

# History of City Planning

## Introduction

Although city planning has only existed as an organized profession for less than a century, it is clear that all cities have historically displayed various degrees of forethought and conscious design in their layout and how they function. Today, the process of planning involves the improvement of urban centers or rural areas in order to provide healthy and safe living conditions; efficient transportation alternatives and communication; adequate facilities; and aesthetically pleasurable surroundings.

This can be accomplished through the public, private, or non-profit sectors of the profession.

Cities exist for many reasons, and the diversity of urban forms can be traced to the complex functions that cities perform. Cities have, and still do, serve residents as centers of trade; holders of religious buildings (e.g., many medieval cities were built near or around monasteries and cathedrals); centers of government (e.g., capital cities); and hubs of

human culture (e.g., arts, scientific research, technical innovation). It is important to recognize both the positive and negative aspects of city planning throughout history in order to: 1) understand its function in present day; and 2) continuously improve the profession by learning from past successes and failures.



*The City of San Luis Obispo is an example of an small urban center that has continuously been improved to provide healthy and safe living conditions.*

Photo: <http://images.businessweek.com>



*City planning has only existed as an organized profession for less than a century.*

Photo: <http://flanagan.150m.com/Donne%20with%20City%20planner%20Dave%20Marsh%20Jan%202023%20%200001.jpg>

**Examination of planning history enables one to continuously improve the profession by learning from past successes and failures.**

## Ancient Global History

The first true urban settlements appeared around 3,000 B.C. in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley. These ancient cities displayed both "organic" and "planned" types of urban form. Many of the city's societies had elaborate religious, political, and military hierarchies, and the majority of the areas devoted to these elite activities were often highly planned and regular in form. In contrast, residential areas often grew by a slow process of accretion, producing complex, irregular patterns that one could call "organic." Both Greece and the Roman Empire have excellent examples of ancient city planning.

### Greece

Greek cities did not follow a single pattern of land use planning; the cities grew slowly from old villages, and often displayed an irregular, organic form, that would adapt to a given area's topography and history. Greek colonial cities, however,

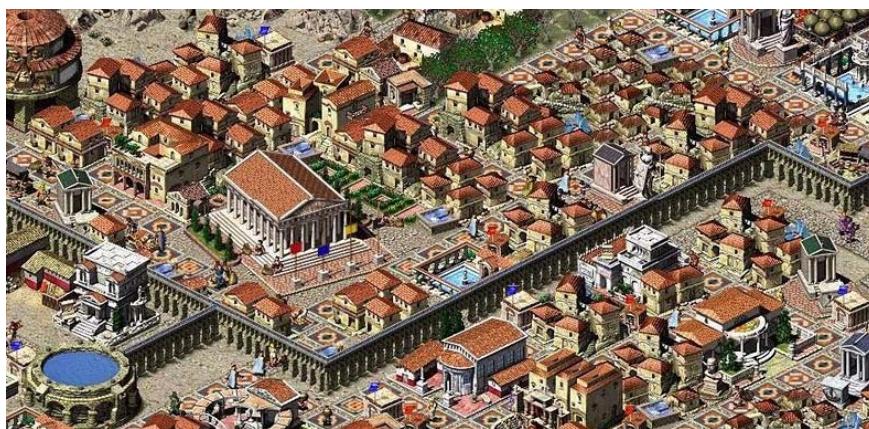
were planned prior to settlement using the grid system, with the first being Miletus developed circa 479 BC by Hippodamus (a Greek intellectual associated with the Pythagoreans). This grid system divides urban land into uniform rectangular lots suitable for development, and was, and still is, easy to both layout and navigate.



*The grid pattern that characterized the Roman colonial town of Timgad can still be seen today.* Photo: <http://img244.imageshack.us/i/timgad2lk2.jpg/>.

