After a quarter century of rapid changes, Hartford seemed to return in the 1870s and 1880s to the moderate growth and social stability for which Horace Bushnell had yearned. The population rose only gradually, by an average of less than a thousand people a year, to reach 53,000 by 1890. Builders erected new houses and commercial buildings without changing the city’s basic form. As late as 1890, “Hartford was compact and closely knit, radiating only short distances from post-office square and city hall,” reminisced a former newspaper reporter years later. The developed part of the city extended barely two miles from City Hall Square. There were a few clusters of outlying homes, “but there were long stretches of vacant lands where daisies grew and cattle grazed.”¹

The local economy expanded haltingly, weathering a difficult downturn in the 1870s before returning to prosperity. By 1890, Hartford was somewhat more industrialized than in Bushnell’s day. On the south side of town stood the enormous Colt’s Armory where, under a blue onion dome, workers assembled revolvers and Gatling guns. Sprinkled in and around the downtown were a few dozen smaller factories, producing books, boxes, brass, candy, carriages, chairs, crackers, cutlery, hardware, industrial belting, iron, machinery, pottery, steam boilers, and soap. The emerging center of industry, though, was the “factory district”—a cluster of long, multistory brick buildings along the Park River (formerly the Little River) and the adjacent rail line running southwest from Bushnell Park. Among the major industries there were the Pope Manufacturing Company, the largest American manufacturer of bicycles; the Hartford Machine Screw Company; and the Pratt and Whitney Company, which made machine tools. All told, manufacturers in Hartford employed slightly more than nine thousand men, women, and children in 1890.² Adding to the city’s economy were the nearby manufacturing villages and towns, mostly created by Hartford capital: Collinsville manufactured axes, New Britain hardware, Thompsonville carpets, Rockville woollen cloth, Willimantic cotton thread, and South Manchester silk. Hartford remained a banking and insurance center as well. The insurance companies had rebounded after suffering heavy losses from the Chicago fire of 1871. They proclaimed their strength by building what one observer called “great granite piles”—ornate, mansard-roofed headquarters that stood out amid the more modest downtown buildings. By 1889 such firms as the Hartford Fire, Phoenix, Aetna, Aetna Life, Connecticut Mutual Life, and Travelers insurance companies had proven that both fire and life insurance companies would continue to compete successfully nationwide. The Hartford insurance industry had “reached a preeminence, which promises to be permanent,” boasted the Hartford Board of Trade.³

The quiet prosperity produced by Hartford’s factories, banks, and insurance companies was readily apparent to any visitor. Spacious homes lined the tree-shaded avenues, lending credence to the claim that Hartford was for its size the richest city in the United States. Some of this wealth had trickled down to the skilled workforce that manned the factories, helping keep peace in Hartford during a turbulent period in American labor history. “Honest work makes faithful workmen. . . . While labor troubles have visited many places during the last few years, causing great waste of capital and bitterness of feeling, Hartford has wholly escaped the contagion,” claimed the Board of Trade. “In our large establishments the relations between employers and employees are notably cordial, and any rash agitator who should attempt to disturb the
harmony would be treated by all with contempt." Organized labor was quite weak despite the efforts of Hartford's Central Labor Union, which helped form a Connecticut branch of the American Federation of Labor in 1887. Strikes were infrequent, and the open shop prevailed until the 1930s.¹

Whatever the eighties may have been elsewhere, in Hartford they were a placid era," recalled Henry Perkins, a man who had grown up then in the last middle-class enclave on the East Side. Money was flowing steadily into the city, and the years ahead promised more of the same:

Everyone felt confident of the future when Hartford would be larger and richer, but still the same pleasant place we loved, without any radical alteration in its character or mode of living. . . . The future might hold more leisure, larger houses, more servants, better horses. There might be more expensive parties, more trips abroad, but life would all be cut from the same pattern, a pattern which made for contentment and a sense of security among the prosperous. Alas for the placid eighties!²

The placid era of the 1870s and 1880s did not end with any violent disturbance, but instead with a powerful surge of growth that transformed Hartford at least as radically as had the first phase of industrialization. The 1890s began a forty-year period of frantic land development. Factories and commercial businesses expanded rapidly, and thousands of new immigrants poured into the city from southern and eastern Europe. The resulting changes in the spatial and social landscape made Bushnell's ideas about urban space seem obsolete. How could such a large and diverse population be brought together? Of what use was the "outdoor parlor" if the population was too scattered to reach it, and if the immigrants preferred to huddle in their ghettos anyway? How could the values of the park be said to extend outside its borders, if the squalor of the streets grew worse and worse?

Faced with what they saw as a new urban crisis, another generation of reformers experimented with ways to reform the use of urban space. Working mainly through voluntary organizations, the Hartford reformers of the 1890s and the early twentieth century drew inspiration both from local reform precedents and from new ideas being developed by reformers throughout the nation. This was a period of enormous reform activity in the United States, as socially conscious men and women, primarily from the middle and upper classes, set out to remedy a host of problems at the local, state, and national levels. Some of these "progressive" reformers, as they came to be called, sought to aid the urban working classes by setting up settlement houses and agitating for cleaner streets,
better housing, and government regulation of working conditions. Others sought to improve morality by agitating for the prohibition of alcohol and the suppression of prostitution. Still others sought greater democracy by reforming the electoral process and smashing monopoly, or—conversely—sought greater efficiency by expanding the power of “experts” to direct government policy and economic life scientifically.  

Some scholars claim to have discovered a common thread running through this tangle of reform activity. Though progressive reform was neither a coherent movement nor a coherent ideology, they argue, it can be seen as a general persuasion, a nebulous cluster of ideas prevalent among some members of the educated, urban middle class in the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s. The progressive frame of mind was based on a Protestant sense of social responsibility. Progressives thought they had a moral duty to improve society and to help form an enlightened, altruistic leadership. A second characteristic of progressive thought was a belief that people were shaped mainly by their environment and their experiences, and therefore that they could be improved. As time passed, the progressives argued more and more strongly that the way to do this was through what some of them called “social efficiency,” which meant using science, bureaucracy, and trained experts to create modern systems of organization. Their goal was to create a harmonious social order, which would take the place of what the progressives believed was a disappearing sense of local community.  

