



The Ottawa Driveway. Visual variety affording aesthetic pleasure was a main objective of parkway design.

## **“THE BATTLE AGAINST DISFIGURING THINGS” AN OVERVIEW OF THE RESPONSE BY NON-PROFESSIONALS TO THE CITY BEAUTIFUL MOVEMENT IN ONTARIO FROM 1880 TO 1920**

*by Edwinna von Baeyer*

Much attention has been focused on the professional aspects of civic beautification—the role of town planning, architecture, landscape architecture, public health and civic legislation. After sketching the relevant activities of the professionals, this survey will demonstrate the persistence and variety of small-scale efforts to beautify the urban environment, ranging from park creation to flower boxes on Main Street. These were undertaken by amateur beautification groups, who were fueled not only by the spirit of optimism and the desire to beautify, but also by the pervasive reforming zeal of the period.<sup>1</sup>

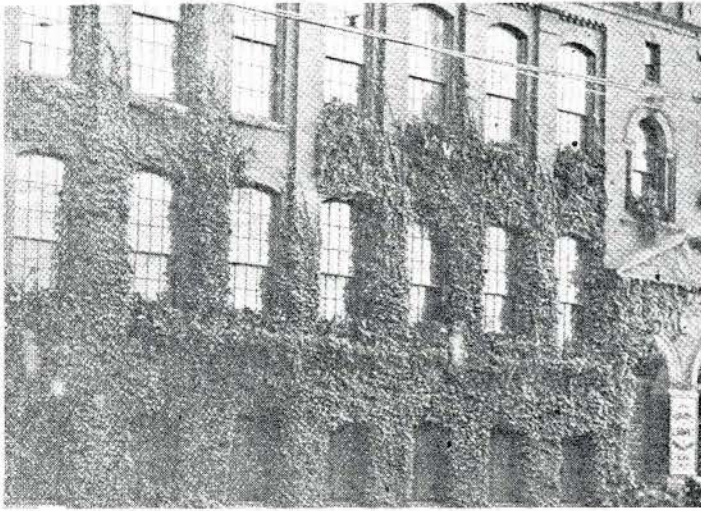
In Ontario, City Beautiful action was stimulated by the powerful example of Chicago's World Columbian Exhibition in 1893 which demonstrated what a coordinated group of professional “Beautifiers” could create. Increased foreign travel to attractive cities in Europe, and a growing literature on civic beautification sharpened our awareness of the contrast between what we had (a profusion of utility poles, tall buildings, billboards, overcrowding and a general drabness of residential areas unadorned by either parks or home landscaping) and the ideals of civic beautification.<sup>2</sup>

The turn of the century witnessed a flurry of activity as professionals began drawing up plans to create the ideal city—one of parks, trees, boulevards and stately buildings.<sup>3</sup> Coherence of design, with elements of visual variety (landscaped streets, inspiring vistas and parkways) were

to enhance the civic grandeur of the planned design.<sup>4</sup> Attaining this ideal involved not only tremendous amounts of money, but also a great degree of regulation over the city dwellers' life. Organizations of architects and engineers were to have the power to approve or disallow municipal building plans, supposedly eliminating the “haphazard mixture along a street of architectural style and building size.”<sup>5</sup> Professional beautifiers were convinced that society as a whole loved beauty, wanted to be surrounded by it, and did not differ in aesthetic judgement from their own ideals. According to current psychological thought, an ugly environment damaged the viewer's mental health. This theory was soon used to bolster the reformers' sense of purpose and duty. If the streetscape was cleaned up and beautified, a “social duty” would be performed.

Unfortunately, the Canadian City Beautiful movement lacked both an integrated philosophy and an articulate national leader. Furthermore, worsening economic conditions before World War I severely curtailed implementation of larger projects. Coupled with this, beautification projects began to be criticized in the face of housing shortages, public health problems, and the need for legislation to control the growth of our cities. Beauty was gradually phased out of the urban planner's list of essential characteristics of cities, and was not readmitted until the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> City councils planned great architectural innovations and park commissions designed large acreages, but few of these plans were executed. Yet during the same time, City Beautiful thought had been trickling down from the





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A Toronto factory in 1906 was improved with vines and lawn as part of a civic campaign to beautify eyesores.

professionals to the rest of the populace, stimulating smaller, less grandiose beautifying efforts. These small, amateur groups (horticultural societies, improvement associations and sometimes Boards of Trade) went about "planting up" the city, carrying on the fight against ugliness when official City Beautiful programs failed.<sup>7</sup>

Before the participants and programs of this "little tradition" are surveyed, a short note on the spirit of reform evident in Ontario before 1930 will provide a background for the beautifiers' pronouncements and actions.

From the late 1800s until the late 1920s, Canadian society was characterized by a reforming zeal which, especially before World War I, was buoyed up by a spirit of optimism.<sup>8</sup> This would be Canada's century! By the turn of the century, Canada was just emerging from the effects of a world-wide depression, new lands and markets were opening in the West as a result of massive immigration, technological advances were being made as a result of the rapid rise of industrialization, and for some the standard of living was improving. The resulting changes unsettled many Canadians, who then sought to redesign existing institutions to conform to a new, unfamiliar society.<sup>9</sup> Yet not all Canadians shared the good times. Rapid industrialization and urbanization coupled with waves of immigration inflicted misery on many especially lower class workers—low-paid, ill-housed and badly educated.<sup>10</sup>

Many reform organizations were already well established by 1900 in response to this society in transition—the organizations dealt with myriad social problems caused by the changes, ranging from tuberculosis prevention to child welfare to municipal government reforms. Unaesthetic, unplanned, unlandscaped urban areas were soon defined within the context of social problems to be solved.