### Roman Empire

The Romans engaged in extensive city-building activities as they consolidated their empire. Rome itself displayed the informal complexity created by centuries of organic growth, although particular temple and public districts were highly planned. In contrast, the Roman military and colonial towns were laid out in a variation of the grid. One of the most striking extant Roman grid patterns can be found in the ruins of Timgad, in modern-day Algeria. The Roman grid is characterized by a nearly perfectly orthogonal layout of streets, all crossing each other at right angles, and by the presence of two main streets, set at right angles from each other. Many European cities, such



*The Greek city of Miletus, planned by Hippodamus, was subdivided by a system of wide main roads and narrow streets.* Photo: <http://www.ts1r.net/2007/10/miletus-grid-in-greece.html>



*The grid pattern utilized throughout Paris came from Roman origins.* Photo: [http://www.overseaspropertymall.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/paris\\_eiffel\\_tower\\_skyline.jpg](http://www.overseaspropertymall.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/paris_eiffel_tower_skyline.jpg)

# United States City Planning History:

In the United States, early New England towns were some of the first to exhibit conscious planning. Annapolis, Md., Philadelphia, and Paterson, N.J., were built after initial plans were made, but the most celebrated example is Washington D.C. This city is laid out according to the plan devised in 1791 by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, under the supervision of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. In general, the base of the plan is rectangular with diagonal main thoroughfares superimposed and the Capitol as the central feature.

## **City Beautiful Movement**

In the 19th century Frederick Law Olmsted was a pioneer in both city planning and landscape architecture, and is still famous for the planning and design of Central Park in New York City. State legislation enabling cities to appoint planning commissions that had the authority to develop and carry out city plans began



*The World's Columbian Exposition 1893 that took place in Chicago, acted as a catalyst to what is currently referred to as the City Beautiful Movement.*

*Photo: <http://burnhamplan100.uchicago.edu/newberryexhibit/images/reforming3-large.jpg>*

in Pennsylvania in 1891. This, coupled with the Chicago city plan drawn up by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 (of which much was constructed), acted as a catalyst to what is currently referred to as the City Beautiful Movement. This movement's intent was progressive reform by means of beautification and monumental grandeur in cities, which was thought to promote a harmonious social order that would increase the quality of life and help to remove social ills.

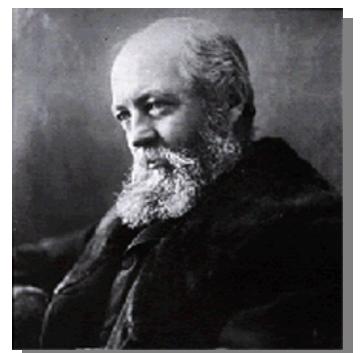
## **Development of Zoning**

In 1916, New York City adopted the first zoning regulations to apply city-wide as a reaction to construction of The Equitable Building (which still stands at 120 Broadway). The building towered over the neighboring residences, completely covering all available land area within the property boundary, blocking windows of neighboring buildings and diminishing the availability of sunshine for the people in the affected area. The zoning laws established as a result of this circumstance became the blueprint for zoning in the rest of the country. This was partly due to the fact that the head of the commission that wrote the initial regulations, Henry



*Central Park was designed by famous planner and landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted.*

*Photo: <http://fthats.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/central-park-new-york-wallpaper.jpg>*



*Fredrick Law Olhsted.*

*Photo: [http://ksgaccman.harvard.edu/hotc/images/cache/olmsted\\_portrait.gif](http://ksgaccman.harvard.edu/hotc/images/cache/olmsted_portrait.gif)*



*The first zoning regulations were adopted due to the reaction from the construction of the Equitable Building in New York City.*

*Photo: [http://www.earthdocumentary.com/equitable\\_building\\_new\\_york\\_city.htm](http://www.earthdocumentary.com/equitable_building_new_york_city.htm)*

## United States City Planning History (cont.):

Bassett, also headed the group of planning lawyers who wrote The Standard State Zoning Enabling Act, which was issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1924 and accepted almost without change by most states. New York City, along with the majority of cities within the United States, went on to develop ever more complex sets of zoning regulations, including floor-area ratio regulations, air rights and others according to the density-specific needs of the neighborhoods.

### Urban Renewal

Arising from more than a half-century of slum clearance and urban housing reform campaigns, “Urban Renewal” was a federally sponsored and largely federally financed program that altered the physical landscapes of many American cities between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s. Proponents promised to pro-

vide cities with funds and legal powers to tear down slums, sell the land to private developers at reduced cost, relocate slum dwellers in decent, safe housing, stimulate large-scale private construction of new housing, revitalize decaying urban downtowns by eliminating “blight” (economically unprofitable districts), and add new property tax revenues to shrinking city budgets. Proponents of urban renewal also claimed that it would slow the departure of middle and upper income residents for the suburbs.

