THE INTEREST IN CIVIC IMPROVEMENT: BY CHARLES MULFORD ROBINSON

What is the secret of the civic improvement hold? Why that wave of city and town improvement effort which is so conspicuously sweeping over the country? Certainly, the reform is needed. That, no doubt, is one great reason for it; but people—the masses that do not belong to the little band of faithful reformers—are not always so energetic about securing for the community, at considerable personal cost, the things the community ought to have. And civic improvement has always been a need—not less great at the beginning than now, though only in recent years has it led to energetic action. Today the movement is continent wide and has enlisted all sorts and conditions of people.

Here is the General Federation of Women’s Clubs with a strongly organized civic committee. It appeals to its vast constituency for concerted effort, noting that “city-keeping is closely allied to housekeeping,” and issuing to its clubs this wise injunction, “Study the needs of your municipality; then take up one phase of betterment and carry it to a finish.” Here is the National Association of Real Estate Exchanges adopting as a part of its programme for the year the extension of “the improvement idea” through its many local exchanges. Here are Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade leading the movement. A recent president of the Chamber in Pittsburgh has said that a commercial organization must be broad enough to see that a city cannot be great commercially unless it be also civically great; that it should bring to civic questions the same earnestness and acumen which it brings to questions of commerce and of trade. “The employer finds that the social welfare of his men is absolutely a part of the welfare of his business.” Here is the church pushing along the movement; here are the city, town and village, the ward and the street improvement clubs, the juvenile leagues. Here is Boston at one end of the country and Los Angeles at the other bringing out elaborate city-plan reports within a few weeks of each other; or, turning the other way, Winnipeg and Oklahoma City are rivaling one another in the elaborateness and beauty of new boulevards.

A writer in The Craftsman a few months ago, Mr. W. L. Price, noted that mankind had “two major dreams—the Golden Age and the City Beautiful; two haunting aspirations.” The one, he said, lies in the past; the other is in the future; and he thought the better of the dreams—the City Beautiful, the dream of achievement—could not be attained until it was the wish of all the people. He was right, and it would seem that the great progress of the last few years is

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because the people—not the few, but the many and of all kinds—are wishing for it now. Why do they want it?

WE ARE a practical people, feverishly active for gains that we can see and only sometimes tired enough to let ourselves dream of the peace of the Golden Age that was. But the dream of achievement, the goal to which we press with effort and with sacrifice, must hold out to the popular imagination some reward more tangible than a pleasing of the senses with a vision of harmony and beauty. Pleasant as it would be to fancy that the world—the great world that goes to Coney Island, to department stores and moving picture shows—had grown artistic, we know that its taste is as crude as ever, its demands as little exacting as to art requirements.

It is not enough to say in explanation, as is so commonly said, that increased wealth and travel to Europe are responsible. The dream is not restricted to the few who are rich and traveled, the aspiration is that of the town which is small and poor, as well of the city which is mighty. In the present competition of cities, I would estimate that travel at home had done more to stir the mass of Americans than had travel abroad. As a people we do not like to be beaten by anyone, and least of all by the fellow or city whose opportunities are no better than our own. And travel between towns and cities and States, in our own country, has increased marvelously of late. We may indeed be globe trotters, but we are also continent racers. My own explanation is that the belief has grown up, rightly or wrongly, in the last few years that civic improvement is a term which comprehends so much as to be a well-nigh universal panacea.

Has one business or industrial interests? Civic improvement facilitates the transportation of merchandise by street and rail and water; it lessens wear and tear by the improvement of pavements; it broadens markets by the attraction of residents—transient and permanent; it increases the efficiency of labor, by the provision of a more wholesome environment, and the opportunities for healthful but inexpensive recreation.

Has one interest in sanitation? Pure air, pure food and pure water are among its objects; and better housing is one of its first desires. Public baths, clean pavements, clean yards are included in its propaganda, and it is one of the staunchest allies in the "white plague" fight.