The leaders and their followers were mainly drawn from an urban middle class which was intent on stabilizing and improving society in accordance with their own middle-class values. The reformers were a mixture of humanitarians, temperance workers, business promoters, evangelists, suffragettes and professionals of many types (such as architects, city planners, doctors, journalists, educators, clergy). The number of supporting voluntary associations were so great in 1895 that it was remarked that "People had been seized by some inexplicable urge to save mankind."<sup>11</sup> Yet they were not united in a single movement or creed, nor were they all motivated solely by altruistic intentions.

This was the contest in which the horticultural offshoots of reform movements were produced. One of the main branches comprised a vocal portion of North American society who were, at first, possessed by an impelling desire to improve their surroundings aesthetically, and later, who transformed the movement's purpose into a combination of artistic achievement, duty to society and reward (sometimes financial).

Typically, the men and women who effected the horticultural reforms held dear the values of property, family, profit, social status, Christian values and the status quo. As we will note in the course of this survey, horticultural reformers often elevated gardening onto many pedestals: beautified surroundings would ensure mental stability, enhance the economic position of a locality, provide work for the poor, etc. Often the reformers were members of more than one beautification group, for example a horticultural society member could also play a role in a town's improvement association or the Board of Trade. A town might have one or all three of these organizations.

Many of our horticultural reformers exist only as names on a page, occasionally given life as members of an improvement committee or an award-winner at a horticultural show. One Ontario gardener whose activities were better documented was the much admired R.B. Whyte of Ottawa. In many ways he was a model twentieth century gardener and citizen in view of his altruism coupled with his belief in gardening as a force for improvement. He not only cultivated a half-acre flower and fruit garden, but he also found time beyond his work as a merchant for his numerous horticultural "good works." He was a founding member of the Ottawa Horticultural Society and the Ontario Horticultural Association. He sponsored children's gardening contests ranging from potato growing to flower cultivation to school gardens. He wrote numerous articles in support of children's gardening and coauthored a pamphlet on Ottawa gardens and their care as a contribution to civic beautification.<sup>12</sup>

By 1900 horticultural societies were slowly becoming a part of Canadian urban life. The first horticultural society in Ontario was formed in Toronto in 1834. Originally outgrowths of local agricultural societies, horticultural societies were organized by men interested in amateur and commercial growing of fruits, vegetables and ornamentals. (There were women members, but the official positions were nearly always held by men until the 1920s.)

By the early 1900s, many Ontario societies were catching the "beautifying fever," and breaking out in a rash of City Beautiful rhetoric:

If we are to provoke a revulsion against untidy streets, hideous alleys, tumble down houses, repulsive garbage heaps, offensive advertisements of black and yellow on dead walls and mountain sides, we must become teachers of beauty . . . Missionaries of beauty are wanted to enlist in this crusade against ugliness.<sup>13</sup>

Horticultural duty to society, when performed well, not only would ensure beautiful surroundings, but also, as a side benefit, would "purify home life . . . promote a greater love of home . . . and thereby lay the foundation of a patriotism worthy of the land we possess."<sup>14</sup>

Professor William Hutt of the OAC in 1909 outlined the various ways a horticultural society could "reach out" to improve the environment: horticultural societies should lead educational campaigns for civic beautification, guiding the public to an "appreciation of the value of neatness, order and beautiful surroundings."<sup>15</sup> The society should not work alone, but coopt other civic organizations: school boards, town councils, and boards of trade.<sup>16</sup> The local press should never be ignored, but used to the best advantage in publicizing civic beautification.<sup>17</sup> By 1902, the Canadian Horticulturist had instituted a monthly department called "Civic Improvement," devoted "to the interests of the Horticultural Societies of Ontario, and of all other bodies interested in the improvement of the surroundings of our Canadian town and country homes."

Improvement associations generally espoused the same ideals as horticultural societies, but sometimes with an added element:

So we have found that what we have done with very little inconvenience to ourselves has proved a good advertisement for the place and its people, and the present prospect is that we shall get back many times the value of the labor and money expended in improvement, for several sales of property have been made at much better figures than prevailed before we began our work.<sup>18</sup>



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A winner in the Hamilton Rockery Contest in 1905. Garden competitions were promoted as part of clean up campaigns held in towns and cities.



Hamilton, Ontario claimed to have the first civic improvement society in Canada in 1899, an organization which was said to have raised "the moral tone of the community."<sup>19</sup> In fact, the spirit of civic rivalry helped fuel the growing improvement movement. The clamour of promotionalism was already strident: real estate promotions, rivalries over factory locations, and general civic advertising of a location's attractions, and floral boosterism easily added its voice as well. Thus boards of trades instigated beautification programs sometimes, believing beautified surroundings were a "potent factor in attracting citizens and increasing trade."<sup>20</sup>

By 1910, many Ontarians were actually heeding the improvers' message; a variety of public plantings had been successfully initiated: street tree planting; public grounds beautification around churches, civic buildings and schools; clean up campaigns; and the beginnings of urban and rural home beautification. The two larger movements, namely public park building and vacant lot gardening, were also emerging at this time. Each will be taken up in turn. (It must be noted that details of Canadian town planning are largely irrelevant to this horticultural story. Town planning focussed more on zoning, legislation, town layout, housing and public health, rather than on landscaping or gardening.)

