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*The Fate of City Beautiful Thought in
Canada, 1893-1930*

This paper seeks to summarize and account for the origins of major city beautiful concepts as advanced within the three professions which played the central role in the practice of town planning: architecture, engineering and surveying. It also attempts to explain why, by the end of World War I, almost all advocates of town planning had ceased to urge implementation of those concepts, and emphasized exclusively the need for preventive suburban planning. For the sake of brevity, the term ‘professionals’ will be used to refer to members of the three professions mentioned.

The notion of introducing beauty into the urban environment was, patently, not new to the 1890’s and early 1900’s, though many laymen and some professionals considered it the essence of city beautiful thought. What its more ambitious professional supporters thought innovative in the city beautiful idea lay in its scope. No longer should beauty be confined to scattered and isolated buildings, its effect more often than not spoiled by an ugly setting. Instead, professionals would plan and regulate the entire city so that people might be surrounded by beauty. Architects who shared this vision grew impatient with their colleagues’ preoccupation with individual commissions. Percy Nobbs, Professor of Architecture at McGill, declared in 1904,

It would be a great advantage if the idea could be got in the heads of architects that beauty is not a quality to add to a city, but that it is or is not of the structure of it. . . . every street in the city should be made as beautiful as it can be, and every building, as far as possible, should cohere with the general plan; then we will have a beautiful city and not otherwise. . . . it is not merely be erecting a fine structure here and there that you will make any great improvement, or even laying out a little bit of park, although that may be an item; the construction of the city throughout should be made as beautiful as it can be.¹

W.A. Langton, Toronto architect and editor of *The Canadian Architect and Builder*, made the same point in criticizing the periodic calls for the beautification of Toronto. “Always an isolated proposition,” he complained, “something to be done in one place. But we have never yet heard of any