

## The Community as Client: Architectural Review in America

David Gebhard



To respond successfully and creatively to community design review, the architectural and landscape architectural professions must become aware of the forces that lie behind them. Too often, members of the profession tend to respond in the empty phraseology of supposed freedom of imagery, whereas the reality of the situation is usually a social, political, and ideological one.

### A Unifying Vision

In the late summer of 1892, the New York architectural critic Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer visited Chicago's World Columbian Exposition, then well along in construction. What interested her most was not the success or failure of the Beaux Arts Classical imagery, but rather what lessons the Fair could provide for the planning of American cities. She wrote, "Anyone of us can point to good and beautiful buildings in American towns; but can anyone think of a single satisfactory large group or long perspective? Beautiful groups, beautiful perspectives, a stupendously beautiful panorama is what the Fair will show us. It will be the first real object-lesson America has had in the art of building well on a great scale; and it will show us how, on a smaller but still sometimes a very large scale, our permanent streets and squares ought to be designed."

The vision of architect-planner Daniel H. Burnham and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted brought about the unification present at the Fair, which offered a unique opportunity for them to function in a manner foreign to the nineteenth century American laissez-faire scene. They could play the game of architectural/planning arbitrator, similar to the role played by Baron Georges Haussmann in the replanning of Paris during the regime of Napoleon III.

As Van Rensselaer had anticipated, the Fair served as an impetus for America's long-term involvement with the City Beautiful movement. Yet, while a few City Beautiful-inspired civic centers and other fragments were built across the country during the first four decades of the twentieth century, the grand city plans of Burnham and others never came to fruition, due to their often prohibitive costs and the array of difficulties posed by the private ownership of land and buildings. Equally determinant, though, was the sentiment of clients, their architects, and a large segment of the public, which openly embraced a laissez-faire approach to design. Van Rensselaer's, Burnham's, and others' vision of an architecturally unified city lacked reality, for in the end it did not provide any acceptable mode of architectural review. Europe and England could and did impose such controls via the continued presence of a leftover feudal bureaucracy that could operate as architectural/planning arbitrator. Americans, with their traditional suspicions of government, found it difficult to conceive of granting such authority to an appointed governmental bureaucrat or even to elected officials (though there have in this century been occasional exceptions, such as Robert Moses of New York).

Ultimately, the demise of the Beaux Arts-inspired City Beautiful movement was due, not to its ideological defeat at the hands of the Modernist, but to its inability to provide a workable method of carrying out its ideals. The typical City Beautiful solution (the creation of a Fine Arts Commission) might work in the public arena of Washington, D.C., but it did not function well in other American cities, large or small. Such commissions could work effectively only within the limited public realm involving groups of governmental buildings and parks, or on a very small scale with a new town or suburban development planned and controlled by private capital.

### Planned Communities

Many privately established communities laid out in the second and third decades at least initially entailed firm architectural control and review. In the teens there were the copper mining towns of Ajo (Arizona), Tyrone (New Mexico), and others. During the heady boom days of the '20s, Florida witnessed the creation of many speculative cities, including Opa-Locka, Boca Raton, and Coral Gables. California experienced the same phenomenon, with communities such as Palos Verdes, San Clemente, and Rancho Santa Fe. Upper middle class suburban residential developments, like St. Francis Woods and Forest Hills in San Francisco and Bel Air and Westlake Village in Los

Angeles, accompanied these planned communities and preceded them in some instances.

These communities began with some architectural controls. A few developed and maintained a highly visible review process. In Palos Verdes, this process specified the Mediterranean/Spanish Colonial Revival image—both in gardens and buildings. The seriousness of the developers of Palos Verdes appears in the “name-brand” professionals they involved in the process: the landscape architect and planner Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the planner Charles Cheney, and the architect Myron Hunt. Generally, these private communities dealt with the need for architectural review via legal covenants (C C & R’s), not by any action on the part of a governmental body.

## **Tourism**

Another impetus, which has had a far more lasting impact on establishing architectural controls and review, has been tourism. In the United States, tourism brought together two seemingly unlikely groups in society: those who were ideologically arguing for a romantic, self-conscious cultivation of regional differences made visible via planning, landscape architecture, and architecture; and those who had an economic interest in seeing tourism promoted.

The earliest “grand” episode of architecture promoting tourism was in Florida in the mid-1880s. The key figure was New York investor Henry M. Flagler, who through railroad acquisitions developed the Florida East Coast Railroad system and commissioned the New York architectural firm of Carrere & Hastings to enhance the historic Spanish atmosphere of St. Augustine through their designs for two resort hotels, the Ponce de Leon Hotel (1888) and the Alcazar (1890). A few years later, in 1893, the city suffered a severe fire, which destroyed a large section of its central core. Regional romanticists joined with the business community to argue that the city should be rebuilt entirely along Spanish lines; the basis of their argument was that an enhancement of the Hispanic image would entice more winter visitors to the city.

The real and mythical enhancement of exotic non-Anglo images developed almost as early in the American Southwest and in California. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, which traversed New Mexico, Arizona, and Southern California, quickly took over first the Mission Revival image and later the Pueblo Revival and the Spanish Colonial Revival images. Architectural icons of the Southern Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads eventually joined the Santa Fe in this endeavor of regional salesmanship.