In some respects, progressive reform harmonized with the local tradition of environmental reform initiated by Horace Bushnell, particularly in its emphasis on social responsibility and on the unconscious influence of the environment. Nevertheless, Bushnell had understood reform in more deeply religious and gendered terms, had taken little interest in concepts of efficiency, and continued to cherish the face-to-face interactions of the local community. Though progressive reform was so diverse that some could always be found who sympathized with Bushnell’s thought, many Hartford reformers ultimately drifted away from his vision of unity in search of newer, rationalized systems of social order—systems that relied in part on a revaluation of “segregation.” The contradictions in progressive thought helped sunder the two halves of Bushnell’s reform legacy.

Hartford reformers of the Progressive Era leaned at first toward a purer version of the local reform tradition, unadulterated by thoughts of efficiency and system-building. Believing as strongly as Bushnell in the influence of a feminized environment on individual character, they focused their efforts on spreading the characteristics of the home and the park throughout the city. At first reformers refused to accept the division of Hartford into areas of cleanliness and filth, beauty and ugliness, order and chaos, virtue and vice. They believed that it was not enough to influence people indirectly through the healing experience of the park; the crusade for gentility had to be extended into the downtown streets and slums. From the mid-1890s through the early 1910s, reformers sought to uplift Hartford by fighting for cleaner streets, better housing, and the suppression of prostitution. Enlisting intermittent support from politicians of both parties at a time when Republicans and Democrats traded control of city hall nearly every two years, they achieved some notable victories. They found, however, that their success was limited by the refusal of working-class men and other Hartford residents to be uplifted.

A City Divided

“Beginning in 1889, every year saw the enlargement of old and the building of new [manufacturing] shops,” reported the Board of Trade in 1895. “During the interval a few scattered establishments on [the] Park River have grown into an almost continuous line, reaching out into what only a few years ago were vacant, unattractive meadows.” Existing manufacturers expanded their plants; the Pope Manufacturing Company moved into automobile production in 1897 and briefly became the largest American car manufacturer. By 1900 about 12,000 members of Hartford’s population of 80,000 worked for manufacturers. Still ahead was the construction of three of Hartford’s largest industrial complexes—the Underwood and Royal typewriter factories and the Hartford Rubber Works, all in the factory district. By 1919, after an astonishing boom produced by World War I, Hartford manufacturers employed nearly 31,000 people in a city of about 138,000. That total subsided in the postwar slump—fewer than 29,000 were so employed on the eve of the Great Depression, but the city’s population reached 164,000 in 1930.
Growth introduced jarring new contrasts into the landscape. The author of an 1897 book on the beauty of Hartford gloried in the sylvan hush of the fine neighborhoods, but evoked lurid, even infernal images in describing the industrial area. The writer took the reader into the factory district at sunset, heading west down Capitol Avenue.

Across [Capitol Avenue] drift transfigured volumes of smoke from railway and furnace, and as we proceed to a lower level we lose the breadth of sky and meet hundreds and hundreds of men and women coming from the long buildings, high and low, which, with their dependencies of dwelling and shop, form a community by itself. The heavy smoke from an incoming train puffs up through bridge railings on our right, the vivid flame from a tall chimney glows more fervidly and cuts the softness of the coming dusk, and we enter upon the streets where many kinds of the wheels and cogs of civilization are turned out by the hundred thousand. Block after block of machine shops and offices line the way, shadowed with iron beams, noisy with the sound of whirling wheel's earlier in the day, and filled then with men busy in countless activities, now, for the most part, growing silent, for they have let forth their laborers into the crowded street, though in some of them the brilliant lights speak of later hours.

Many of these buildings are of recent erection, many are dingy with the smoke and wear of years. To the left extend new streets of picturesque houses which owe their existence to these industries, and beyond them is a bit of woodland which is to form part of a new park.

Great changes and stark contrasts were also visible in the central city. One observer in 1899 marveled at the city’s transformation and described how a former resident returning after a long absence would barely recognize the place:

When he left Hartford, soon after the Civil War, there were two lines of street cars . . . drawn by horses. Now there are twenty-one trolley lines centering on the north side of City Hall Square. And on this particular Saturday afternoon there was a hurry and bustle about the square that would have done credit to a much larger city than Hartford. He found . . . elegant modern buildings erected for banking, insurance, dry goods and other kinds of business, not only about the

Main Street in 1899, looking south from Talbot Street. Although the city was small, the downtown impressed observers with its bustling energy and growing wealth. This view shows part of the city’s retail center, which, thanks to the trolleys, served a wide metropolitan area. (Municipal Register, 1899)

‘Square’ but also on Main, Pearl, Pratt, Asylum and Trumbull streets. Tall business blocks, fitted with every modern appliance, have been erected within the past two years, where formerly stood old landmarks.

The downtown was becoming a place of vast wealth, where millions of dollars flowed as abstractions through the big financial institutions or chinked as gold and silver in the cashboxes of merchants. Even in the 1890s, the stores along Main and Asylum streets were drawing crowds of shoppers, who at Christmas time jostled one another on the sidewalks and at the counters in their eagerness to spend their money.

Yet poverty lurked nearby in the tightly-packed tenements of the East Side, the flood-prone, waterfront area where nearly a quarter of the city’s population lived. Hartford had, for its size, the worst housing conditions of any American city, reported Robert W. DeForest and Lawrence Veiller in a nationwide study done in 1903. Slumlords had cut dilapidated old houses into multiple apartments and had built new tenement houses
along the streets and in rear courtyards. Some of the new buildings followed the plan of the New York "dumb-bell" tenements, with small air shafts. Truly wretched conditions were limited to the East Side slum, but this slum bordered so closely on downtown office buildings and department stores that the middle class could easily see the squalor. An observer on the Main Street bridge over the Park River could catch what one offended writer described as "a certain glimpse of muddy river, over which hang, in diverse juts and angles, old, decrepit galleries, shiftless and unkempt, from which float many-colored garments of departing usefulness, and which extend on either side until they shut in the silver line of the Connecticut."14

