Revisiting the White City

Beloved by contemporary critics, the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition was later considered a malicious influence on architecture and American cities. How is the fair judged 100 years after it opened? By Andrea Oppenheimer Dean

The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 dazzled the eye as had no previous world's fair. A phalanx of 200 shimmering, classically styled buildings spread over 633 acres of land bordering Lake Michigan, the exposition, as colossal in its ambition to be a model city as it was in its size, turned out to be both immensely influential and controversial. In its own time the White City, as the 400th-anniversary celebration of Columbus's arrival in America came to be known, was widely admired. In 1894 the architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler considered it "the most admired group of buildings ever erected in this country." The French psychological novelist Paul Bourget, meanwhile, wrote in his journal after the exposition closed in 1894, "The White City of Jackson Park...is not an apotheosis, it is a hope. It is not an end, it is a commencement."

Although later commentators would agree that the World's Columbian Exposition marked the commencement of city planning in the United States, many derided the fair's effects both on urban America and on its architecture. M. Christine Boyer contended in her 1983 book, Dreaming the Rational City, the Myth of American City Planning, that the architects of the White City, "these improvers," as she called them, led the country not only "toward some imaginary form of the city," but backward "away from the American city," grafting onto it "all the civic ideals and ceremonial urbanities of the European city."

Similarly, while the majority of fairgoers were enchanted by buildings described by the critic Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer in her 1893 book, A Week at the Fair, as a sight "not paralleled since the Rome of the emperors stood intact," most twentieth-century commentators have been less impressed. Louis Sullivan remained silent on the subject of the fair for thirty-one years following its closing, then vented on it the considerable disappointments of his declining years. His grievances became a rallying cry for advocates of modern architecture. The defrocked architect declared, "Architecture died in the land of the free and the home of the brave...The damage wrought by the World's Fair will last for half a century." Sullivan, who wrote this shortly before his death in 1924, was convinced that the White City had abruptly ended the modernizing and progressive tendencies of the Chicago School's relatively unadorned, functional architecture.

Any attempt to reach a just assessment of the fair's accomplishments and failures must begin with its history and context. The exposition took place during, and reflected, a period of profound social ferment. There was a pervasive sense of dislocation, due in part to a huge influx of immigrants...
Central to the layout of the exposition during the 1880s and 1890s. The population of the country jumped from forty-seven million in 1877 to sixty-seven million in 1893, an increase of nearly fifty percent in just sixteen years. As the immigrants contributed to the nation's rapid urbanization, the country became simultaneously more pluralistic and more cosmopolitan, and urban wickedness (including increased alcohol and drug addiction) was blamed for destroying the family. By 1893, moreover, business ruled America, the entrepreneur was king, and the number of millionaires had increased during the thirty years leading up to the fair from a mere handful to several thousand.

Chicago was both the spirit and the embodiment of the Age of Energy, writes David Burg in his 1976 book Chicago's White City of 1893. "The West," Burg contends, "was the new and vital America and Chicago was its heart." Chicago was marked by great riches and great poverty; it was violent and lawless.

Commerce, not surprisingly, gave birth to the era's most important building type. If there was a genuine American style it was thought to be embodied in the skyscraper, and the art of the tall building was attaining full blossom in Chicago, which, phoenixlike, had risen from its own ashes following the fire of 1871. Chicago's distinctive architecture was given impetus by such buildings as William LeBaron Jenney's glass-and-steel Leiter Building of 1879, Boston architect H.H. Richardson's Marshall Field Wholesale Store of 1885, and the buildings of Adler & Sullivan. The rational, American, incipient Chicago style presented a stark contrast to the academic, French, entrenched Beaux-Arts style that prevailed on the East Coast.

The immediate impetus for the Chicago fair was the success of the Paris Exposition of 1889. By mid-August of that year the Chicago Corporation—or Directorate, as it came to be called—had been formed to help secure the planned 1893 exposition for Chicago. The city's main competitor was New York. "The active city... can best typify the giant young nation," wrote the corporation's president Harlow N. Higinbotham. Chicago, with its modern and extensive transportation system, promised prospective visitors convenience and excitement. (It was the hot air emanating from Chicago boosters at this time, not the icy blasts from Lake Michigan, that earned Chicago the sobriquet, the "windy city.")