Street tree planting was one of the earliest civic beautification projects, closely allied with the growing popularity of boulevarding: creating a strip of lawn and trees and sometimes flower beds alongside or down the centre of a city street. A response to this was an "Act to Encourage the Planting and Growing of Trees"<sup>21</sup> passed in 1897 by the Ontario legislature.

By 1901 readers of the *Canadian Horticulturist* were told it was their civic duty to plant shade trees.<sup>22</sup> In 1907, Professor D.P. Penhallow, professor of botany at McGill University, lent scientific backing to tree planting. In addition to their aesthetic appeal, he stated, trees also provided an atmosphere of "greater purity and more bracing quality."<sup>23</sup> Educationally shade trees were also beneficial:

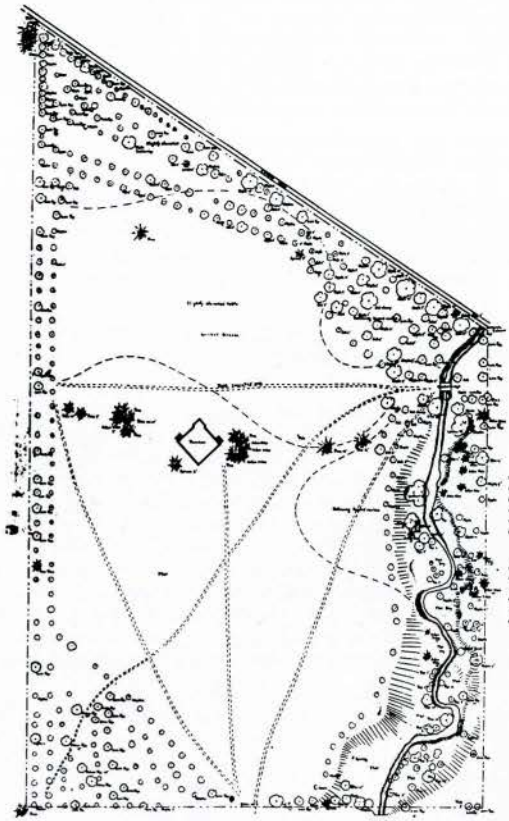
11 to bring up children habituated to association with those forms of vegetation which typify great beauty and grace of form, which represent the embodiment of plastic strength and great virility, is to insensibly shape their moral natures in such ways as to develop character and self-reliance, as well as an appreciation of those more gentle graces which contribute so largely to the characteristic qualities of the cultured and the refined.<sup>24</sup>

The planting campaign was further embellished by claims that street trees attracted visitors and encouraged settlement. The contrast between an unimproved street (a mud road, bordered by deep ditches and ornamented by weed patches) and an improved one (a paved street, bordered by ribbons of lawn and rows of trees) was a powerful incentive in many localities for increased tree plantings.<sup>25</sup>

However, by the 1920s, problems had emerged in some localities from overenthusiastic tree planting. In Ottawa, street tree vendors had not only sold unsuitable trees but recommended planting them too close together. The Ottawa Horticultural Society led a campaign for better street tree regulations: little gardening was occurring in older sections of the city because of overshadowing and overdrainage of front lawns and gardens.<sup>26</sup> In 1923, the city passed a tree bylaw prohibiting the planting of certain trees and appointed a street tree inspector to oversee planting and spacing.<sup>27</sup>

The continuing battle to eliminate "disfiguring things" was not limited to tree planting—the attack was manifold. The main street of many towns became the focus of the improver's activities as city hall, post office, factories, libraries, railway stations and other sites were beautified. Vines were trained up factory walls, flower boxes sprouted from municipal windows, and flower beds graced vacant ground near public buildings. Churches and hospitals were not ignored, although not all responded so enthusiastically. In 1902 the Hamilton City Improvement Society complained that far from the strong support and activity expected from churches, there was practically no improvement shown.<sup>28</sup>

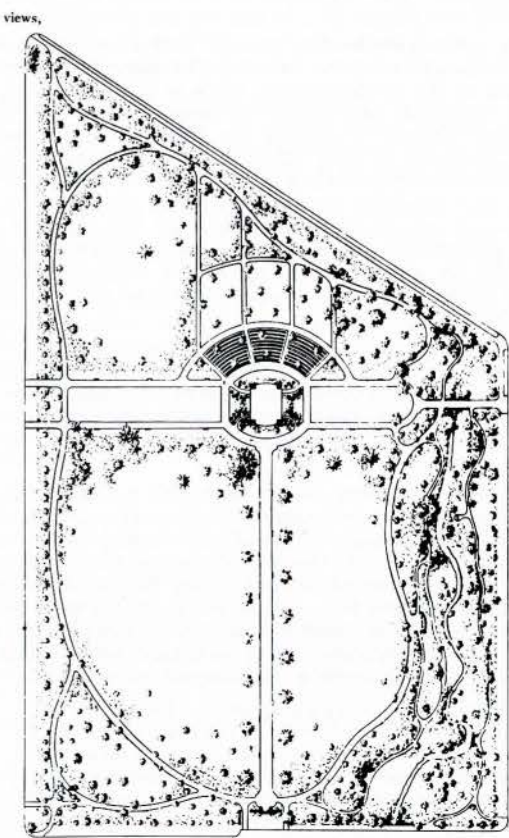
In St. Thomas, Ontario, the incoming president of the horticultural society, Dr. Frank E. Bennet, accepted the position only on one condition: that \$100 was granted by the city council to plant fifteen flower beds near downtown railway lines.<sup>29</sup> In 1913, the society planted fifty-five flower beds (on average six metres by one metre) along the street-car route, in parks, and in front of public buildings such as the city hall, public library and post office. Nearly sixteen thousand tulip bulbs were used in these public plantings.<sup>30</sup> Where land was not available for flower beds, the society in 1915 bought and filled twenty-five one metre high cement urns.<sup>31</sup> By 1920, the society had established a community garden (on land rented from the London and Port Stanley Railway Co.) where new varieties of perennials, annuals and shrubs were tested and floral "donations" gathered. Mr. Bennet characterized the garden as "... as very practical business, the base line for an aggressive campaign for permanent beauty..."<sup>32</sup>