Program implementation proved costly, complex, and controversial, and generally failed to accomplish the often contradictory goals. Between 1949 and 1970, some 500,000 housing units fell to the renewal wrecking balls that the government attempted to rebuild. In Chicago, and other cities, the stark high-rise housing that was built for citizens displaced by urban renewal often became centers of crime, drug abuse, and other social ills. Although well intentioned, urban renewal often caused more problems than it solved.

There were some success stories, such as the soaring “Gateway to the West” arch in St. Louis, Missouri, that supplanted blocks of dilapidated riverfront buildings, and a civic arena that restored the luster of downtown Pittsburgh’s “Golden Triangle.” Such successes, however, often masked failures inherent in the legislation that established the program.



*The Cabrini Green housing project (located in Chicago, Illinois and marked within red border) was separated from the rest of the City by a large freeway. Photo:*

<http://reference.findtarget.com/search/urban%20renewal/>.



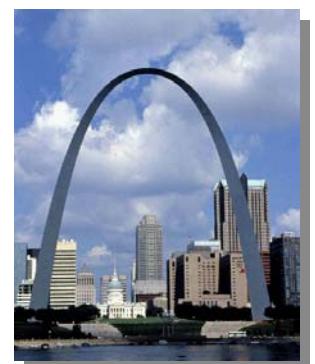
*The Cabrini Green housing project, located in Chicago, was poorly designed and poorly located. Photo:*

<http://affordablehousinginstitute.org>



*Cabrini Green was isolated, underfunded, and financially infeasible, which ultimately lead to its failure and demolition. Photo:*

[www.affordablehousinginstitute.org](http://affordablehousinginstitute.org)



*The “Gateway to the West,” located in St. Louis, Missouri, was one of the few urban renewal success stories. Photo:*

[http://  
blu-  
roof.files.wordpress.com/2007](http://blueroof.files.wordpress.com/2007)

## Professional Planning Today:

Planners work everywhere within the United States and the world, including rural areas, suburban areas, and large cities. They can function within the public sector (federal, state, or local governments), nonprofit sector, or private sector (e.g., real estate development companies and planning / multi-disciplinary consulting firms). Whichever sector a planner may work for, it is the common goal of all planners to improve the welfare of people and their communities by creating more convenient, sustainable, equitable, healthful, efficient, and attractive places for present and future generations. This goal is a lofty one, and in order to accomplish it many different people on all sides of development have to take part. For example, one of the many possible roles of a private planner would be to assist, advise, and/or manage private development projects for a developer.

The planner's expansive knowledge on both broad and specific issues that are oftentimes incredibly complex (e.g., storm water management, permitting, and environmental regulation) enables the realization of a development that obtains the goals and objectives of the client, while also satisfying the appropriate regulatory constraints and acknowledging the "vision" of the community.

All planning sectors – public, private, and non-profit, should consciously strive to improve the community they work within for present and future generations. In order to do this effectively, it is important that every planner both acknowledges and learns from the successes and failures of past planning. In doing so, falling into a cyclic pattern of repeating past planning mistakes will be avoided, and success in city planning will increase steadily over time.



*Time management is an essential skill for a planner in any sector.*



*Private planners strive to meet the goals and objective of their client, while also acknowledging the "vision" of the community.*



*One role of the private planner might be to assist, advise, and/or manage a private development project. The planner's expansive knowledge on both broad and specific issues enables the realization of a development.*

**Planners can work in the public, private, or non-profit sectors.**

## References:

American Planning Association (2010). *What is Planning?* Retrieved 21 April 2010 from <http://www.planning.org/aboutplanning/whatisplanning.htm>.

Boyer, P. (2010). *Urban Renewal*. The Oxford Companion to United States History. 2001. Retrieved on 21 April 2010 from <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

Ellis, C. (2010). *History Of Cities And City Planning*. Retrieved on 16 April 2010 from <http://www.art.net/~hopkins/Don/simcity/manual/history.html>.

Jackson, K. (1985). *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Wilson, W. (1980). *Harrisburg's successful city beautiful movement 1900-1915*, Pennsylvania History, 47

