Patterns and Stages in City Planning

The study of city planning on the Pacific Coast contributes to our understanding of American history in three ways. Most importantly, it refines our knowledge of the Progressive Era, and especially the politics involved in city planning during that period. It also extends our understanding of the development of western cities at the close of their frontier periods of growth. Finally, it enhances our knowledge of the ways by which businessmen have tried to shape their social, political, and economic environments in the United States.

Progressive-Era City Planning

Many historians have concluded that an appropriate way to view the Progressive Era is to see that period as one in which Americans were reordering their lives in the wake of disruptions
caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization. The city planning movements on the Pacific Coast represented efforts to take advantage of opportunities and handle problems resulting from the economic transformation that was occurring in that region as elsewhere in the United States. A major theme was the replacement of a personal, face-to-face society by a more highly organized, bureaucratic society. Businesses run by management hierarchies, nationwide labor unions, farm cooperatives, and professional organizations spread across the land. Professional expertise came to count for more than personal connections in American life, and informal ways of doing things gave way to working through formal, bureaucratic organizations.

The businessmen who were so important to Pacific Coast city planning partook of the growing organization of American life, and the organizational synthesis approach to modern American history helps explain their actions. Even such well-known business leaders as James Phelan of San Francisco and John Ainsworth of Portland found it essential to work through organizations to achieve their goals. Chambers of commerce, commercial clubs, boards of trade, and other business organizations were very important in supporting planning. Local improvement clubs, which drew much of their strength from neighborhood businessmen, proliferated in all of the cities. Citywide organizations soon followed. Businessmen set up some, such as the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco, as a way to work around the established political system, which they viewed as unresponsive to their wishes. Others, such as the Greater Portland Plans Association, worked within the established political system. Those opposed to planning, such as the south-end businessmen in Seattle, also worked through organizations. Nor were businessmen alone. Professionals—especially architects, engineers, and lawyers—formed their own organizations, such as local chapters of the American Institute of Architects, to work in coalition with the business groups.

With its stress on the growing desire for order and efficiency, the organizational synthesis approach to history explains well the thoughts and attitudes of the businessmen in the forefront of the planning campaigns on the Pacific Coast. Confronted with the burgeoning growth of their cities, businessmen viewed planning as a key method to channel the forces of change. They argued that
only city planning could ensure the orderly and efficient development of their cities. Only through planning by experts, they believed, could the construction of new harbor facilities, street and transportation systems, and civic centers be properly coordinated so that their cities would function as harmonious entities rather than as discordant collections of separate parts. Further, businessmen anticipated that such integrated developments would save tax dollars spent on public services while simultaneously boosting private profits by providing facilities that would encourage the development of trade and manufacturing.

Such developments would, business leaders thought, help put their cities on the map as part of America's urban network and aid them greatly in their rivalries with other Pacific Coast cities. They were proud of their cities and sought, through planning, recognition for them as the equals of cities in other, longer settled sections of the country. They hoped such recognition would serve them well in their continued quest for growth. People, capital, and businesses would all, they anticipated, gravitate to attractive, well-designed centers. At the same time, they were conscious of the ties their cities maintained with their regional hinterlands and were always concerned about the actions of their neighbors. Intercity rivalry motivated many of those engaged in planning. Only through the adoption of well-modeled plans, they argued, could their cities either catch up with or move ahead of other cities on the Pacific Coast.

A desire to maintain their influence over new groups entering their cities also led businessmen to spearhead planning movements. Businessmen saw parks, municipal ornaments, and civic centers as tools by which they might harmonize the often clashing values of the many different groups in their cities. Through planning they hoped to unite neighborhoods separated by ethnic, economic, and geographic barriers. Planning came to mean building functional cities whose residents were bound together by a sense of civic unity and civic patriotism.

In their leadership and support of the planning campaigns, businessmen blurred the boundaries separating public from private actions. They saw no sharp separation between what they were doing to build up their business enterprises as private citizens and what they could accomplish through politics. Public planning was for most of them an extension of their private work.
Thus, for example, Frank Mott became deeply involved in real estate development even as he sponsored city planning as Oakland’s mayor.

The city planning movements were often associated with progressivism. Business leaders like Phelan in San Francisco were often active in the progressive campaigns of their cities, and many of the same business groups that backed planning (such as the Municipal League in Seattle) were also deeply involved in progressive reforms. That situation was hardly surprising. City planning proponents shared many assumptions and goals with Progressive-Era reformers. Most fundamentally, reformers and planners believed that people could be changed—and changed for the better—by altering their environments. People, they thought, could determine their own futures, could progress to new levels of development. Businessmen in the city planning movements believed that parks, boulevards, and civic centers would inspire all citizens with a vaguely defined sense of order and morality.