In December of 1889 an exposition bill was introduced into the United States Senate; on February 24, 1890, an eighth-ballot vote determined the location of the fair; and on April 25 President Benjamin Harrison signed the bill into law. It provided for "an international exhibition of arts, industries, manufactures, and the products of the soil, mine, and sea." The act designated an exposition commission, consisting of two commissioners from each state and territory, to oversee the fair, and a Board of Lady Managers, also with national representation, to acknowledge the growing role of women in the spreading village-improvement
were a vast Lagoon and the Grand Basin.

A wooded island occupies the center of the Lagoon. The Woman’s Building stands at the far right in this panorama, and the low dome to its left marks the central block of the Horticulture Building.

movement, in municipal reform, and in the nation’s cultural life. Women’s accomplishments would be highlighted in the Woman’s Building, which would be built to the competition-winning design of a twenty-one-year-old architect, Sophia Hayden of Boston. A few months after signing the Exposition Bill, Harrison issued an official invitation to foreign exhibitors. Forty-six would participate; nineteen would build separate government structures on the exposition grounds.

If a virtual city was to be designed and built in fewer than three years—the dedication was originally scheduled for October 12, 1892, six months prior to the fair’s actual opening—there wasn’t a moment to spare. “After wasting four months debating possible locations,” write Norman Bolotin and Christine Laing in The World’s Columbian Exposition (published last year by The Preservation Press), the corporation called in the nation’s premier landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of New York’s Central Park, and named him consulting architect to the fair. The partners Daniel H. Burnham and John Wellborn Root, who were playing an important role in the evolution of the Chicago School of architecture, were put in charge of construction. Root was to be the principal designer, but his unexpected death from pneumonia on January 15, 1891, left Burnham, a brilliant organizer, manager, and promoter, in sole charge, with the title of director of works.

In February of 1891 the triangular exposition site of Jackson Park, just six miles south of Chicago’s Loop, was chosen as the fairground. Two thirds of the park was described at the time as “a treacherous morass,” according to Bolotin and Laing. The design of individual buildings was largely dictated by Olmsted’s configuration of the site and the contrast he created between the symmetrical and stately treatment of a great basin, open at one end to Lake Michigan and cut midway by canals, and the irregular winding of a lagoon. Burnham assigned the overall plan of the buildings to a committee of ten architects whose mandate was to work collaboratively. Because Burnham was entrusted with creating a national architecture, and was himself a Chicagoan, he looked to the East Coast in selecting the first designers, and gave these outsiders the more glamorous assignments—to the consternation of Chicago architects and many later critics. Three of the architecture firms were based in New York City (Richard Morris Hunt, McKim, Mead & White, and George B. Post), one was from Boston (Peabody & Stearns), and one was a Boston firm transplanted to Kansas City (Van Brunt & Howe).

“By a remarkable piece of good fortune,” writes Titus M. Karlowicz in the October 1970 issue of the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, “the architects to whom the five buildings on the great court were assigned constituted a family, by reason of long-established personal relations and of unusually close professional sympathies.” Virtually all had attended the
Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which emphasized stable symmetries, balanced masses, and strong axes and advocated cladding buildings in historic styles, preferably those of antiquity and the Renaissance. Burnham's committee of ten was completed when he selected five Chicago architects—Adler & Sullivan, Solon S. Beman, Burling & Whitehouse, Henry Ives Cobb, and Jenney & Mundie. Hunt, the president of the American Institute of Architects, was chosen as committee chairman, Louis Sullivan as secretary. Among the architects' initial acts was to set a standard cornice height of sixty feet, virtually assuring the use of a classical architectural vocabulary, and to establish white as the principal color for the fourteen so-called Great Buildings.

