CIVIC ART REPORT

DES MOINES, IOWA.

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It is somewhat hazardous to offer any concrete plan by which the appearance of a city may be definitely and consciously improved. There is always a danger that sentimental enthusiasts will confuse this phase of the city plan with the once popular but ineffectual "City Beautiful" movement. It is hoped that in Des Moines there will be no such misunderstanding. The City Plan is an instrument designed to make this city a more healthful, comfortable and satisfying place in which people may live and work. There must necessarily be a consideration of the attractiveness of the city as exemplified in public buildings, monuments, treatment of the river parks, and the like. The city plan itself through zoning, guidance of street development, proper placement of parks and a solution of railroad and street car problems will tend to introduce a greater measure of order and system into municipal growth. But there are many structural details of the city which should come under special observation and control. The problem of building a more attractive city is not so much a matter of spending large sums on superficial decorations and embellishments as of giving proper guidance to its normal physical growth.

One who sees Des Moines with a sensitive eye finds it generally pleasing. There is an impressiveness in the grouping of newer office buildings down-town. The civic
center is a welcome departure from the conventional. The streets have good pavements and are marred only by the car tracks here and there. Trees are everywhere. No slums are found. Public work seems to be of a high order. Individual homes are predominant; few without some landscape treatment. Certain buildings such as the Ford Plant, the Homestead Printing Plant, the Rollins Hosiery Mills, the Cottage Grove Presbyterian Church, the Wetherell Apartments, the Polk County Hospital stand out because of unusual merit. Grand Avenue is remembered because of its dignity and spaciousness. The river views have not been wholly spoiled from the bridges. Des Moines is different enough from other cities to be easily remembered.

Without great effort, every phase of its development can be given outstanding merit.

It should surpass all others of the State in attractiveness. It is the capital. Nature has given it a superb site. All that is required is a greater regard for the eye. Things that may be either pleasing to the eye or repulsive frequently become the latter by default. Ugliness is a product of indifference. The need is for an acceptance of the challenge of ugliness, for a clearing house for better ideas and suggestions, for an authority to which appeals may be taken in matters of taste.

Des Moines has a newly created art commission having control over the design and location of statuary memorials and works of art in public places. Des Moines
is one of a select group of seventeen American cities having such a body. It has a City Planning Commission and the law under which the latter body will function gives it control over the design and location of public buildings, bridges, viaducts, street fixtures, public structures and appurtenances. There are art societies and committees among the women's clubs, all interested in the subject of art. There are art teachers in the public schools engaged daily in promoting among children an interest in things beautiful. It would seem reasonable to suppose that enough support could be built up among these groups to insure the carrying out of a plan for making Des Moines the most attractive capital city in this country. The art commission should take the lead in an endeavor to enlist support for a definite program.

The difficulty is going to be in the stimulation of popular interest in civic art. The people of Des Moines, like those of scores of other cities, are devoted to music, and other arts but objects which appeal to the eye, in spite of art education in public schools are rarely selected. The dwellings that people live in and the apartments that are built are evidence of this.

If public taste were more dependable, Des Moines would never have witnessed the invasion of residential districts by hideous filling stations and objectionable stores. Beautiful natural ravines would not be dumping grounds. Street trees would have been planted with more
consistency. Park areas would not have been denuded of
shrubbery and valuable trees cut down. Business houses
would have distinction without the need of blatant signs.
Real Estate promoters would be more interested in "home
sites" than mere "lots".

There is scant hope at this time, however, for wide
popular support for a movement of this character. Any real
advances which are made in the improvement of the outward
aspect of Des Moines will probably have to come from the
few who appreciate the subtle influences of the beautiful.
Those who are not afraid to stand for better art in public
and semi-public works should be organized. The civic art
movement should be fostered among them through an Art
League. Such an association should be formed to provide
encouragement and support for the official art commission.

A specific program which can be used to secure re-
sults from this effort may be outlined as follows. Des
Moines has much to do.