Has one love for little children? The child is the special ward of the civic improvement effort. For him the playground is equipped, for him the school is made healthful, efficient, beautiful without and within; for him are the swimming holes in the parks, the skating
ponds and toboggan slides, the ball grounds, the interplayground
meets; and for the "little mother" are story-telling, sewing and
singing, the swing, the flowers, and for her charges the sand-box.
Civic improvement paints out the sign of "Keep Off the Grass."

Does one look back instead of forward? The worthy landmarks
of the past are preserved; the historic sites are marked and the beauty
of earlier architecture is reverenced.

Is one's interest in sociology? The playground, the park, the
better housing make their appeal. The social center, the recreation
house with its evening entertainments, the better factory surround-
ings, the folk dance, the many and various activities which are in-
cluded in the growing social service of the parks, even the civic club
itself in its essential democracy, all this is effort that will not be denied.

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S ONE'S interest in art and culture? Suppose it is music. There
are the free band concerts in the parks. Or sculpture? There
are the public statues and fountains. Or painting? There are
the galleries, for which civic improvement strives, the mural decora-
tions in the public buildings, the pictures in the schools. Or archi-
tecture? There are the monumental civic centers, the noble bridges,
the encouragement of good design generally, the regulations imposed
to protect it. Or is the interest in landscape art? There are the
parks, the ornamental squares and open spaces, the improvement
of grounds surrounding public and private buildings and the preser-
vation of viewpoints and natural beauty.

Is one rich? To him appeal the drives, the increased splendor
of environment, the great avenues. Is one poor? For him are the
public gardens, the vacant lot cultivation and all that beauty and
comfort and pleasure which is proffered to the citizens as a common
possession.

Does one love animals? The drinking fountains on the streets,
the sheep on park meadows, the birds and waterfowl, even the zoo
and aviary make him a recruit.

Is one a craftsman? There are the street furnishings to interest
him—name signs, light standards, trolley poles—all the fixtures of
the common way.

Does one, without pretending to art, yet loving beauty and grace
and fitness, feel affection for the city and town where men congregate,
and desire to surround with pleasantness the lives of the people? He
may enter the billboard fight, join the anti-smoke leagues, en-
courage the preventive work of the juvenile street-cleaning organiza-
tions, join the tree-planting societies and work to secure municipal
control of the street trees and expert care for them.
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Or is one simply a home-lover, declining the call of public questions? To such a one, the community appeals as his larger home, the home in which most of his waking hours are spent, the home which, far more certainly than the house in which he lives, his children will inherit. So he, too, for all his reticence, enlists under the banner of civic improvement.

WHAT wonder, then, that we find the movement absorbing all sorts and conditions of people? Considering it abstractly, we may scorn such cure-all pretensions; but we have no right to think of civic improvement abstractly. As each one of us has individual interests, so to each the civic improvement movement is an effort toward one concrete goal in particular—the bringing to pass of the definite object in which is his interest. Its appeal to masses of men is not because it will do so many things, but because in each separate case it attempts to realize one thing—the special object in which one is interested. In concentration on that one may ignore, or forget, all the other ends it strives to reach; while in the house next door one has, perhaps unconsciously, an ally, a neighbor, who also is a civic improvement champion for an entirely different reason. The fact is, the movement has come to embrace not a handful of idealists, but all persons who, according to their lights and in their own particular way, desire the physical betterment of a community. And, thank God, it is in the nature of most of us to want that!

We shall never have, we are told, the City Beautiful or a true civic art until that goal is the aim of all the people—in realization of Aristotle’s ideal of the city as a place where men live a common life for a noble end. But may we not dare to hope that there is approach toward that ideal—"the noble end," civic betterment, "the common life," the life of the citizens of all sorts concerned in the realization of various phases of the general "noble end?" When this great idea is finely rendered, we shall have a great example of municipal art—a real City Beautiful. It will be beautiful in all its parts, in the sense that a machine is beautiful when perfectly adapted to its functions, as well as lovely to the artist’s eye. That is the promise of the widening wave of civic improvement interest. However commonplace and practical may be the motives that severally lead men to take up the effort, the hope lies in the multitudes that are, in diverse but worthy aspiration, enlisting beneath its banner. The artists may now be few, but great artists are created by the great motives of a nation, and given the motive and given the people, civic art is sure to be born.