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The Map of Existing Conditions in Queen's Park, Barrie, Ontario Shows much tree growth not of natural origin, but planted by the hand of man

Before and after plans for improvements to Queen's Park, Barrie, Ontario, 1909. The influence of the English landscape style as interpreted by F.L. Olmstead is evident in the improved park version.



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The Plan for Arrangements Contains Many Suggestions for Adoption by other Municipalities Shows a charming scheme involving little expense for construction because existing features are taken advantage of in an attractive way



Occasionally groups other than civic organizations provided an impetus for beautification. For example for one year the *Farmer's Advocate*, a farm journal, sponsored competitions for the beautification of cheese factories in Ontario and western Quebec.<sup>33</sup> A group of merchants in Clinton, Ontario turned the centre of their business district (where six streets converged) into beds of cannas and caladiums.<sup>34</sup>

Schools were not ignored—beautified school grounds, according to civic beautifiers, would assure “better and more contented attendance of pupils, will inspire (pupils) with higher ideals of living and of citizenship and will implant in their minds loving and imperishable memories of the happy days spent at the old school.”<sup>35</sup> Horticultural and improvement societies further enticed school children into the “love of the beautiful” by seed distributions and special exhibitions of their floral harvests:

To get results in civic and home improvement, we must first reach the individual. We cannot do better than to begin with the young child.<sup>36</sup>

School grounds beautification was a response not only to City Beautiful thought and action, but also to the growing concern over primary education. This concern led to the school gardens movement. School gardens (plots of vegetables, flowers and trees tended by the students) were promoted as an educational reform leading to good citizenship, love of nature, rejuvenation of rural life, and a concrete basis for the three R's. The next step was obviously to have the students beautify the school grounds as well. Thus the Ontario Department of Education in the early 1900s institutionalized the beautification of school grounds, diminishing the participation of horticultural societies, Women's Institutes, and improvement associations. The department offered grants to teachers, supplied ornamentals, and, in general, included school beautification in official school garden policies.

Arbor Days were held to encourage community participation in school grounds beautification. Usually a May Friday was designated for cleaning grounds, planting trees and occasionally creating flower beds. The response was not always enthusiastic: the editor of the *Canadian Horticulturist* in 1904 surveyed fifty Ontario schools on their Arbor Day observances and discovered only three schools active.<sup>37</sup>

The ideal, which a few schools achieved, was a properly landscaped site with flower beds, shrub borders, and a lawn and circular drive at the entrance. The horticultural departments of Macdonald College, Quebec, and of the Ontario Agricultural College would draw up landscape plans free of charge, for any school submitting a proper sketch of their grounds showing placement of buildings, existing trees and playgrounds.

Clean-up weeks were another popular horticultural attack on civic eyesores. In larger towns the clean up campaigns often concentrated only on one or two neighbourhoods, while in smaller localities, the entire community would be involved. The home owner became subject to the improvers' attention as clean up campaigns usually focussed on the backyard. Backyards of many urban homes were generally neglected, littered with debris—places where dish water and garbage were thrown. After the clean up, home owners were further encouraged to plant a few flowers and shrubs for aesthetic, hygienic and emotional values.<sup>38</sup> “An ugly environment too often means a soul distorted, dwarfed and destroyed by the absence of sympathetic and subtle influence—a soul untouched by the influence of a home scented and adorned with things fair to look upon.”<sup>39</sup>

In eastern Canada, a priority project in addition to general clean up was tearing down the high board fences surrounding home properties. Professor William Hutt of the Ontario Agricultural College saw the removal of street fences as the first step which would initiate a series of improvements: proper cement sidewalks, proper grading of lawns and boulevards, neater yards, and more tree planting.<sup>40</sup>

Home garden competitions were taken over by civic beautification groups and promoted as yet another way to involve a town in beautification. The earliest competitions, specifically working toward the ideal of a beautified city, were in Hamilton, Ontario in 1902, sponsored jointly by the Hamilton Horticultural Society and the Improvement Society: gardens, children's bouquets, window boxes, and rockeries for corner lots were among the competitive categories. Ottawa's garden competitions were organized and patronized by the wives of two governors-general. Lady Minto in 1902 inaugurated garden competitions for the

... encouragement of neatness and order in the keeping of grass plots and flower beds in the private homes ... the encouragement of flower growing, and their tasteful arrangement in beds or borders; and to awaken increased interest in horticulture in general, so that the gardens and lawns entered in the competitions might be object lessons to the rest of the citizens.<sup>41</sup>

In Toronto, some clean up campaigns were linked with slum improve-

ment projects. A minor theme in the overall movement, slum improvement provoked outbursts of action and idealistic rhetoric:

It had been very encouraging to see the transformation of ugly little backyards littered with broken furniture, boxes and cans, without plants or flowers, and cheered only by an occasional bright-hued garment on washing days, into little green and flowering places, where the family can refresh their minds and bodies, rest and think, and perhaps dream a little.<sup>42</sup>

But the magnitude of slum conditions overpowered any lasting horticultural remedy.