CIVIC CENTER.

The Civic Center is one of the distinctive features
of the city. The reclamation of the river and its improve-
ment as a part of the public building group plan is an
achievement that has brought Des Moines widespread recognition.
Many cities have taken inspiration from this achievement.
Few can show equal progress in carrying out such an am-
bitious plan.

The Civic Center, however, is not yet complete. It
should be finished, for the remaining effort is inconse-
sequentia; when compared with that of getting the project started. This involves erection of a museum building site already owned, the development of the present playground north of Grand Avenue, the improvement of the river by continuation of walls and construction of dams and a more studied landscape treatment of banks especially those along the power plant. In the course of time the railroad bridges will be replaced and it is believed that concrete structure should be built in conformity with existing bridges. Plate One is a conception of the finished Civic Center as outlined above. The features of this scheme which deserve immediate attention are as follows:

1. A low dam should be built in the bed of the river below the lower railroad bridge to raise the normal level of the water through the civic center. The reflecting pools thus created will greatly enhance the effectiveness of bridges and buildings and make the river more usable for recreation purposes. The water-board recently built a dam of this type in the Raccoon River at a cost of approximately $35,000.

2. The old power plant north of Grand Avenue should be removed inasmuch as the power company is now equipped with a new plant. An effort should be made immediately to enlist the cooperation of the power company in the improvements of conditions along the river from Grand Avenue to the dam. It would be possible without great expense to plant the grounds and river bank at the power station and transform the appearance of property. Walls should be built and this whole property permanently improved in conformity with the civic center scheme. To date the company has done little or nothing to match the effort of the city in building a feature here which gives Des Moines distinction throughout the entire country.
3. The general effect of the civic center would be helped also by a more permanent landscape treatment of the present play area or the east bank north of Grand Avenue. A decision should be made as to the future use of this area and plans prepared at once for its development along modern lines. A natatorium and recreation building is recommended for this site.

4. Additional tree planting in the vicinity of the railroad bridges and southward seems necessary also for the purpose of screening out as much as possible the gas plant and other structures not in keeping with civic center buildings.

5. Sites are available in the civic center for monuments, fountains and statuary and features of this sort should be sought for these locations. They would add a little more life, color and diversity to the scene, which it needs at present.

These measures above would do a great deal to add finish to the civic center scheme. The more costly work of completing the building group and reconstructing the auditorium and railroad bridges will come later.

CAPITOL APPROACH.

The thought has been expressed in Des Moines many times that a more dignified approach to the capitol should be provided from the west. The State of Iowa, through reclamation of capitol surroundings, has set a high standard for work of this sort. The city has done equally well in the civic center. It remains now merely to tie these two features together. This can be done by giving special treatment to Locust Street from the Civic Center to the Capitol.

There are three basic methods by which Locust Street may be made an adequate and distinctive avenue between capitol hill and the river.
1 - Building heights could be limited. The Zoning Ordinance now places a limit of 12 stories upon Locust Street buildings, but if this limit is reached by a single building on either side the view of the capitol from the river will be cut off. The impression created by the State House on the hill can only be preserved by keeping commercial structures along Locust Street low. An agreement might be secured among property owners to observe a moderate limitation.

2 - A more satisfactory plan would be to widen Locust Street to 150 feet cutting off the fronts of buildings and re-designing them to conform with a complete study of the facade of the entire street. This plan also would involve a restriction of building heights. The result would be a broad, dignified plaza setting off the view of the capitol and giving Des Moines a feature such as one expects to find in metropolitan centers and capital cities.

3 - The most drastic plan but one frequently supported would require the condemnation or purchase of all property in the half block on either side of Locust Street. This would leave the rear facade of buildings on Walnut and Grand exposed. These would have to become virtually double front establishments having the depth of a normal lot. The park strip thus secured would give the capitol a magnificent approach. It is believed, however, that the expense of this undertaking is too great to secure for it more than passing consideration.