"Shiftless and unkempt"—the phrase ostensibly described the housing, but hinted also at the character of its inhabitants, who seemed to many Hartford residents to be a threatening breed of aliens. Hartford's Yankees had long since learned to live with some foreigners in their midst. The alarm that had greeted the Irish immigration of the 1840s was now a fading memory, for the children of the immigrants had made great strides toward respectability by finding skilled industrial work or even entering the middle class. The more recent German and Scandinavian immigrants had also taken valuable places in the skilled work force of which Hartford was so proud. In 1880, 25 percent of Hartford's people were foreign-born, most of them from Ireland, Germany, and England. The relative proportion of the foreign-born population remained remarkably stable, rising only to 32 percent in 1910, but its composition changed with the heavy influx of immigrants from Italy, Russia, and Poland after 1890. To Hartford's Yankees these newer immigrants were more disturbing than the established groups. Moreover, the new immigrants swelled the city's population with their children, until by 1920 only 29 percent of Hartford's people were native-born whites of native-born parents. The immigrants clustered especially in the East Side and in the Clay Hill and Arsenal neighborhoods north of downtown. Winthrop Street, where Bushnell had once lived, was now part of this growing immigrant neighborhood. The whole East Side, the area first settled by the Puritans, now seemed to be foreign territory.15

The East Side soon began dividing into ethnic enclaves as a result of the new waves of immigration. Though people of various ethnic groups could be found on each block and often within each building, the north-

Charles Street, 1906, looking north from Kilbourn. Charles Street, which was located on the East Side, was home to many Italian immigrants. (Connecticut State Library)

ern section of the neighborhood became dominated by Jews, the central section by Italians, and the southern section by Poles. A small Chinese area developed on State Street in the central section. Each enclave had shops serving its dominant ethnic group. In the Italian section, recalled an old resident years later,

pushcarts had lined its gutters, and around them vendors, customers and pilferers had vied loudly with each other. Sidewalks in front of the stores spilled over with crates of fruit imported from Sicily and baskets of rare greens and chestnuts and boxes of snails pecking out from their beds of sawdust. The windows of the numerous grocery stores were always filled with hanging provolone cheeses, clusters of pepperoni sausages, prosciutti, Genoa salame [sic], and many other cold meats wrapped in colorful foils...[the air was filled with] the aromatic odors of frying garlic, frying peppers, and simmering tomato sauces.16

Traditional Yankee restrictions on behavior were weaker on the East Side, especially in the Italian and Polish sections, where even the rule
of law was more tenuous. Voices were louder, disputes more public and violent, and drinking less discreet. Police made frequent arrests for brawling and especially for drunkenness. They were often confronted by angry resistance from the accused and from neighbors. The atmosphere reflected not simply the different cultures of the immigrants, but especially the fact that the East Side served as Hartford's skid row and red-light district. "How long can you be in the neighborhood of Front and State without seeing at least one drunkard?" asked John J. McCook, a Trinity College professor who studied tramps. "I have counted a dozen within a few minutes—staggering along from saloon to saloon, dropping in half helplessness upon the steps to fall into a drunken torpor, that was disturbed only by the restlessness of reviving thirst or the peltulance of swarming flies or the solicitude of the proprietor, or the rude hand of the passing policeman." Knots of men loitered on street corners in front of the numerous saloons, occasionally forcing passersby to step off the curb and sometimes even beating up police officers who ordered them to disperse. Streetwalkers could be seen soliciting customers at night. Public drinking took place even on Sunday.17

The streetcar system ensured that the Yankee middle class became well aware of the diversity in the landscape. Passengers could ride quickly from one section of town to another, watching through the window as slums, prestigious homes, factories, and parks flickered by in a series of clashing images. Streetcars, which had been running in Hartford since 1863, had begun switching from horse to electric power in 1888 and completed the change four years later, greatly increasing the speed of travel.18

Though the experience of riding the trolley heightened the passenger's perception of a chaotic landscape, the trolley system was actually beginning to create a new spatial order. In the 1890s the trolley system made central Hartford the hub of a metropolitan region. Rails radiated from downtown to surrounding towns and villages, drawing them more fully into Hartford's orbit. Trolleys to Unionville and Manchester did a booming business in summer and fall, taking thousands of city people on excursions to commercial picnic grounds where they could relax in the shade, feel the cool breezes, and listen to band music.19 More important, the trolleys brought people from outlying towns into Hartford to shop and to work. "The great stores and industrial enterprises of the city are assuming aspects altogether metropolitan," as a result of the trolleys, wrote Mayor William F. Henney in 1905. Suburban and country people made up much of the customer base needed to build such department stores as C. Fox and Company, Sage Allen and Company, Wise, Smith and Company, and Brown, Thomson and Company. "Hartford is today realizing the dream of its founders—of becoming the trading and shopping center of the Connecticut valley," Henney wrote. "The street railway company ... has done so much to develop the city."20

Perhaps the most dramatic effect of the trolley on Hartford's landscape after 1890 was its influence on the growth of residential areas. The electrification and extension of Hartford's streetcar lines in the 1890s encouraged the creation of new neighborhoods of multifamily housing. For the next forty years, the street grid spread inexorably toward the city line and beyond, into West Hartford, Bloomfield, and Wethersfield. Broad swaths of land north, south, and southwest of the central city filled up with clapboard "triple deckers," red brick "perfect sixes" and—by the 1910s and 1920s—large apartment blocks near the trolley lines. By the 1920s these areas, which housed the families of skilled workmen and low-level office workers, formed buffers between the swelling slums by the riverfront and the secluded neighborhoods of the affluent.21 Beyond this broken ring of multifamily houses rose such new, middle-class neighborhoods as the West End, Blue Hills, and Fairfield Avenue. This reconfiguration of land use took many decades. The middle class in the 1890s deserted Prospect Street, its last toehold in the center of the city, but lingered in the Charter Oak and South Green neighborhoods until after World War I. Asylum Hill remained prestigious despite its proximity to downtown and its ample trolley service.22