When the fair was opened on May 1, 1893, by President Grover Cleveland, the "vision of harmonious power was such a contrast to the typical confusion of the average American town that the visitors were almost stunned," writes architectural historian Talbot Hamlin in *Forms and Functions of Twentieth-Century Architecture* (1952). Visitors were also stunned by the extent and scale of the exposition. It was estimated that to see everything quickly would have required three weeks of walking a total of 150 miles. In addition to the fourteen Great Buildings and the nineteen foreign-government buildings, there were thirty-eight state-government buildings and numerous service structures and individual exhibitors pavilions. The fair's largest structure, the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building (by Post, a protégé of Hunt), was the largest roofed building ever erected; its floor area alone consumed more than three million feet of lumber and five carloads of nails. "The bigness of the fair imposed itself upon the imaginations of most visitors as their first and enduring impression," writes Burg.

As striking as the fair's harmony and scale was its coherent plan. Stanley Applebaum writes in *The Chicago World's Fair of 1893*, published in 1980, that "the main lines of the exposition layout offered the first widely publicized, well-planned ensemble of public buildings within the memory of living Americans, and the first anywhere since [Baron Georges-Eugène] Haussmann had reorganized the heart of Paris [1853-70] and Vienna's 'ring' system had been created [1859-88]." Central to the layout were the Lagoon and the Grand Basin, around which the fourteen main exhibit buildings were arranged, many of them in ways that formed squares or plazas. Passing and sometimes encircling the buildings were three miles of intertwining canals. These were lined with more varied and picturesque structures and dotted with elaborate fountains and statuary that had been crafted in what became the first collaboration between architects and artists on such a large scale.

Visitors would arrive either by train at a western entrance or by boat at the main gateway, which was distinguished by an immense Grecian peristyle colonnade beneath which a sluice admitted lake

*Seldom have livestock been so grandly celebrated as along the Colonnade, opposite. At left, from the top, the view from the Colonnade includes the Obelisk and South Canal; a launch pillows the Lagoon; turrets punctuate the Fisheries Building, seen here from the Lagoon's wooded island; and the Administration Building stands at the foot of the Grand Basin.*
Buildings were clad in an impermanent material.
water to fill the Grand Basin. At the eastern edge of the Grand Basin was Daniel Chester French's sixty-five-foot-high Statue of the Republic. Gracing the Grand Basin's western shore was Frederick MacMonnies' Columbian Fountain, a huge fabrication that incorporated thirty-seven figures aboard a triumphal ship of state topped by Columbia enthroned on a central pedestal.

McKim, Mead & White's decidedly Roman Agriculture Building stood on the southern rim of the Grand Basin, a statue of Diana by Augustus Saint-Gaudens crowning its central dome. Across the South Canal from Agriculture was Peabody & Stearns's Machinery Hall, which covered an area measuring 846 by 492 feet and was edged by colonnades and covered with a liberal sprinkling of small domes. Standing opposite the west end of Machinery Hall was Beman's Mines and Mining Building, a less-than-popular structure that featured an early Italian Renaissance exterior imbued with a "French spirit," as Elizabeth Gilmore Holt describes it in The Expanding World of Art, 1874-1902, published in 1888. The Electricity Building by Van Brunt & Howe, just east of Mining, was reminiscent of a French Renaissance château.

Dominating the exposition, by dint of its location and its twelve-foot-high gilded dome, was Hunt's Administration Building. This structure served as the focus of the central square formed by Electricity and Mines on the north and Machinery on the south. Closing the loop around the Basin's northern edge, finally, was the last of the so-called Honor Court buildings, Post's huge Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, which was topped by a semicircular, glazed green roof and incorporated corner pavilions and a large central entrance marked by giant Corinthian columns. Flanking Manufactures's eastern edge was the Lagoon with a central wooded island housing a Japanese temple, the Ho-o-den.

Only two of the Great Buildings, those dedicated to Fisheries and Transportation, did not toe the classical line. For Fisheries, which stood on an islet and was therefore curved in plan, Cobb chose a southern French Romanesque style with tiled roofs and pointed turrets. Sullivan's polychrome Transportation Building, edging the Lagoon's southeastern shore, was the only structure that strayed from Beaux-Arts precepts, although its form was that of a Roman—albeit a plain Roman—basilica. Most striking was the Sullivan building's Golden Doorway with its lavishly ornamented receding arches. Covered with gold lacquer, the Golden Doorway graced a building that was positively baroque when compared to the basic, modern buildings that Sullivan advocated when he hurled rebukes at the fair in the 1920s.