The diagram, Plate Two, shows scheme Two used to link the capitol and Civic Center. It is recommended that if the capitol approach idea is approved, further study be made of all three schemes for the purpose of determining preliminary costs and devising a practicable plan which can be published and put into effect.

OTHER PUBLIC BUILDINGS.

The capitol, while outside the jurisdiction of the municipality, is a noteworthy feature of Des Moines. The capitol commission cannot be too highly commended for its work reclaiming the capitol grounds. They are now a credit to Iowa and a mark of distinction in the city. Only a few
faults can be found with this work. There is still some property needed. The light standards are not graceful in design and are entirely too numerous and obtrusive. An excessive amount of pavement tends to spoil the effect of the park. The money which might have been saved in asphalt perhaps would have paid for the removal of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument to its permanent position. This should be done to complete the improvement. It is suggested that a committee of the City Planning Commission be appointed to confer with state officials regarding matters of common interest affecting the appearance of Des Moines.

The public schools of the city deserve special mention. Noteworthy buildings have recently been erected. The school board obviously recognizes the cultural value of dignified and impressive school houses. Both Roosevelt and Lincoln High Schools deserve considerable praise. The Junior High Schools are all commendable structures. The newer elementary schools, however, are somewhat more commonplace.

All schools should have an appropriate landscape setting. This the board will undoubtedly provide. A protected lawn, an enframement of trees, choice display of flowers, all enhance the value of the property and protect the investment which has been made in exterior architectural effects. Des Moines has passed through the era of factory-like public schools with small cinder-
covered dooryards and a few struggling trees in front. The complete school plant should include a first class building and a commodious site, all carefully planned so that each element of the scheme, the landscape setting for the building, the playground at the rear and the central building itself may serve its proper purpose. The first requirement in carrying out a policy of this sort is to secure school sites of appropriate size. This the Des Moines Board of Education is now doing.

The other public buildings of Des Moines outside the Civic Center, have no special merit. The Court House is of conventional design and easily recognizable. In a group it might have a dominant appeal; standing where it does it is virtually lost. The station opposite gives the courthouse a slight advantage, but the two structures are so dissimilar there is little opportunity for one to supplement and enhance the effect of the other. A new station on this sight might be designed to harmonize with the courthouse, creating a second civic center.

UNION STATION.

The often expressed desire for a new Union Station arises partly from the belief that Des Moines should have a more creditable rail gateway. There is an economic value in a union station, as the transportation studies of Des Moines have clearly demonstrated, but this is not widely understood. The average citizen sees only the small separate structures serving the several railroads. He has difficulty
getting to them because of their cramped surroundings. He has conviction that the capital city deserves something better.

When the time comes for a reconstruction of any one of the existing passenger terminals, a movement should be inaugurated officially by the city or by the planning commission looking toward the development of a union station. From the standpoint of both operating policies and the effectiveness of the station as one of the dominant public buildings of the city, there is only one satisfactory site. The new union station should be built near the Capitol grounds. Adequate space is available here to give the building a suitable setting and to permit future expansion of the terminal facilities. All railroads can use it. A structure can be erected which will last for generations and being adjacent to the capitol will become one of the most impressive gateways to be found in American cities.

BRIDGES

Des Moines has done well in its bridge construction. The permanent river bridges with the possible exception of the Locust Street Bridge are all of good design. These handsome structures alone add considerable to the appearance of the city. The structure over Keosauqua Way, however, is scarcely in the same class and not as pleasing. Des Moines, however, has many opportunities yet to build creditable bridges.

Wherever a large investment is made in such per-
manent public works, effort should not be spared to secure designs which will represent the highest standards of good taste. The judgment of men qualified to speak in such matters is greatly to be desired. This service of recommending competent specialists in architecture and landscape architecture for public work and of urging the employment of other artists of known standing where there handiwork is to be seen, is a primary function of an art league. Des Moines has not suffered much from bad advice but many cities have made grievous errors in the selection of man to build bridges, schools and other public structures that appeal to the eye. An art jury can act as a buffer or a protecting agency, but the most important step toward the production of meritorious structures throughout the city is in the selection of competent and dependable professional advisers.