Compared with the startling juxtapositions of slum and downtown, factory district and residential neighborhood, the evolving spatial order of the streetcar city was at first too subtle to be understood. Squalor and industrial grime were never far from the best neighborhoods in the 1890s and 1900s. At the eastern edge of the factory district, the Billings and Spencer forge belched smoke a mere four blocks upwind of Washington Street, a broad avenue lined with mansions. The shady streets of Asylum Hill were even closer to the factory district. Katharine Houghton Hepburn, an affluent reformer who lived on Hawthorn Street, found it impossible to ignore the presence of the workers at the nearest factories.
Distressed by their lack of a comfortable place to eat lunch, she invited workers to picnic on her lawn one day, but she realized from the mess they made that neighborly kindness had limits.19

Dirt, poverty, and disorder were inescapable in the new Hartford of the 1890s and 1900s. The landscape seemed to proclaim the waning authority of the Yankee middle class.20 Urban space was increasingly dominated by activities beyond the influence of either the traditional commercial elite or the new professionals and managers who owed their status to the growing banks and insurance companies. Still, the Yankee middle class could see two examples of how its interrelated concepts of gentility and femininity could be extended to public space. One example, of course, was Bushnell Park. The other was taking shape within the semipublic space of the corporate office.

In Hartford, as in other financial centers in the decades around 1900, the insurance and banking industries were hiring numerous female clerical workers and were creating work environments that conformed in some ways to ideas of decorum and gender relations derived from the home. Within the corporation, women were segregated spatially and as-
signed subordinate, service roles that supposedly reflected their special skills in caring for others. At the Aetna Life Insurance Company, for example, President Morgan C. Bulkeley was so uneasy about the presence of women in offices that he tried to shield them from public view. Nevertheless, the new female presence forced modifications in the culture and atmosphere of the workplace as a whole. The presence of women employees was thought to encourage cooperation, tranquility, refinement, cleanliness, and self-control. In this way, traditional definitions of femininity contributed to a new office environment that mingled aspects of both public and private space. Like public space, the corporate office both brought together people with no familial or social ties and was subject to incursion by at least some complete strangers. But like private space, it was privately owned, it carefully screened out unsuitable visitors and—most important—it promoted a code of behavior different from that of the streets.21

Hartford reformers in the 1890s and 1900s, therefore, could take comfort from the fact that middle-class domestic values had been extended successfully to some public and semipublic spaces. Some members of the Yankee middle class—particularly corporate executives, professionals, and their wives—attempted in the decades around 1900 to make the entire city conform to these values.

Municipal Housekeeping

One of the leaders of this cause was the daughter of Horace Bushnell. Dohà Bushnell Hillyer was, with the possible exception of the parks superintendent George A. Parker, the Hartford resident most widely influential in local reform campaigns during the Progressive Era. Hillyer was the youngest of Bushnell’s three daughters and was named after his beloved mother. Though affectionate, Bushnell had very high expectations for his children. “I wish you to feel, as you grow up, that you are not doomed to any low or vain calling because you are a woman,” he wrote to one of Dohà’s sisters in 1845. “I have no son upon whom I can lean, or in whose character and success I can find pleasure. . . . Therefore I desire the more to have daughters whom I can respect, and in whose beautiful and high accomplishments I can find a father’s comfort. You
cannot be a soldier or a preacher; but I wish, in the best and truest sense, to have you become a woman." A true woman, Bushnell continued, should be modest, intelligent, sincere, graceful, refined, calm, kind, selfless, smiling, charitable, and pious. "Your victory ... will be a woman's only—the victory of patience, purity and goodness." Her father's feminine ideal would guide Dotha's reform activities in her adult years.

In 1879 Dotha married advantageously to a wealthy banker named Appleton R. Hillyer, to whom she bore three children. Appleton Hillyer's father had given the site for the local Young Men's Christian Association, and the son followed this philanthropic example by donating money to found the association's Hillyer Institute, which later developed into a junior college and finally became part of the University of Hartford. Appleton and Dotha settled in the 1890s in a big brick house on Elm Street across from Bushnell Park. From their front windows Dotha could look directly over the park her father had created to the gables and conical roofs of the YMCA on the far side—a daily reminder of what good works could accomplish. 37

A plump, plain woman with her father's sharp beak of a nose, Dotha Hillyer entered energetically into numerous reform campaigns and organizations from the 1890s through the 1910s. Perhaps her greatest reform victories came through her leadership of the Civic Club, in which—after a brief stint as vice president—she served as president from 1898 to 1915 and from 1918 until the club folded in 1920. The Civic Club worked to create cleaner streets, to improve housing conditions, to set up vacation schools, playgrounds, and gardens for slum children, and to support the efforts of other reform organizations. Dotha Hillyer led her club's successful effort to establish a Hartford Juvenile Commission in 1909 and served as one of the commission's charter members. 38 She was appointed to the Board of Park Commissioners in 1911 as its first female member and served until 1920, though she declined the presidency. She was also active in the Municipal Art Society and in the Newsboys and Newsgirls Committee of the Consumers' League of Hartford. 39 Hillyer provided personal encouragement and major funding for the Hartford Equal Franchise League in the 1910s, though she did so secretly, perhaps in deference to her father's emphatic denunciation of woman suffrage. Her generous contributions helped numerous other civic and charitable organizations. She was thus involved either directly or through financial support in nearly every major reform campaign affecting public space in Hartford. 40

Hillyer struggled to conform to expected ladylike behavior by making her civic activities as discreet and polite as she could. But she refused to play the role of the demure matron, and she would not back down when her work became controversial. "Her alert, vivid personality stimulated and challenged the best in her associates," recalled a fellow member of the Civic Club. "Her quick mind held back its decisions so that others less quick might not be left behind; she was aggressive, but of a quiet restrained type that never aroused antagonism. She gave the impression of great power and of still more in reserve." 41

Hillyer's Civic Club was one of many women's organizations throughout the United States that became involved in urban reform campaigns at this time. These organizations worked to extend the female role into areas of public policy that touched on a wide variety of traditionally feminine concerns, particularly issues related to children, cleanliness, housing, health, morality, and beauty. Female reformers advocated curricular reforms, better school administration, sanitariums and public health clinics, sanitary drinking fountains, the hiring of visiting nurses, infant
milk stations, pure food laws, improved water systems, public baths, public laundries, improved garbage disposal, smoke and noise regulations, the suppression of vermin, the suppression of prostitution, public education about venereal disease, the supervision of dance halls, the censorship of movies, the construction of parks and playgrounds, improved tenement conditions, the removal of billboards and other eyesores, and the planting of trees. Street cleaning was an issue of particular interest, drawing attention in the 1880s from the Ladies' Health Protective Association in New York and in the 1890s from the Civic Club of Philadelphia, the Women's Municipal League of New York, and the Hull House settlement in Chicago. 32