As illustrated in the works of the historian William Wilson and other scholars, the early city planning movement was much more than an aesthetic attempt to beautify cities. In his study of the city beautiful movement in five cities across the nation, Wilson concluded that “for all its idealistic rhetoric the movement was imbued with the courage of practicality, for it undertook the most difficult task of all, to accept human material where found, to take the city as it was and to refashion it into something better.” On the Pacific Coast, as well, businessmen favored planning because it sought to come to grips with what they saw as urban problems and opportunities. Nonetheless, the plans were inadequate for the tasks at hand. While viewed as comprehensive by people in the Progressive Era, the plans did not in reality deal with all urban problems. The planning focused more on the needs of the cities than on the needs of all of the people in them. They touched only lightly on housing, for instance. Only the Bogue Plan addressed anything approaching the full range of urban problems.

City planning on the Pacific Coast originated in diverse sources and passed through several definite stages. Planning often began with the efforts of business groups—especially merchants or real estate men—to improve certain sections of their cities, often the downtown districts. Street lighting and cleaning frequently headed the list of early civic improvements. Municipal decorations, street
tree plantings, and water fountains were often included in the first stage of development.

From scattered local actions, planning proponents began thinking in terms of citywide improvements, a second stage in planning. The creation of park and boulevard systems was often the initial attempt to deal with city problems at more than the neighborhood level. The establishment of park systems, rather than simply individual parks, introduced people to the idea that they could shape their urban environments. In the park movements, too, urbanites were first exposed to the idea that beauty could have economic utility, a major theme put forward by the businessmen involved in the planning movement. Expositions—the Lewis and Clark Exposition, the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition—also spurred the development of planning. Like the world’s fair in Chicago in 1893, the expositions awakened city dwellers to the possibilities of coordinated building.

From those efforts Pacific Coast businessmen moved on to a third stage in planning, the preparation of what they saw as comprehensive plans for their cities. It was this development that most clearly separated the city beautiful movements from earlier efforts at civic improvement. Sometimes working on their own, sometimes in conjunction with city officials, business-dominated organizations hired planners to come to their cities and draft guides for their future growth.

Variety characterized the resulting plans. Charles Robinson’s plans for Oakland and Los Angeles dealt mainly with parks and boulevards, while Virgil Bogue’s plan for Seattle emphasized new designs for that city’s streets, transportation system, and harbor. In general, those plans prepared after 1909—a major transition point in planning history, when the city beautiful movement gave way to a city functional movement—were more highly engineered than the earlier plans. The plans for Portland and especially for Seattle dealt more with the details of harbors and streets than with parks and boulevards. Too much, however, should not be made of that division. All of the plans addressed the same major items and possessed the same basic goals. The differences among the plans were differences of degree, not kind.

The political contests over the acceptance of the plans composed the fourth stage. Business groups achieved only partial suc-
cess in their efforts to secure public acceptance and adherence to the plans. The degrees to which they succeeded in winning approval for the plans depended on several factors. Those plans with limited goals were more likely to be implemented than those that sought to remake the cities in major ways. Robinson's plan for Oakland won greater acceptance than Burnham's plan for San Francisco. Those plans put forward as suggested, rather than mandatory, guides for the development of cities were more likely to be approved. Bogue's rigid plan for Seattle went down to defeat at the polls, while Bennett's flexible plan for Portland secured public acceptance. Political support could prove crucial in winning approval for planning. Mayor Frank Mott's strong backing of the Robinson Plan for Oakland helped obtain implementation for much of the plan.

The pattern of stages in the development of city planning in Pacific Coast cities, while discernable, was far from tidy. Different stages overlapped each other or were entirely absent in some cities. For instance, the park and boulevard movement, which was so important in all of the other Pacific Coast cities, was of only limited significance in San Francisco. Each city possessed its own pattern of development, making the planning movement complex.

**Western City Planning**

The distinctive features of each city also make it hard to generalize about the development of Seattle, Portland, Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles as western cities; but some observations are possible through an examination of their planning movements. Despite their origins as "instant cities," the Pacific Coast metropolises were coming to resemble their eastern and midwestern counterparts by 1900 and 1910. The historian Lawrence Larson has argued that as early as the 1880s the towns of the trans-Mississippi West faced many of the same problems, and derived many of the same solutions, as eastern towns and cities. Larson has shown that as they matured, western centers came increasingly to resemble other cities in their architecture and cultural character.
In most respects the planning movements that occurred in the Pacific Coast cities were similar to those going on elsewhere in the United States in the same time period. The same basic stages and patterns of development can be found in the cities that Wilson has studied. Well-established eastern planners, a tightly knit group of professionals who knew each other closely, prepared the plans for the western cities: John Olmsted, Daniel Burnham, Charles Robinson, Edward Bennett, and Virgil Bogue. Only Bogue had any particular knowledge of western cities, and even Bogue had to accept Olmsted as a partner. Not surprisingly, the plans drafted for the Pacific Coast cities differed little from those drawn up for cities elsewhere in America. The eastern planners were interested in turning Pacific Coast cities into "ideal" cities. Blinded by their previous training and work, they could do only what they had learned from their earlier experiences. Most made little effort to adjust their plans to take advantage of—or even acknowledge the existence of—the western environment. San Francisco and Portland would, in their visions, have become Washington, D.C., Chicago, or Paris. In the hilly Pacific Coast cities, for example, arterials and circumferentials would ride roughshod over the topography. In Seattle, even the native evergreen trees were to be replaced with deciduous trees from the East.