More lasting was the clean up work directed to vacant lots, grounds of public buildings, and private front lawns. The St. Thomas Horticultural Society, with its green fingers in every gardening pie, pursued these campaigns so energetically that by 1920, it boasted:

The effect of the work has been remarkable. Hardly a waste area exists in the city. Unsightly spots have been transformed into beauty places, unsightly fences have been removed, nearly every home, however humble, is a bower of flowers. Law and order are more respected and fires are practically eliminated. An air of cleanliness exists, and the whole town has transformed in a few years at a very small cost.<sup>43</sup>

The clean up and planting of vacant lots began as a City Beautiful activity in Ontario. Vacant lot gardening (where rubbish heaps were turned into lush vegetable and flower gardens) is historically related to allotment gardening, originally popularized in Britain, entering North America in 1898. By 1910 some Ontario civic groups promoted vacant lot gardening not only as City Beautiful projects, but also as an aid to the poor and to uplift the working classes: the gardens “would mean so much for the moral and financial improvement of the dwellers in the slums of our rapidly growing cities.”<sup>44</sup> Unemployment would be mitigated, and vacant lot gardening would teach thrift and industry to the working-class poor. This in fact was the main aim of the Toronto Vacant Lots Cultivation Association, founded in 1914. Self-help charity was seen as the best solution to the financial and moral burden of poor relief: “It would not be a charity tending to pauperize and degrade ...”<sup>45</sup>

Many sponsoring organizations began depicting the gardens as problem solvers—yet another agent of social reform. Not only would patriotism and civic beautification be served when these areas were cleaned up, but a city's noxious weed problem and sanitary condition would also be controlled. Other socially minded citizens proposed vacant lot gardening as the perfect solution for the problem of the unemployed woman. It was easily learned, and light work especially when “two or more girls” shared a plot.<sup>46</sup> When a serious scheme to send unemployed males to farms as farm labourers gained support during the early years of the war, an Ontario agricultural official, C.C. James, campaigned instead for vacant lot gardens. Here a man could grow labour-intensive crops such as potatoes without any farming expertise whatever.<sup>47</sup>

The poor and the unemployed were not the only beneficiaries of this new movement. Florist associations reported that their business increased significantly as a result of vacant lot gardens. Merchants stocked an unusually large number of vegetable plants in 1917, which sold out early in the season.<sup>48</sup>

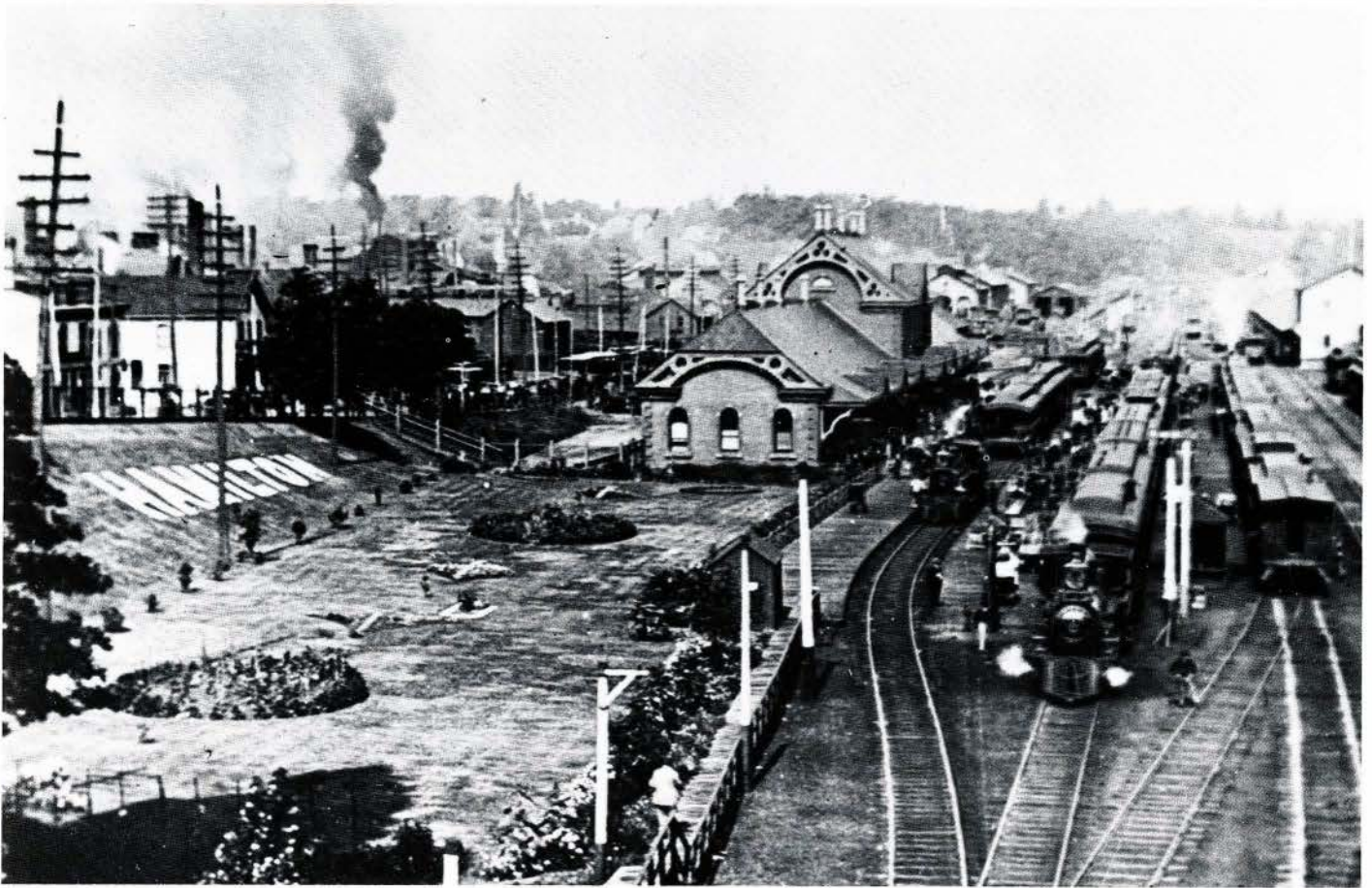
But not until 1915, when the effects of World War I were becoming more evident, did vacant lot gardening receive serious attention from municipal, provincial and, finally, federal authorities. Federally, vacant lot cultivation became synonymous with the greater production campaigns strongly supported by the Department of Agriculture. Every able Canadian, rural and urban, was to participate in the war effort by raising food on any available piece of ground.