Dirty streets disturbed the late-Victorian middle class on two levels. First, the middle class had legitimate, if somewhat confused, fears about the link between dirt and disease. Although by the 1890s most physicians accepted the theory that disease was spread by germs, there lingered a popular association of contagion with dirt itself, particularly with "miasmas"—harmful vapors that were thought to rise from unclean substances. Sanitary reformers guided by these earlier beliefs had achieved some notable successes in improving public health in American cities after the Civil War. Germ theory's practical implications for public health were not immediately clear to health officials, who only in the 1890s began to turn their attention away from the war on miasmas and visible filth. 33

Second, and more important, dirt had powerful symbolic meanings in the middle-class mind, suggesting a certain moral weakness among those who created or accepted it. Personal cleanliness indicated self-discipline, good character, and self-respect. "The true line to be drawn between pauperism and honest poverty is the clothesline," wrote New York housing reformer Jacob Riis in 1890. "With it begins the effort to be clean that is the first and the best evidence of a desire to be honest." Similarly, a clean home reflected well on the family, and clean streets reflected well on the community. A clean environment was thought to exert a positive influence on health, behavior, and morality, and to encourage personal improvement. Dirt, in short, represented a threat to middle-class values, particularly to values associated with women. 34

Women reformers felt an obligation to fight dirt because of their traditional roles as homemakers and as defenders of morality. They argued that they could not fulfill their duty to protect their homes and families unless they cleaned up the filth outside their doors. "Women must come to regard the city as their home," declared Mary McDowell, a settlement-house worker in Chicago. "Home must not end with the front doorstep." 35 The reformers were reluctant to acknowledge the class-based assumptions that underlay their definition of womanhood and female duty. "When woman reformers talked about the home going forth into the world, they meant the middle-class home going forth into the lower-class world," observes the historian Sheila Rothman. "For all the assumptions that men were the common villains, it was the lower-class male who was, in the end, the most dangerous beast, and the lower-class woman who had to be lifted up to middle-class standards." 36

Many women's organizations lobbied their cities to follow the example set by the efficient New York Department of Street Cleaning under the leadership of sanitary expert George E. Waring, Jr., in the 1890s. They hoped that if they could impose standards of middle-class cleanliness on the streets, poor people observing the change would be inspired to keep cleaner houses, to improve their personal hygiene, and ultimately to adopt middle-class morality. The reformers sought to enlist the entire populace in the crusade for cleanliness, partly to keep a messy public from undoing the work of the city's street sweepers, and partly because their crusade was really a moral revival. They began educational campaigns to spread their ideas to immigrants, and organized juvenile street-cleaning leagues for the immigrants' children. Children in the leagues were expected not only to stop littering but also to pick up whatever litter they found, to chastise the litterers, and to hand out circulars requesting cleanliness, to go from door to door giving advice, and to report to adult supervisors about the conditions they found. The supervisors would then pass this information on to the appropriate city officials. 37

The Civic Club in Hartford shared the concerns but not always the tactics of its predecessors in other cities. The club was founded in January 1895, by some one hundred prominent women led by Alice Hooker Day, the wife of a local attorney. Hartford women had previously formed a number of charitable and literary societies that represented a tentative claim to a female role outside the home, but the Civic Club more openly asserted women's place in public affairs. Its declared purpose was to "promote a higher public spirit and a better social order in the community in
which we live.” It took as its first project the improved cleaning of streets, sidewalks, and crosswalks. Unlike its counterparts in other cities, the Civic Club was at first quite reticent about appealing for public support. Apparently club leaders felt that although women occasionally might need to step into the public sphere to fulfill their domestic obligations, they should never mistake this step as an excuse for unladylike political rhetoric. In the 1890s the club did its work quietly and behind the scenes, through discreet persuasion of elected officials. It issued no manifestos and published only a few terse reports.

The club’s initial project was certainly needed, for Hartford’s streets were very dirty. The street commissioners had put an end to some of the worst nuisances, in the 1880s ordering property owners to stop dumping their ashes and rubbish in the street, and in the 1890s inaugurating daily sweepings of the major downtown streets. The daily cleanings limited the accumulation of rubbish and horse manure, which could otherwise dry into a pestilential dust that blew through homes and stores. But homemakers continued to leave rubbish overflowing from open barrels, shopkeepers swept their trash into the gutter, and pedestrians tossed cigar butts, apple cores, and wastepaper indiscriminately. And the streets outside the downtown area were not nearly so diligently cleaned. “Hartford needs more than anything else streets that are cleaner than ours are,” declared Mayor Henry C. Dwight in 1891.

The problem most severely affected the people who lived in the East Side, reported Dr. Edward K. Root, the city’s medical inspector, in an 1896 address to the Civic Club:

People living in the more wholesome localities have little idea of the extent to which the streets are used by the poorer people of our population. The street is the playground of the children, the meeting place ... for all the inhabitants of the tenements along its sides. Most of the daily shopping, purchasing of food necessaries, is transacted on the sidewalks, and in summer weather the inhabitants virtually live in the streets. These people make comparatively little use of parks, no matter how convenient they may be. They are reserved for excursions and half-holidays after the day’s work is done and the family has an outing; but all day long, while the wage earner of the family is at work and the mother is busy with the housework, the children are left to run and play on the pavement close to the house within easy call, but subject and exposed to all the filth and miasms and demoralizing influences of the foulness which exists in these quarters.

The filth spread disease among the poor and cost dozens of lives each year, Root claimed.