## **Preservation**

An offshoot of this created regionalism, with decided implications for architectural controls and review, was the development of an interest in historic preservation. The pointedness of this connective link shows in the early establishment, in 1894, of the California Landmark Club, by Charles Lummis (who was the first editor of *Land of Sunshine*, the promotional magazine of the Santa Fe Railroad) and Arthur B. Benton, the designer of Hispanic resort hotels such as the 1903 Mission Inn in Riverside and the 1910 Arlington Hotel in Santa Barbara. Their argument for preserving the Mission churches and adobes of California was identical with those for creating Mission Revival railroad stations and hotels, namely that it would help to entice visitors to the state.

The close linking of historic preservation and architectural controls and reviews grew appreciably in the late 1920s and on into the 1930s. Charleston, South Carolina, initiated its first ordinance in 1929, and New Orleans created its Vieux Carre Commission in 1936. The rationale for historic preservation eventually became, especially after 1945, one of the key arguments for the creation of historic districts. Their administrators reviewed all proposed demolitions, modifications, and new developments. In recent years, historic preservation commissions have, to a considerable degree, replaced planning commissions as the principal planning body in many communities, including New York City itself.

## **Beauty and Character**

Before turning our attention to incidents of official governmental design review, two added arguments for design controls should be noted. The first is aesthetic, the “obligation” of each community to cultivate the beautiful. The second has to do with the desire of citizens in

a community to preserve, not only the historic flavor of the place, but equally its scale and ambience. Such controls were entailed in several private developments in the nineteenth century, including Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, of 1852-53 (Llewellyn Haskell and Alexander Jackson Davis) and Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's 1868 suburban development of Riverside, Illinois. With the rapid acceleration of urbanization and density of development experienced across much of the American landscape since 1945, the issue of scale and present character has often turned out to be the underlying reason (sometimes stated, often not) for design review and controls.

The preeminent figure responsible for establishing the rational and eventually legal arguments for aesthetic controls was the planner Charles H. Cheney (1884-1943). Cheney, a close associate of Olmsted and Olmsted, was a founder of the American City Planning Association (1917). He wrote the architectural review legislation for several communities, including Santa Barbara, Palos Verdes, and Rancho Santa Fe. Within every master plan drawn up for a community, he argued, there should be a section devoted to "architectural control of all buildings, signs, and physical appearances. The general architecture, mass, and appearance of all buildings, private as well as public, is essentially a matter of public concern." Cheney, with Newman E Baker, Harold Beardslee Brainerd, Thomas W. Mackesey, and Rollin L. McNitt, established the court-tested abilities for communities to initiate design review legislation.

### **Santa Barbara, California**

Santa Barbara presents an early, extensive example of design review. (Others of roughly the same period, with similarly compelling historical and geographic settings, include Nantucket and Santa Fe.) This city plunged into the design review process in the years immediately after World War I, with a vision to develop the whole coastal zone of Santa Barbara County as a new version of the Mediterranean coast of Spain. The rationale for this vision was the region's strong Hispanic inheritance from the early nineteenth century. The Plan and Planting Committee of the Community Arts Association (a private organization) effectively pursued the concept of the planned city, of limitations on density and the height of buildings, and of the creation of a single, community-wide architectural imagery.

The Association realized from the beginning that its first task was to inform and educate the citizens of the community. They diligently pursued the design and construction of a series of small-scale examples, which could serve as apt demonstrations of what the city could look like if the goals of creating a unified Hispanic city were achieved. Accompanying these demonstrations were other educational programs—exhibitions, articles in the local newspapers and regional journals, and local and regional competitions.

Simultaneously, the Association engaged 19 Cheney to prepare an array of ordinances concerned with planning, zoning, and architectural control. Santa Barbara's contingent of architects, George Washington Smith and others, was closely involved in their preparation, providing proposals for plazas and streetscapes. By 1924, ordinances relating to zoning, building height, and density of development were in place. Immediately after the 1925 earthquake, the Association prevailed upon the City Council to enact the design review ordinance previously drawn up by Cheney. During the year of its existence, the Architectural Review Board set up by the ordinance processed some 2,000 building permits.

From the late 1920s through the immediate Post World War II years, architectural control in Santa Barbara reverted to the private Plans and Planting Committee headed by Pearl Chase. The continuation of Hispanic imagery during these years illustrates how effective she and her committee were. With the renewed press of building activities after World War II, they prevailed upon the city in 1949 to institute once again an appointed architectural review board (eventually placed within the City Charter). To maintain tighter design controls over the downtown area, Chase and her colleagues induced the City to establish the Advisory Landmark Committee (1960), whose major responsibility was to act as a design review board over the city's central core. In 1977, this committee was reorganized and given much more substantial authority to review all projects in the downtown, El Pueblo Viejo District.

As early as the late 1920s, it was recognized that planning and review should not be limited to the City of Santa Barbara alone, but should eventually encompass the whole county. In 1931, the suburban community of Montecito received its historic planning and review ordinance. In the 1950s, Santa Barbara County became the first county in California to establish architectural review.

*Adapted from Architecture California, vol. 12, no. 1, August 1990*