In its association with progressivism, city planning on the Pacific Coast also resembled planning in other regions of the United States. As Wilson and other scholars have demonstrated, planning and progressivism often went hand in hand in eastern and midwestern cities. In cities as diverse as New York, Chicago, Harrisburg, and Kansas City, city planning was associated with some aspects of urban progressivism. (Such an association was not, however, ubiquitous. Robert W. Speer, the city boss of Denver, was the single most important person in his city's planning movement.) In that respect, as in many others, city planning on the Pacific Coast was far from unique. Planning advocates there shared many of the same motivations of those operating elsewhere in America. The search for social harmony in their cities and the quest for recognition of their cities as urban centers of regional importance and national repute ran through the thoughts of many engaged in America's planning movement.4

However, a major event distinguished Pacific Coast planners from their national colleagues and motivated them. The tremen-
dous importance of the coming completion of the Panama Canal in leading businessmen, especially merchants, into planning movements was a unique element on the Pacific Coast. The eagerness of business leaders in cities up and down the coast to prepare for the opening of the canal and their fears that their counterparts in rival cities would use the canal to get ahead of them lent an urgency to the involvement of businessmen in the planning campaigns not found everywhere in America.5

Progressive-Era Businessmen

Businessmen sought to shape their social and cultural environments in a number of ways during the Progressive Era. They reasserted control over their individual factories through scientific management, or Taylorism, and created new management structures. So, too, they tried to develop city planning as a tool with which to control the vagaries of their urban environments.

That businessmen were active in city planning should not come as a surprise. Although Americans have conventionally viewed businessmen as opponents of planning, historians have recently shown that some businessmen have worked for certain types of planning throughout the twentieth century. In fact, recent scholarship suggests that business involvement in planning has been pervasive.6 Businessmen often turned to politics for the sometimes contradictory goals of trying to stabilize their competitive business environments, of seeking to win competitive advantages over each other, and of attempting to smooth out the ups and downs of the business cycle.7 The roles businessmen played in city planning should, thus, be most properly viewed as part of a larger picture: the efforts of businessmen to use planning to seek advancement for their firms.

Businessmen wanted to encourage the social and economic growth of their cities. They were boosters. The thought of uncontrolled growth, however, disturbed many of them; and they hoped through planning to channel growth along paths that they desired. Growth with harmony was one of their primary goals. They wanted to replicate in their cities what they saw as the harmonious func-
tioning of the many different parts of the pieces of machinery in their factories. Predictability and stability were their goals.

The limited success of businessmen in shaping their urban environments on the Pacific Coast is worth stressing in conclusion. In his examination of the city beautiful movement, Wilson concludes that planning accomplished a great deal. In addition to "tree-shaded boulevards, undulating parks, and graceful neoclassical buildings rich in ornament," the city beautiful movement "left a legacy of civic activism" and brought the professional planning expert to the fore. All true, both on the Pacific Coast and nationally. As commercial cities, those on the Pacific Coast, like those studied by Wilson, possessed large middle classes of businessmen and professionals eager for planning. Moreover, in contrast to industrial cities in which planning was less successful, they did not have "a higher proportion of laborers likely to be skeptical of sweeping improvement plans." It is important, however, to remember that in their major goal—the implementation of what they saw as comprehensive city plans—businessmen failed. The Pacific Coast cities contained too many different groups with different values for agreements to be reached on most aspects of city planning.

Planning was defeated in the political arena. All of the groups involved could agree that city planning in the abstract was valuable, but they reached few agreements on the concrete details. Various groups of businessmen fought each other. No monolithic business community existed in any of the Pacific Coast cities. In Seattle the issue of where to site the civic center split the business community. In Portland East Side and West Side business groups fought over how best to develop their city. In San Francisco the basic issue of how fast and by what means to rebuild after the earthquake and fire proved divisive. Moreover, divisions between business organizations and other groups killed the planning prospects. Labor organizations often opposed what business groups wanted. That type of division was most apparent in San Francisco, but it was significant in other cities as well, particularly Portland and Seattle. In the end, the city plans, which looked so beautiful to their proponents on paper, won only partial acceptance.