But Civic Club members were driven more by concern about the symbolic implications of untidiness than by fear of disease, and they did not, therefore, distinguish between filth and litter. To them the problem seemed most severe in the highly visible public spaces of the downtown, the section of the city shared by the broadest range of people. In March 1895 the club sent out letters to seven hundred downtown shopkeepers and property owners, asking them to cooperate in keeping the streets clean. In the same year the club successfully petitioned the city to install trashcans at busy downtown street corners (to reduce littering) and persuaded the Common Council to pass an ordinance against littering. Upon receiving a complaint from Alice Day, the Board of Street Commissioners agreed to have downtown streets swept early on Sunday morning so that churchgoers could be spared the annoyance of seeing the previous day’s litter. Day and Hillyer also urged the police to take stronger measures against littering and to see that dead animals were removed more promptly. Sure enough, police that autumn were seen picking up wastepaper and ordering those who knocked over trashcans to clean up after themselves.

Faced with this success, the club decided to form a citywide children’s league to fight littering. This association, the League of Good Order, would require children to swear off littering, to stop others from littering, and to do everything possible to keep the streets and sidewalks clean. The Civic Club had additional waste cans installed outside schools to encourage children to pick up wastepaper in schoolyards. The League of Good Order achieved some success on Asylum Hill, where children in 1896 divided the neighborhood into districts that they patrolled for litter. If the league accomplished anything in the less hospitable sections of Hartford, it is not recorded in surviving accounts of the Civic Club’s activities.

The new interest in clean streets spread to the street department itself, which showed a desire to emulate its New York counterpart. The street
commissioners ordered new uniforms for street sweepers much like those worn by the “white wings” under Waring’s authority. The street department also bought street-cleaning machines to supplement sweeping by hand. The commissioners shared the Civic Club’s belief that clean streets depended in part on public cooperation, but they did not work any more energetically than did the club to obtain this support. The commissioners expressed the hope in 1895 that the new public trashcans “may gradually educate our citizens, both young and old, to the desirability of clean streets, and to the fact that a little thoughtfulness on their part, will very materially assist the municipal authorities in their endeavors to this end.” By 1903, the street superintendent Philip Hansling, Jr., claimed to have noticed an increase in public conscientiousness. Littering persisted—downtown, in the East Side, and in the outlying residential districts to which limited street cleaning had been extended—but Hansling hoped that the problem would diminish as civic pride continued to grow. Health officials were somewhat less optimistic about the East Side because of the difficulty in changing “the habits of the people.”

Another dirty habit of Hartford residents at this time was spitting in public, which was most common among lower- and working-class men. Members of the middle class viewed this practice with disgust both because spitting violated their standards for proper bodily management in public and because they feared it would spread tuberculosis, which was one of the leading causes of death among the poor in Hartford. The Civic Club placed signs in trolleys asking passengers not to spit on the floor, then persuaded the Board of Health to post similar signs in trolleys and along sidewalks. Health inspector Robert J. Farrell proclaimed the campaign a success in 1906. “At the present time one does not see pools of tobacco spit in front of public spaces. The sidewalks of the business section of the city are today more defiled by dogs than by the expectorations of human beings. Education and public sentiment can accomplish a great deal.” But later that year the Common Council found it necessary to pass an ordinance against spitting on sidewalks, in trolleys, train stations, and public buildings. The Hartford Evening Post reported that spitting continued anyway, even in front of the police, and that tougher laws were needed. In 1911 the city finally ordered the police to begin enforcing the law seriously, and the nuisance diminished.

The public cleanliness campaigns blurred means and ends. Civic Club members and their supporters believed that heightened civic consciousness and restrained behavior would produce cleaner public spaces, and cleaner public spaces would result in a more responsible, refined citizenry. Both the people and their environment needed to be reformed, and both public persuasion and legal coercion were necessary. “Push the good work of keeping saliva from the sidewalk until all droppings from the mouths of public feeders are eliminated,” urged McCoat at the end of 1906. “But, since uncivilized eating habits die hard, in the meantime have our street inspectors and our police patrols keep an eye to the occasional orange peel and apple core.”

“Uncivilized habits” were particularly strong in the slums, the Civic Club found. Club members observed that tenement dwellers were in the habit of dumping trash in the private alleys between buildings and in whatever open space was left behind a tenement, creating an eyesore and a fire hazard. Voluntary cooperation on the part of the tenement dwellers would have been necessary to eliminate this practice, but the Civic Club did not attempt to obtain such cooperation with even the limited energy that it devoted to the League of Good Order. Club members appealed instead to the fire marshal and to the local fire insurance companies to force property owners to comply.

Unconstrained by the traditional distinction between public and private space, the Civic Club worked in the 1900s and early 1910s to extend its fight against dirt into the interiors of Hartford’s tenement houses. The club was alarmed about the “conditions brought about by a rapid influx of foreigners,” Hillyer recalled later. Examples of bad housing included ten families of recent immigrants with their respective lodgers quartered in a fine old mansion that had once sheltered a family whose ancestors... had come over in the Mayflower; the evils of overcrowding together with the dangers of primitive yard closets and antiquated plumbing; the almost complete lack of fire escapes; basement and cellar tenements; dark rooms and halls, and filthy yards.” The heart of the problem, it seemed, was a breakdown of domestic privacy, decency, and cleanliness brought on by the immigrant invasion.

Hillyer’s understanding of the situation was certainly influenced by nativism, but there is no reason to doubt her sincere concern. Guided by a sense of Christian stewardship, she and the other club members worked
to educate the better classes about their responsibility. The Civic Club worked in cooperation with the Charity Organization Society, which had been concerned about poor housing conditions as early as 1896 and had discussed "the need of having homes for the poorer people in the hands of those who take philanthropic interest in maintaining good conditions." In 1900 the two organizations cooperated in mounting an exhibit of photographs that exposed the worst conditions in Hartford and other cities and displayed examples of model housing. The emphasis of the exhibit was the need for enlightened property owners to build what the Hartford Daily Courant called "wholesome housing for the workingman... at a reasonable profit on the investment." The New York housing reformer Lawrence Veiller, in a speech at the opening of the exhibit, said that Hartford should build small houses for workingmen rather than model tenements, which he believed were not needed in a moderate-sized city.