A number of somewhat less vast and more varied buildings were arranged around the Lagoon, the North Pond, and the South Pond. Among these structures were Francis M. Whitehouse's Choral Building; Jenney's Horticultural Building; the Woman's Building, which resembled an (Continued on Page 97)

The vaulted roof of the Manufactures Building, opposite, rises to 245 feet at its center; the pavilions lining its floor display products from around the world. Some buildings, including those devoted to Great Britain, top, Kentucky, center, and South Dakota, right, approximate domestic scale and character.
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(Continued from Page 49) Italian Renaissance villa and received lukewarm critical reviews; and Charles Atwood's Fine Arts Building. Atwood's was the only major structure at the exposition that was intended as a permanent building and remains on the site today—as the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. It was also the only one of the so-called Great Buildings to be clad in stone. The rest, although engineered as iron-and-timber sheds, derived their styling from their cladding, which was formed of a material called staff, a lightweight but firm and reasonably durable mixture of plaster, cement, and jute fibers.

Completing the exposition grounds there was, finally—in addition to the various foreign and state buildings, villas, and annexes—the Midway Plaisance. Originally a one-mile-long, 600-foot-wide wooded strip linking Jackson and Washington parks, the Midway was shaped to accommodate the first separate amusement area at a world's fair. Among the attractions on this strip was the world's first Ferris wheel.

The assassination of the city's popular mayor, Carter Harrison, on October 28, 1893, turned the fair's October 31 closing into a sorrowful event. Soon after the closing, fires consumed the Court of Honor buildings, and, in its issue of October 3, 1896, Scientific American reported that the World's Columbian Exposition Salvage Company had just completed its removal of the remaining buildings.

The one incontestably positive impact of the fair was the lesson of its overall configuration. Its order and harmony, Schuyler was on the mark when he said in 1894, "The success is first of all a success of unity, a triumph of ensemble. The whole is better than any of its parts and greater than all its parts." He was speaking of the Great Buildings that constituted the White City, not of the more eclectic, varied, and colorful structures surrounding the North and South ponds.

Nor can the fair's germinal effect on city planning be contested. For Burnham—who went on to complete plans for Washington, D.C., Cleveland, San Francisco, Manila and Baguio in the Philippines, and Chicago—the fair was "the beginning, in our day and in this country, of the orderly arrangement of extensive public grounds and buildings." William H. Wilson, the author of the 1899 book The City Beautiful, has disputed the commonly accepted notion that the fair initiated the City Beautiful movement, which, adhering to the belief that, as Burnham noted, "an orderly arrangement of fine buildings and monuments brings fame and wealth to the city," strove to make cities as convenient, healthful, and beautiful as possible. Wilson regards the movement as having been, instead, a consummation of existing currents in and ideas about municipal improvement and comprehensive park and boulevard systems.

Indeed, the time was ripe for an exercise in urban clarity and grace and in such modern sanitation and transportation systems as were employed at the fair. The critic Carl Condit writes in his 1973 book, Chicago 1910-29, "The chaos of the city made functional coherence and visual order, at least in the major civic areas, a matter of necessity." As an urban phenomenon, the fair was a direct and logical consequence of its time, and if it was only one among several causative influences on the City Beautiful movement, none was more forceful.

Among the several criticisms of the fair as an urban model was that of the critic Lewis Mumford, who in 1945 called it "a cosmetic . . . something that could be plastered on impoverished life." In fact, the White City was, as Schuyler observed, "a fairy city," "a seaport on the coast of Bohemia," "the capital of No Man's Land." The exposition's aims were limited to exhibitions and displays. It neither attempted to tackle the social problems of the day nor even to accommodate weekday activities. The overall concept of the fair was also influenced by the so-called imposers' belief that given a sanitary, well-ordered environment "the natural, socially responsible man would appear from beneath the vice of depravity." as Boyer reports and that "if the external milieu was tolerable, then poverty would take care of itself." The last view, especially, may seem foolishly naive today, but as recently as the 1970s it still formed the social underpinning of modern architecture and urban renewal.