SMALL PARKS.

The smaller parks for instance are not outstanding features of Des Moines for the reason that none have been developed in accordance with a carefully studied plan prepared by a fully trained landscape architect. The chief service to be rendered by parks of this type is merely that of being agreeable to look upon. They should be planned and graded and planted with this thought uppermost in the mind of the designer. When so handled they can become veritable jewels in the structure of the city. They will show none of the uncertain treatment of Drake Park,
none of the neglect of Nash Park, none of the crude equipment of Burke Park.

The case of the latter park deserves special note. Across University Avenue from Burke Park is the new county war memorial. At the time it was announced that this memorial was to be erected here, the park was a barren, newly graded bit of park property. It would seem entirely reasonable to presume that the designers of Burke Park would recognize the memorial across the street and adapt the plan of the park to it.

An opportunity was here for cooperative effort. The memorial is clearly in view from the park; the park forms the foreground of the memorial and is in full view from it.

As finally improved, however, the park is detached from the memorial and in its general layout forms a wholly unsatisfactory and disagreeable setting for it. The present arrangement is not a credit to the capital city. Failures of this sort to grasp the elementary principles of civic art and take advantage of such obvious opportunities to do superior public work greatly emphasize the need of both art commission and an art league. Of all the responsible municipal departments, the park department should be the very first in the promotion of civic art. The parks themselves all exist primarily to render service of this character. That is why they are acquired in the first place. Nature will always do her part to preserve this function. Their so-called improvement, however, is too frequently of
a lower order. Des Moines can stand considerable improvement in the handling of its public parks.

MONUMENTS.

The Polk County war memorial previously referred to is perhaps the best of the few works of this sort found in Des Moines. It has dignity, simplicity, pleasing lines and a commanding site. The monuments on the capitol grounds are of a different age and are somewhat detached from the life of the city. The sculptured groups on the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, however, are of superior design. Elsewhere in Des Moines outdoor monuments and memorials are not to be found. The city apparently has felt no desire to commemorate historical events or persons or to embellish the city with work of art. Des Moines differs in this respect from many eastern and southern cities.

The time is coming however, when Des Moines will wish to place fountains, shafts, and sculptured works throughout the city. The interest in such features may not be strong but this is only a temporary condition, resulting from the prevailing devotion to material interests and the belief that cultural things are without value. The capital, the leading city of the state in population and resources must expect to rise above the level of the commonplace. Its public buildings must be of high order. Their ground and the streets around will need the enlivening effect of decorative stone and bronze feature set up solely because the enduring qualities of form and arrangement. All through
the city, especially along Keosauqua Way, are bits of property often of odd shape which now make no contribution to the municipal scenes. Most of these are suitable sites for works of the character in mind. Their proper use for this purpose should be an objective of the art league. A few monuments of genuine merit would do a great deal to stimulate a wider public interest in such things. It is extremely important, however, to get good pieces. It is better to have nothing than to have monuments that lack merit or violate fundamental principles of design.

**STREET LIGHTS.**

Des Moines has reached a size which practically requires a change in the form of street lighting. At present an underground lighting system is found only in a few parts of the city. In the business district the lighting standards are of the antiquated cluster type. Along Keosauqua Way and the boulevards, more modern standards have been installed. Throughout the remainder of the city the old system of poles and wires and suspended lights is in use. This system is not only inefficient and unsatisfactory but as long as it is continued, the proper growing of street trees is impossible.