Interest in workingmen's homes grew but bore little fruit. The few model row houses that were built in the 1890s and 1900s—on Columbia Street and Park Terrace—proved to be too expensive even for skilled workers. They were occupied instead by banking and insurance clerks. George Parker and the City Plan Commission advocated large developments of workingmen's bungalows on the outskirts of town. They felt that the city might even build these. The city as a whole had an interest in building single-family homes, wrote Parker: "Privacy is essential, for the family is the unit of our civilization." The Hartford Home Building Association, organized by the Chamber of Commerce with capital from Hartford's major employers, built dozens of duplexes and single-family houses in the northwest corner of the city in the early 1920s. Nevertheless, these supplemented rather than replaced the ever-increasing numbers of tenements. The housing problem clearly could not be solved by replacing the dirty tenement with a properly domestic alternative in the outskirts.

Meanwhile, the Civic Club continued to fret about the filthiness of housing on the East Side. Even the successful construction of model homes could not excuse conscientious municipal housekeepers from clearing up the central neighborhoods. The club invited the New York reformer Robert E. Todd to report to it in 1907 on the conditions in Hartford tenements, but the details printed in the Courant were evidently not enough to spur a satisfactory cleanup. The club made a stronger push for cleaning the tenements in 1911. By then, a new state law had empowered the city's Board of Health to make landlords correct some of the worst conditions, and the club "decided that the officials could do effective work only if backed by strong public opinion," Hillyer wrote. Once again, however, the club made no attempt to build a mass movement of tenement dwellers; instead, its efforts at public education took the form of calm appeals to public officials. At Veiller's recommendation, the club hired an investigator to gather new information, which was then presented to the board of health. Under pressure from the club, health officials and the prosecutor forced the most notorious slumlord to install modern plumbing for his tenants. Other landlords cooperated more readily in replacing outhouses with indoor toilets. Dozens of dark rooms were opened to light and fresh air. "All this seems to prove that the first step in tenement house reform is to make a thorough and systematic investigation. Next, to lay the facts before the people and arouse public opinion. Lastly, public enthusiasm must not be allowed to die down until the necessary reforms have been accomplished," Hillyer concluded, reciting a procedure that was widely accepted among reformers at the time. The board of health boasted in 1913 that Hartford's tenement conditions were now the best in the state.

The effort to cleanse the tenements led the Civic Club to redouble its crusade for outdoor cleanliness in 1912. This time the focus was on the slums. The club joined with city officials and insurance companies to organize annual spring cleanup weeks. It had the schools distribute handbills to children telling them about the campaign and requesting their help and the help of their families. Participants cleaned up the papers, tin cans, construction debris, manure, dead animals, and other trash that filled the open spaces, and hauled them to the curb to be removed by the city. The Civic Club arranged to have Boy Scout troops help take a survey of the particularly bad conditions that deserved attention. In the 1915 cleanup, the scouts distributed literature from the fire and health departments and inspected the yards of more than ten thousand buildings, taking note of unusually messy ones. Although it is unclear what if anything the scouts and Civic Club could do if property owners refused to cooperate, the survey was taken quite seriously on the East Side and frightened many people into compliance, reported American City magazine.
"When the Scouts were seen in the poor section of the city a strenuous cleaning commenced at once. 'Don't report this yard,' one man said. 'Can't you see I'm cleaning?'" 31

By depending so heavily on children in this latter phase of the cleanup campaign, the Civic Club might seem to have followed the lead of the big-city women's organizations that tried to build a mass movement around municipal housekeeping. The Courant declared that the campaign "have done much to educate the people," and that the East Side was much cleaner as a result. But the cleanliness crusaders were unable or unwilling to enlist full public support, perhaps because they felt restrained by the need to maintain a ladylike distance from the sordid segments of the city they sought to reform. Their public education efforts took place in an unmistakable atmosphere of middle-class coercion. The Boy Scouts on whom they depended were in the 1910s primarily a middle-class, Protestant organization dedicated to building morality, self-control, and a sense of public duty among the next generation of American leaders. In Hartford, admitted one advocate of scouting, the scouts were outnumbered by rougher boys who sneered at them for belonging to "a society for mollycoddles." For such sanctimonious pups to wield authority over the East Side and to enjoy the cooperation of East Side schoolchildren may well have struck Hartford's immigrants as an arrogant display of Yankee power. 32 The cleanliness crusade, however, provoked neither organized opposition nor even the public griping aroused by the lower pedestrian safety campaigns. Uncleanliness persisted not as a self-conscious act of defiance, but as a casual refusal to adopt the self-restraint prized by the middle class. No one, it seems, cared to denounce the Civic Club on the grounds either of individual freedom or of class rights. The housing and cleanup campaigns had no more than a limited long-term effect on the East Side, notwithstanding the initial boasts of the board of health. In the words of one man who grew up there in the 1920s, East Siders remained trapped in "those dismal labyrinths of brick, concrete, broken windows, and rubbish-strewn alleys." 33

Among the organizations supporting the crusade to cleanse Hartford was the Municipal Art Society, founded in 1904 by a diverse group of affluent men and women led by the local artist Charles Noel Flagg. The society drew most of its membership from the social register. It managed to combine a snobbish aestheticism with a sincere interest in such earthy matters as street cleaning and public restrooms. The founders argued that Hartford should develop the refined taste worthy of such a wealthy city and should resist the spirit of commercialism. A prominent member, Mayor William F. Henney, declared in a 1905 speech, "It is full as natural for a man to desire to keep the city of his home in neat and wholesome and happy condition, as to establish and maintain those conditions in the house in which he lives." The society shared a number of members with the Civic Club—most notably its second vice president, Dotha Hillyer. 34

The Municipal Art Society was part of a loosely organized national reform effort that came to be known as the City Beautiful movement. Local organizations sought to guide the design of public buildings, parks, boulevard systems, and street improvements ranging from pavements to landscaping. Like the women's clubs devoted to municipal housekeeping, the City Beautiful organizations were keenly interested in the effect of the environment on individual character. They hoped in particular to stimulate taste, civic pride, and social tranquility. The movement gradually took an interest in such immediately practical problems as sewers and water systems, refuse collection, and public transportation. 35

