

Speakout Submission

Topic: The City Beautiful Movement, Then and Now

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A little more than 100 years ago, civic leaders, aided by Mayor Robert Speer, took steps to adapt principles of The City Beautiful movement to distinguish Denver from other dusty, poorly organized frontier towns. Boosters were inspired by the belief that urban beautification—landscape, city planning and architecture—would elevate the lives and health of citizens, as well as ignite economic development and impress visitors.

Influenced by European Beaux Arts architecture and the 1893 Chicago World Exhibition, the movement was popular in America from the 1890s through the 1920s. Characterized by parks, fountains, public statuary, grand boulevards, handsome civic centers, prominent civic buildings and comprehensive planning, The City Beautiful Movement was both aesthetic and based on the belief that a quality public and civic realm was key to the public health of the citizenry and the financial stability and wellbeing of the community.

Speer's legacy remains as the visible organizing principle of our city: Civic Center, Denver's park and parkway system, Denver Mountain Parks and commanding civic buildings. The city's five original high schools—East, West, North, South and Manual, plus 10 junior highs and two dozen elementary schools built between 1900 and 1940—reflect The City Beautiful ideals. They are located on prominent sites, usually adjacent to a park, and possess commanding mountain or axial views.

It is again time for Denver to distinguish itself from other cities beset by a half-century of rampant growth, the negative impacts of the automobile and environmental degradation. The substantial capital investments in public infrastructure from the tree canopy, to parks and parkways, civic buildings, fountains, sidewalks and statuary are eroding.

Denver's beauty is more than the sum of its parts; rather, it is the elegance of the whole, the physical tapestry of the places we love and use. When those elements deteriorate, the fabric is weakened and the daily lives of citizens are subtly impaired.

It is time to renew our commitment to public stewardship, to care for our inheritance of the legacy of The City Beautiful movement and to reinterpret The City Beautiful for the 21st century.

The planets are aligned. Mayor John Hickenlooper has directed citizens and public employees to perform a thorough analysis of the condition of Denver's assets and capital budgeting protocols. The recommendations of citizens and government leaders are expressed in the *Mayor's Infrastructure Priorities Task Force Report*. Denver will host its second Democratic National Convention in 100 years. The renewed vitality of the urban core demands a renewed focus on the public realm.

Downtown is becoming a 24-hour neighborhood. With more people living and working in the core, connections must be strengthened—sidewalks widened, streets designed to facilitate the easy movement of transit, bikes, pedestrians and vehicles and ground floors activated. A focus on moving people as well as vehicles demands a quality public realm.

The region's investment in comprehensive, multi-modal transportation can be maximized only if we recognize that land use should drive transportation decisions.

Since the end of WWII, we have done the reverse. We have worried about how to get cars out of the city instead of improve people-scaled connections and places.

Also, we must take care of our investments in civic art. From public buildings to parks and parkways, from statues and monuments to irrigation systems, roads and cultural facilities, Denverites have been consistently generous in acknowledging the importance of public and civic infrastructure. We must respect that investment, address deferred maintenance and commit to sustainable building practices, land use policies and resource management.

We have a remarkable legacy to protect and expand. During Colorado Architecture Week (April 13-20), The American Institute of Architects (AIA) Denver chapter offers the public several opportunities to re-engage with the city:

- April 12: *Denver: The City Beautiful and Its Architecture*, a lecture by Tom “Dr. Colorado” Noel, Ph.D. A corresponding exhibit will be on display through June.
- April 14-15: Doors Open Denver expert and self-guided tours of the city..
- April 19: *Transit-Oriented Development: Reshaping the Great American City*, a 60-minute film.

Visit the online calendar at www.aiacolorado.org for more details about these events.

With great excitement, AIA Denver joins citizens and civic leaders in rejuvenating The City Beautiful legacy. From the updating of the city’s zoning code to the revitalization of Civic Center, tree planting, infrastructure improvements and a renewal of civic places throughout the city, we applaud a rededication to the words that inspired Denver leaders 100 years ago:

“Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men’s blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty. Think big.”

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2007 President

The American Institute of Architects (AIA), Denver