It is believed that Des Moines will find it profitable at this time to have plans for a complete new system of lighting prepared. This should provide for the installation of permanent standards of good design with feed wires laid underground. This system should be di-
versified to the extent of having a uniform type of standard for business centers, major streets, local or minor streets and pleasure drives. It is hardly the province of this report to suggest types of light standards, spacing or other matters involved in the design of such a comprehensive system. This is a province of electrical engineers. Many firms supply lighting units and standards and offer service in the preparation of plans of this sort. The only point that need be emphasized here is that in the selection of standards, special consideration should be given to their design. An art jury should aid in the selection of standards of the different types. The standard now in use along Keosauqua Way has the merit of simplicity and a certain element of strength in its design. This standard, however, will serve for business districts but something more carefully studied should be selected for major streets, residential districts and pleasure drives.

STREET TREES.

Des Moines has been for many years proud of the trees which line its streets. This pride, however, has never been translated into definite measures for the preservation of existing trees and the encouragement of new planting. Yet there is no device which the city might adopt to improve its appearance that would have the value of a city-wide tree planting program. Streets and avenues bordered throughout with uniform species evenly spaced and well cared for would add immeasurably to the character of the city. Trees would stimulate a higher degree of civic
-16-

pride. They would improve the value of property. They would unquestionably contribute to the health of the community.

It would seem entirely proper for the city to have a definite forestry program, providing for (1) the eventual removal of soft wood, short-lived varieties, such as soft or silver maple, box elder, poplars and cottonwood, (2) planting of trees of a permanent type such as hard maple, elm, pin oak, hackberry, ash, linden and oriental plane, (3) the requirement of uniform spacing between trees which should never be less than thirty feet, the standard being forty, (4) the requirement that trees of a single species be planted throughout the entire length of each individual street, (5) the responsibility for the care of street trees should be assumed by the municipality rather than the individual property owner.

This last item requires the organization of a new department in the city to be devoted exclusively to forestry work. It is recommended that steps be taken immediately to organize this department. The first work of this department will be to formulate a working program modelled somewhat along the lines indicated above. Of the several elements in this program the most important will concern the planting of new trees. For this work three (3) methods of comprehensive tree planting may be outlined here:
First, the work may be done when new streets are laid out. This is the best method of insuring the streets against barrenness or improper planting. The cost of putting new trees on streets is small compared to the remainder of the cost of development. The planting charge is a valid item in the expense of street improvement and should be as readily accepted as curb and gutter or paving costs. The responsibility of planting trees on every newly laid out street should be assumed willingly by the land developer. Unwillingness to render this small service to the community and to those who buy lots on the new streets should be met by some action on the part of the city. It is believed that the city plan commission through the power which is given it to approve subdividing practice can do a great deal to encourage every subdivider to carry out his part of the comprehensive tree planting program.

The second method of securing good street tree planting is by ordinance and special assessment. This method will apply especially to old streets that were not planted when first laid out. This form of action is quite common and in many cities has been productive of highly satisfactory results. For the direction and administration of the work which arises in connection with such an ordinance, a forestry department or a shade tree commission is almost a necessity. Several states, notably Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania authorize the appointment of commissions to control the planting as well as the preservation of shade trees in parks, playgrounds and along public streets. Because of the extraordinary importance of shade trees in Des Moines and also because the park department and other municipal agencies are usually overburdened with their own work, it is believed that an independent forestry department will secure better results than might follow if this department were merged with one already existing. This matter, however, is one which can best be settled after a conference with municipal officials.

The third means of carrying out a tree planting program is through the voluntary cooperation of individual property owners. Civic organizations having a sincere desire to assist in
the building of a better city can frequently carry out a tree planting plan without the use of special authority. There are numerous records of cities in which the property owners of certain streets under the leadership of some individual or active committee joined to create a local fund and make plans for planting trees and caring for them. This method of securing a uniform permanent planting of trees along certain streets is suggested merely as a device to be used in case others fail.

POLES AND WIRES.