By 1916, the vacant lot gardening movement was well represented in many Ontario towns. Groups such as Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, policemen, firemen, Women's Institutes, church organizations, ratepayers associations, and factory workers' groups were encouraged to raise vegetables. Community participation was voluntary; small fees were charged for rental, ploughing and fertilizing.

The most popular crops were vegetables during the war, however some associations, such as the one in Fort William, required lot holders to plant at least one row of flowers in addition. The flower borders were usually composed of bright annuals such as marigolds, asters and nasturtiums. One harried enthusiast stated that while many might find vacant lot gardening soothing, he was of a different opinion:

When I came in from my Vacant Lot and in my own garden passed budded lilacs running to a forest of suckers, precious paeonies lost in a jungle of delphiniums and beautiful spreads of climbing roses ablaze with flowers even then against a background of brown, thrip-riddled leaves, the joys of the Vacant Lot Garden did not soothe my mind.<sup>49</sup>





Hamilton, Ontario. Railway garden sites generally were determined by the horizontal lines of track and adjoining roads.

Despite the occasional grumbler, vacant lot gardening was an expanding, popular movement. For example, a report in the *Agricultural Gazette of Canada* in 1917 noted the following: out of 1600 lots in Guelph, only two were given up. In St. Thomas, the Home Gardening Association oversaw the cultivation of 37.07 hectares of vacant lots by 100 members. The Vacant Land Production Association in Galt, Ontario recorded 3,000 bags of potatoes in addition to the other crops produced on 111.20 hectares of land. Port Arthur Garden Club boasted 525 members.<sup>50</sup> To sustain enthusiasm, garden competitions were sponsored—the largest was the Toronto War Gardens Show held in September 1918. Also, W.T. Macoun, the Dominion Horticulturist, in 1918 sponsored a vacant lot garden poetry contest. “Rain-softened and sun-warmed, it stretches fair/Prepared to yield a wealth of all good things,/In neat, well-ordered rows the seedlings pierce/The rick brown mould, and seek the sunlight . . . Behold my Vacant Lot, vacant no more . . .”<sup>51</sup>

The high-point of the movement came in 1918: everything was well coordinated and public participation at its peak. At least one minister used his vacant lot gardening experiences as the subject for a Sunday sermon—“When God Speaks in Your War Garden”: “The war garden underscores His name . . . (and He says) ‘If I can hang emeralds and topazes on the bean bushes, rubies on the tomato vines, and amethysts on the eggplant, I can take care of you.’”<sup>52</sup>

The amount of participation in clean up days, backyard beautification, garden competitions, vacant lot gardening, and flower shows varied throughout Ontario. Depending on the energy of local improvement groups, a town’s eyesores might be eliminated, but gardeners seemingly were never satisfied—there was always room for one more planter, one more boulevard. The famous Ontario gardener, R.B. Whyte, bewailed the horticultural ignorance of many Ontarians who (he felt) retarded the movement.<sup>53</sup> Others worried that our gardens and horticultural improvements would not compare favourably with the beautiful gardens of Europe. Yet, in some quarters, improvement societies were being criticized for overenthusiastic beautification. Frederick Todd stated that the Ottawa Improvement Commission had improved much of the individuality of several scenic drives “out of existence until a sameness exists . . . which destroys the interest.”<sup>54</sup>

The enthusiasm which prompted neighbourhood clean ups or municipal flower beds was also directed into park building, one of the most popular City Beautiful activities, and the last one surveyed in this

paper. Open areas for public use were not a recent innovation—the town square probably is as old as settlement itself.<sup>55</sup> What was innovative in the nineteenth century was the idea of a landscaped tract of urban land devoted to public recreation. Prior to the nineteenth century, parks were part of a gentleman’s private property, and not open to the public.