The dreamlike White City was also a very American phenomenon, despite criticisms that it was a European throwback. As a carefully programmed, highly organized fantasy land, the fair resembled a magnified and culturally sophisticated nineteenth-century version of Disneyland and, like Disneyland and our late-twentieth-century urban festival markets and enclosed shopping malls, the fair expressed a typically American ambivalence toward the city. The exposition presented a sanitized version of the city, denuded of the diversity, density, and grit that lend urban America its texture and richness but also contribute to its less appealing characteristics. Also very American were the exposition's grand scale, its superb organization, its technical wizardry, and the vaunting ambition implicit in its attempt to tame and make rational urban chaos and confusion. Ironically, this overbearing make-believe city with its elite buildings was not only an American spectacle but also a populist event. By the time the fair closed there had been between twenty-seven and twenty-eight million paid admissions. The American public was psychologically ready for the exposition and loved it—which was one reason for its enormous success and influence.

Like its overall concept and form, the White City's architecture—its imperial yet cool Roman classicism—resonated in the American psyche during a period when the nation, after subduing its own territory, was turning to overseas conquests. Classicism suited the needs of late-nineteenth-century American architects as well as it did those of the United States public. Designers were searching for a new style, but they could not invent it overnight. Especially to architects who were educated in Paris and trained to seek such design qualities as order, proportion, rhythm, equilibrium, and harmony, classicism must have seemed the only logical basis upon which to build a new style. Besides, none of the other existing aesthetic vocabularies fit the bill. The Richardsonian neo-Romanesque was very promising and popular but could not accommodate itself to the reductive demands of skeletal construction without abandoning its most distinguishing features. Classicism, by contrast, was a flexible, easily adaptable style that could create a unified building by combining a boldness of plan with refinement of detail.

The year 1893 saw two quintessentially American cultural contributions. The first was the New York City premier of Czech composer Antonín Dvořák's New World Symphony, which he composed while he was the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York from 1892 to 1895. The second major cultural event of 1893 was Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," an address delivered to the American Historical Association that argued that the ever-expanding U.S. frontier explained the key differences between Europeans and Americans. Turner's thesis shaped subsequent thinking about American history.
Like Dvořák’s and Turner’s accomplishments, the Chicago fair was both deeply American and profoundly of its time—two important reasons why it was so influential and so well-suited as a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the New World.

In the end, however, the exposition’s effects were shorter-lived than those of either Dvořák’s symphony, which sounds as fresh as when it was first heard, or Turner’s thesis, the importance of which as an explanation of America’s unique nature is just now being challenged. The fair’s classicism looks anachronistic today and had become a sort of dinosaur by the early 1930s when the Depression’s hard times, dictating drastic economies in construction, dovetailed with the spread of modern architecture to put a premium on stripped-down, minimal forms of architectural expression. Even the fair’s lessons for city planning have been superseded during the last two decades, the penchant for comprehensive urban plans having been replaced by a preference for piecemeal solutions. But then, if the influence of the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 was less long-lasting than twentieth-century critics have imagined, their estimate of its destructive effects may also have been exaggerated.

The photographs accompanying this article were drawn from the 700 images of the World’s Columbian Exposition that constitute the Charles Dudley Arnold collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Arnold was the fair’s official photographer. From May 1 through July 4 the Institute will exhibit sixty large-format platinum prints from the Arnold collection.

DEEP IN THE SHADOWS

(Continued from Page 69) Missouri, in 1907, leaving the home place in the hands of a caretaker. It would remain uninhabited by the family for fifteen years. When Gilbert Hall died in 1909, Lily and her adolescent son returned to live not in New Iberia but in New Orleans. Hall, an aspiring artist, dropped out of school in the tenth grade and later won scholarships to study painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Arts. Upon the death of his mother in 1918 he inherited a half interest in the New Iberia home place: the co-owner was his aunt. Mrs. Harriet “Pattee” Torian, who was childless and lived in New Orleans. The following year Mrs. Torian was widowed and the City of New Iberia offered $15,000 to purchase the Weeks place, expressing the intent of turning the land into a park to honor the city’s war dead. Instead Hall paid his aunt $7,500 and at the age of twenty-five became the sole owner. He spent a year and a half abroad before returning to Louisiana in 1922.