The removal of poles and wires from the streets is necessary if a comprehensive tree planting program is undertaken. Some progress has been made in Des Moines along this line. The newer subdivisions, with few exceptions, all provide easements along rear lines of lots for the reception of overhead and underground utilities. The practice of reserving such easements will become established if the city plan commission has the power to review subdivision plans before they are accepted for record. The utility companies, in practically every city where rear lot easements are common, prefer to place poles and wires there instead of on the streets. Once this system is established there is no reason for the appearance of these disfigurements elsewhere except perhaps to serve street lights of the older type.

The municipality, however, has a certain obligation with regard to the removal of poles and wires on principal thoroughfares. There should be a demand in the city to eliminate these utilities entirely or at least reduce them to an absolute minimum. It is suggested that
at an early date conferences be held with utility officials and an agreement entered into with them looking toward the removal of poles on certain length of streets each year. The city will be in a position to make such a requirement as soon as it is ready to install a modern underground lighting system.

SIGNS AND BILLBOARDS.

Des Moines is not seriously afflicted with billboards. Some are apparent through the city but in general they are confined to districts in which such structures are obviously not objectionable. The local company which maintains the larger number of billboards has been especially progressive in its treatment of property used for display advertising. In several instances noted throughout the city the advertising of this company is set off by trees and shrubs and made to contribute something to the appearance of the neighborhood. Vacant lots used for this purpose and treated in such a way are certainly preferable to rubbish heaps and dumping grounds.

Billboards in purely residential districts, however, notwithstanding the efforts made to dress them up are blatant and offensive structures. They unquestionably destroy the charm and attractiveness of residential districts. The owners of property spend considerable sums improving yards and surroundings. The homes, taken together, give character and dignity to the district which
billboards proceed to destroy. There should be protection against this. The Zoning Ordinance to a large extent will provide this protection. Property owners now may feel free to move against those few remaining billboards which mar these districts. Once they are removed they are not likely to return.

The signs displayed from store fronts in the business district of Des Moines are more objectionable than billboards. There has apparently been no effort made to control these signs and they overhang the sidewalks in all sizes, shapes and colors. The result is something of a country fair appearance. Each proprietor endeavors to outdo his neighbor and the result is that many signs of modest inoffensive proportions cannot be seen at all except from a point immediately in front. The city, by its failure to place a sensible regulation upon these structures, has permitted a rather severe penalty to be imposed upon the storekeeper whose sign is trim and neat and not disfiguring to the general appearance of the street.

The city has a legal right to control all structures which project into space of the public highway. All the larger cities have ordinances regulating the size of overhanging signs. The twenty-four inch projection should be considered the maximum. This leads to the erection of vertical rather than horizontal signs, but the street prospect is very obviously improved. Contrary to the opinions that may arise among business men, such an ordinance does not work a hardship. It applies alike to all and enables a
man to erect a sign pointing out his place of business with some assurance that his neighbor cannot put up a much larger one and prevent his from being seen.

SIDEWALK OBSTRUCTIONS.

Certain side-walk obstructions are noted in Des Moines. They occur chiefly in the business district where side-walk space is at a premium. The city has the power to prevent the use of this space for display advertising or structures which interfere with the pedestrian movement. The enforcement of a uniform policy with regard to these matters will in time give the business district more character. The police should have orders to require the removal of all show cases, tire racks, signs and other obstacles which have been thrust out into the public highway.

PRIVATE BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS.

There is little that the municipality can do to improve the appearance of private structures and grounds except to set a good example. Garden clubs, however, can offer prizes or awards of merit for the improvement of home grounds. A garden contest every two or five years would be an effective means of stimulating interest in trees, shrubs and flowers around the home.

The Chamber of Commerce or some other civic organization could well offer an annual award for the best designed building. Dwellings, apartments, small stores,
office buildings and factories might be considered. The
Chamber of Commerce of Cleveland, Ohio, restricts the field
to apartments, factories and small stores. If a way could
be found the taxes on each meritorious building might be
removed for a period. Such devices merely stimulate an
interest in improved building design and result in a better
looking city.