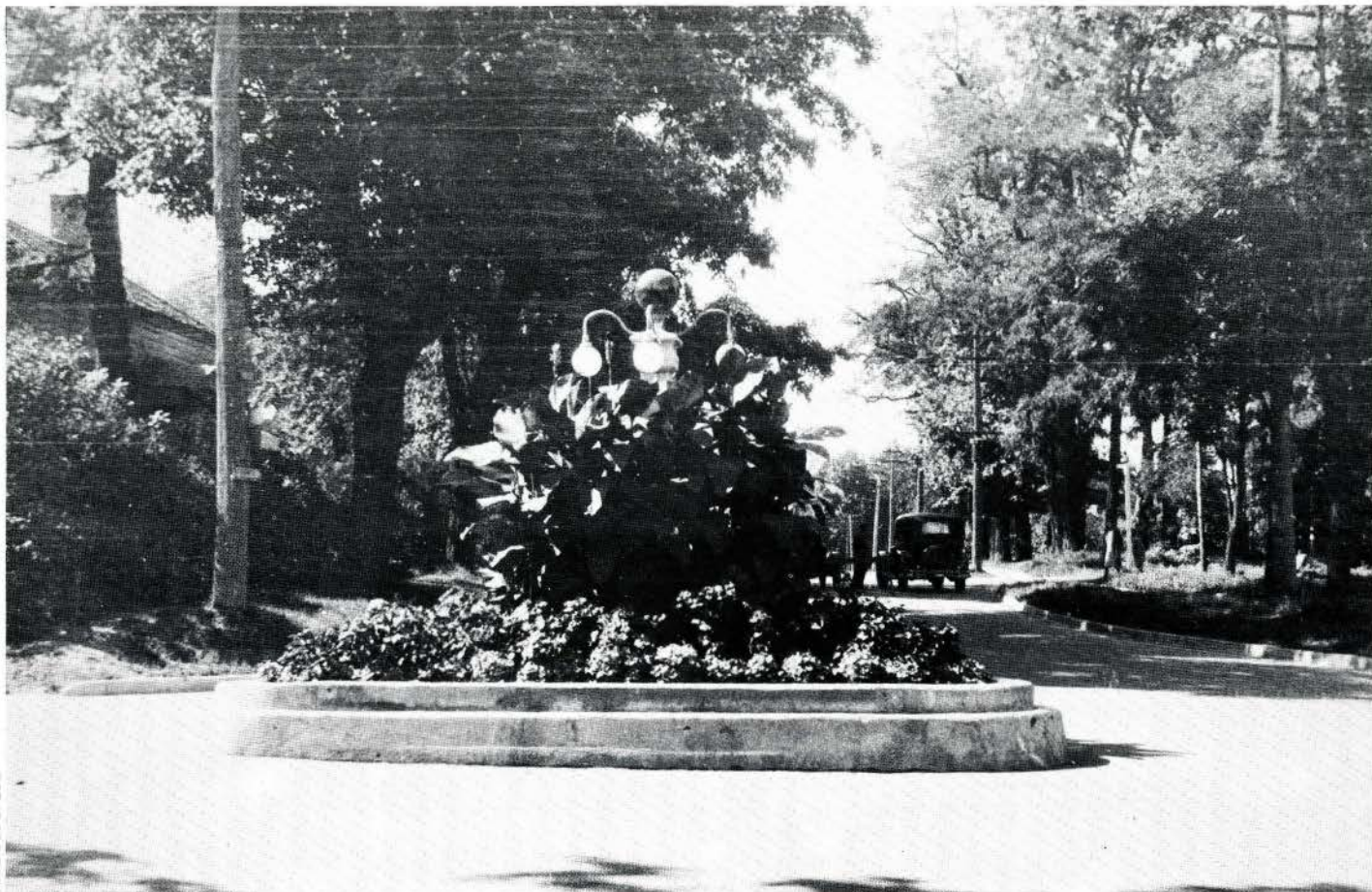
The landscaped public park entered North America in the 1830s through the “rural cemetery” movement. Burial grounds were landscaped, serving as “a quiet place in which to escape the bustle and clangor of the city—for strolling, for solitude, and even for family picnics.”<sup>56</sup>

The cemetery-as-park phenomenon in the mid-1800s was heavily influenced by the active agitation of British immigrants, and the media. The *Canadian Horticulturist* was in the forefront of this enthusiasm, as seen in an 1903 article extolling the virtues of a well-designed cemetery: If a cemetery was nicely landscaped and well-maintained, “patronage would so increase that the sale of lots would soon make the cemetery a paying investment and the pride of the countryside.”<sup>57</sup> A beautified cemetery would be a place where “mourners will not mind to lay aside a loved one.”<sup>58</sup> Too many cemeteries, according to various commentators, were sadly neglected: uncut grass, broken fences, and desecrated gravestones “shame the living, and speak loudly of their lack of reverence for their ancestry.”<sup>59</sup>

Until the later years of the 19th century, park promotion and creation was effected by private citizens anxious to duplicate in Ontario some of the amenities of the “old country.”<sup>60</sup> It was not until 1883 that the Ontario legislature passed the Public Parks Act which enabled municipalities to appropriate land and vote funds for park creation. What followed was an unprecedented number parks built throughout southern Ontario.<sup>61</sup> For example, Ottawa in 1898 had only one park, but by 1908, mainly through the efforts of the Ottawa Improvement Commission, the city was ornamented by six more. By the 1930s many Ontario cities and towns boasted at least one new park (usually named Victoria) and a beautified cemetery. Interest in park building was also reflected in the media.

As with other improvement projects, park and cemetery work had a professional as well as an amateur side. While landscape architects (some imported from England and the United States) and parks boards landscaped large tracts of urban and suburban land, horticultural and improvement societies oversaw the beautifying of smaller lots.





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Street tree planting and a street ornamentals planter in Grimsby, Ontario in the mid 1920s.

