 83