Upon his return Hall immediately sought out the best architect in New Orleans to guide the repair and restoration of the house in New Iberia and by good fortune found Richard Koch (pronounced “coke”) of the firm of Armstrong and Koch. Thus began Koch’s affiliation with the Shadows, an affiliation that lasted well beyond Hall’s death. Koch, whom Hall considered “unquestionably the final authority on the traditional architecture of Louisiana,” worked upon “the problem of making the house habitable without in the least changing its original purpose and condition,” as Hall would write in 1940 in a long paper with the unwieldy title, “An Account of the Restoration of an Old House and the Care of its Gardens, with a Statement of Intentions as to its Future Preservation, in Perpetuity.”

“Structurally, the house was sound; but repairs had to be made, and light, heat, and plumbing provided for.” Hall continued. “The latter services might have been installed by anyone, but the work on the house was entrusted to Mr. Koch for the reason that he best knew whether the dilapidated detail was correctly reproduced and because he knew how to install these practical improvements without disturbing the appearance of the house.”

Koch’s attitude toward authenticity was somewhat prescient for 1922. In those days, when leading American restorationists were relying upon conjecture informed by aesthetics to guide the restoration of historically important buildings, Koch “left all sound surviving detail [Hall’s emphasis] in the house intact.” The architect found intact the original plaster cornices, wood floors, woodwork, doors, pilasters, and window details. Hall wrote. Most of the walls, however, were replastered, and the big porch columns were stripped down to the brick and restuccoed. In order to minimize the intrusion and the disruption of historic fabric Koch constructed within existing rooms a kitchen and bathroom on the first floor and a bathroom on the second floor.

Today, seventy years after the fact, of course, not every restoration decision made in 1922 goes unchallenged. Why turn the two windows and center door on the first-floor loggia into a trio of French doors? And why, absent historical precedent, balance the nineteenth-century shutters between the end columns on the west side of the front porches with corresponding shutters on the east side?

Once the work on the house was completed in December 1922, Hall later wrote, he turned his attention to the landscape. Here he disregarded historical precedent and designed what he considered to be an appropriate setting. Hall took liberties that would not be sanctioned today for such a potentially rich historic site. He dismantled the decaying outbuildings that stood on the bayou side of the house.

David Wecks had built his home place to stand in virtual isolation along the Teche; ninety years later his great-grandson found the old house to be hemmed in on a tract reduced to just two and a half acres. Downtown New Iberia was at Hall’s doorstep. The road along what was now the south edge of the property had become both New Iberia’s Main Street and the major highway. U.S. 90, connecting New Orleans and Texas, and a gasoline station and a fruit stand were visible from the mansion’s south porches. A large, recently built Greek Revival house loomed to the east, and a Ford garage stood immediately to the west. All that remained of the landscaping around the house, Hall later would write, were thirteen live oaks that he believed his great-grandmother had planted in about 1830 (an opinion now challenged), six camellia trees that she planted later, and a clump of bamboo.

In an attempt to cultivate a vegetative screen for the east, south, and west borders of the property, Hall tried out many varieties of plants and discovered that only bamboo would provide a dense screen year-round beneath the shade of the live oaks. Because he believed that the south facade of the house should be viewed obliquely, Hall removed a gate that provided an axial approach from Main Street and positioned new entrances near the corners of the property. From these points he laid gently curving gravel walkways that led to the columned front and bordered the new paths with aspidistra. To the east of the house he created a garden, laying rectilinear walks with bricks salvaged from the slave quarters and placed marble statues representing the four seasons at the garden’s corners. The statues, Hall typed out in a description he framed and placed in the garden, “were once in the gardens of the old Hester plantation.” On the north