City beautifiers often wanted parks to be landscaped, usually reflecting the ideals of the English Landscape style: rolling hills, long stretches of lawn, vistas of shrub and tree groupings, and flower beds set among winding paths—a setting for family picnics, strolls, and Sunday afternoon band concerts. But another segment of park promoters wanted space for more vigorous recreation, a place for the landless worker to dissipate dangerous energy. This tension between the aesthetic and the athletic continued up into the 1920s.

Reasons for park promotion in these prewar years encompassed this tension and ranged at times far beyond the Victorian spiritual bond-with-nature philosophy, breathing-spaces-for-the-worker, and the beautifier's justifications. Not that these viewpoints lacked promoters, but the booster mentality of the era had also begun influencing park creation: the economic benefit of parks began to be noted as the value of land adjacent to parks rose. Thus in many cities, parks were created near the "better" residential areas, sometimes due to the vested interests of members of parks boards and improvement societies.<sup>82</sup> Parks were then touted less as a social reform than as visible proof of a prosperous community, concerned about the welfare of its residents. For this reason, parks were said to attract a better class of residents to the town, and act as tourist attractions.<sup>83</sup>

Parks were also said to be economically beneficial for the horticultural industry, maintaining a consciousness of floral beauty, creating a need for flowers for indoor and outdoor use. One commentator noted that to maintain the growing horticultural industry, parks must be continually created. A dismal picture was painted of a town which did not "mould public sentiment towards a love of horticulture and parks."<sup>84</sup>

Park expansion was more intense in our smaller cities and villages, where concerned citizens devoted cheerful weekends of planning and planting. Galt, Ontario was often cited for its progressive, energetic parks policy—out of 567 hectares of city land, fifty hectares were devoted to parks and playgrounds. By 1908, it had "three good sized parks and seven or eight small plots and squares about the town."<sup>85</sup> Its Victoria Park of fifteen hectares was considered one of the "most beautiful natural parks in Ontario."<sup>86</sup>

As park building intensified, professional advice on plant material and design increased in newspapers and magazines to support amateur ef-

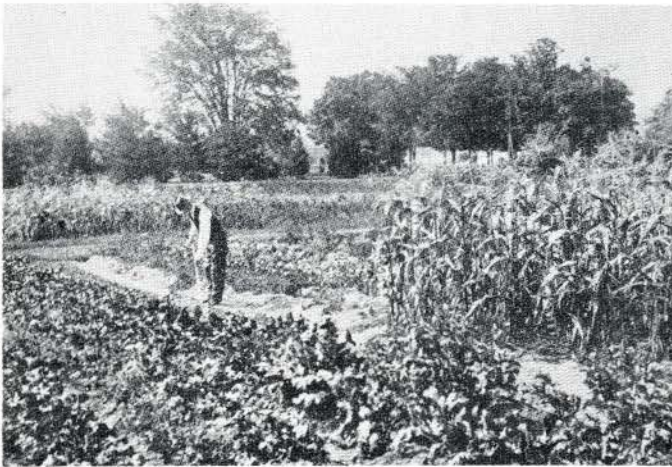
forts. The advice ranged from the succinct "for solid, bold effect, nothing equals geraniums and cannas,"<sup>87</sup> to the detailed. While most spokesmen stressed supervision by an elected parks board, the more thorough articles offered guidelines for any enthusiastic park builder. Plant lists of desirable park material stressed the use of native plant material, both for its educational value and its reliable hardiness. Design advice was rudimentary: "Decide what purpose the park will serve," "Do not put formal flower beds in natural settings," "Strive for simplicity" and so on.<sup>88</sup>

The idea of linking a town's park system with connecting "parkways" was another popular idea in the advice columns. Parkways, according to City Beautiful theorists, provided visual variety and aesthetic pleasure. They were treated somewhat like boulevards in that wide grassy strips alongside the road were planted with ornamental trees and shrubs, becoming long extensions of the parks they linked. Unfortunately for many cities and towns, parkways were often too expensive, and had to be omitted from final plans.

The collapse of the real estate boom coupled with the onset of World War I left many cities unable to finance civic beautification schemes. Park building was halted until war memorials rekindled interest and released civic money. Many parks created in the 1920s were products of bureaucratic supervision by well-entrenched parks board and a consulting, if not on-staff, landscape architect. As well horticultural societies seemed to be losing their former influence in the community, as red tape replaced enthusiastic "green thumbs." In a sense the power of creating parks had been taken from the people, but coinciding with the bureaucratic takeover was the realization of the basic need for parks in growing communities. The Depression may have slowed down major park building projects, but the idea of public space devoted to beauty and recreation never waned.

Just as other social movements lost their sustaining energy and reforming zeal in the 1920s, so did the urban beautification movement. However, certain ideals stayed in the public mind. Parks, tree-lined streets, well-tended lawns and public plantings never really lost their champions. Nor did the urge to grow vegetables in the city totally disappear—victory gardens abounded in World War II, reemerging as allotment plots in the 1970s. The reforming city beautifiers' fulsome rhetoric has receded, but their pronouncements lent a vitalizing element to the progress not only of civic beautification, but also to the progress of ornamental horticulture in Ontario.





At work in a vacant lot garden, 1917.

This brief survey has presented the importance for heritage preservation of what I have called the "little tradition" in the City Beautiful context. Much more research is needed to fill in the details of movements, design principles, plant materials, and the personalities behind the activities. Piecing together these details, wedding them to their social context, will then allow preservationists and historians to clothe our heritage buildings and sites in their appropriate horticultural garb. In so doing we will all, it is to be hoped, gain further insight into our heritage. □

## NOTES

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