In Hartford, the Municipal Art Society began working for cleaner streets and alleys shortly after its formation, at a time when the Civic Club was busy with other projects. The society complained to the city in 1905 about the dustiness of the streets, persuading officials to sprinkle the streets more frequently and to wash them thoroughly on a regular basis. The society, and later the Commission on the City Plan that it helped create, also advocated the construction of public restrooms. These "houses of comfort" were needed not only as a public convenience but also to stop men from urinating in alleys. The need was particularly severe in the center of the city, especially "since the trolley lines [had begun] to bring many strangers into the city who arrive at and depart from City Hall Square," reported the Commission on the City Plan in 1911. The city finally built underground public lavatories on the east side of city hall in early 1914. By 1919 more than twenty-five thousand people a week were using the lavatories, and the number rose as Prohibition closed the saloons that had provided the same service. 36

Ideally, the Municipal Art Society believed, streets should be free not
only of dirt but also of eyesores and moral contamination. Like many other City Beautiful organizations, the society was incensed about billboards. “Our conspicuous places, our most beautiful views, even our residence streets are desecrated by glaring advertisements of second rate plays and intoxicating remedies,” one of the society’s subcommittees complained in 1908. Before the advent of radio and television, downtown street space was the preferred medium for commercial messages. The facades of some downtown buildings were literally covered with signs advertising businesses and the products they sold. Billboards extended the available advertising space as much as a full story above the cornice line. The concentration of these signs in and around the downtown was a frank declaration of one of the main economic functions of that part of the city: retailing. But the heart of the city had symbolic as well as economic importance. If, as Bushnell had argued, people gained an understanding of their city by observing its vistas and “ornaments,” then billboards had a frighteningly insidious influence. The advertisements’ prominence and blatant hucksterism seemed to prove the Municipal Art Society’s contention that commercialism was overwhelming Hartford’s finer qualities. The screaming slogans and garish colors suggested that the pursuit of mammon took precedence over refinement, taste, and beauty. And some of the advertisements also suggested a certain moral laxness.⁵⁷

For that reason, local pastors had been among the first to object to the proliferation of billboards. In 1902 the priest and several parishioners of St. Anne’s Catholic Church on Park Street protested to the city about the billboard across the street, asking the mayor to prevent any objectionable messages from being put up there. The Hartford Federation of Churches, an organization of Protestant pastors, protested in 1904 about a huge, round billboard that loomed over Exchange Corner at City Hall Square. The sign bore the words, “Highball. That’s all,” and showed a man mixing a drink. The pastors joined with the Municipal Art Society in stirring up a public outcry against this affront to sobriety, and the landlord decided to order the sign removed when the lease expired.⁵⁸

This symbolic victory did little to slow the increase in advertising—or to raise its moral tone. By 1908 billboards were common along practically every major thoroughfare. There were some 255 billboards in Hartford, totaling 102,530 square feet—roughly the equivalent of a sign ten feet high and two miles long. A particularly controversial double-decker billboard stood at Asylum and Hopkins streets near Hartford Public High School. “Children going to and from school . . . look upon frightful deeds of crime committed in the melodramas playing at local theaters; or in other cases behold dashing demoiselles clad in no more than the law requires, often less,” reported the Times in 1908. Hoping to put an end to such moral dangers, the Municipal Art Society, the Civic Club, the Federation of Churches, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Landlords and Taxpayers’ Association, and nineteen other local organizations joined in forming the United Committees’ Association for Billboard Regulation. This umbrella group considered whether to oppose all billboards or whether to ban all pictures, leaving only the text. The reformers believed that banning pictures would weaken the billboards’ powers of temptation while putting an end to bad public art. The city engineer, Frederick L. Ford, who supported the movement, declared, “It is simply one detail of a larger tendency to get back to the former days when the streets were clean, the air was pure and the landscape undefiled by unsightly objects.”⁵⁹

In practice, however, the association focused on removing billboards
from certain prominent locations that were readily visible to middle-class people in the course of their daily activities. The club successfully pressured billboard owners to remove signs visible from Bushnell Park, the most offensive being a row at Pearl and Ford streets on the main route between the elite Washington Street and Asylum Hill neighborhoods. They secured as well the removal of the double-decker billboard on Asylum Street, which was a daily annoyance to those traveling back and forth between downtown and Asylum Hill. A billboard at Woodland Terrace and Albany Avenue, another residential area, was also taken down. The association in 1911 persuaded the Common Council to pass a billboard ordinance, which among other provisions forbade signs “of an immoral or indecent character” and signs “representing vice or crime,” and which gave the mayor the power to order the immediate removal of such signs. Nevertheless, billboards continued to clutter the downtown.60

Early campaigns to cleanse Hartford of dirt and ugliness had limited effects. Those concerned spoke of the need to reform the city—but cautiously focused their efforts on those neighborhoods where middle-class dominance was already strongest. The Civic Club organized orderly, middle-class children to clean up Asylum Hill and persuaded city officials to improve downtown street sweeping, even though the problem of dirty streets most severely affected the East Side. When the club turned its attention to the slums in the 1910s, it avoided enlisting mass support for tenement house reform, relying in its cleanup campaign on middle-class leadership and intimidation. Club members hoped to clean up the entire city, but their accomplishments were limited by the fact that their values were not enthusiastically shared by the working class and by their own failure to mount a more inclusive campaign. Basing their moral authority on their status as middle-class ladies—with all that that implied in the late-Victorian era—they imposed on themselves a code of decorum too restrictive to allow effective reform work in the slum environment. Meanwhile, the Municipal Art Society’s billboard campaign focused largely on areas with a secure middle-class presence. These campaigns thus failed to break down the division of the city into zones of dirt and cleanliness; in fact, they inadvertently heightened the contrast.

To some extent the campaigns furthered the goal of extending into public space the middle-class, feminine values of cleanliness, morality, decorum, and beauty. The work of the Civic Club in particular helped assert a middle-class, female role in issues affecting the use of streets. This work would be pursued more vigorously by the radical suffragists of the Hartford Equal Franchise League, who shared many of Dota Hillyer’s values but were less ambivalent about entering the male world of politics. From 1912 to 1914, suffragists waged a fierce battle to prevent the reopening of Hartford’s red-light district, winning the single greatest victory in the crusade to purify the city’s public space.