The Early Planning and Development of Oklahoma City

Enduring Influence of a Grand Plan
The Early Planning and Development of Oklahoma City

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An analysis of the planning, development, and implementation of Oklahoma City’s Grand Boulevard. In the early days of 1909, a plan emerged to build an expansive parks and boulevard system to encircle Oklahoma City. Such systems had evolved during the parks movement era of the late nineteenth century and had become a common feature of major cities throughout the United States. While Oklahoma City leaders in many ways wished to emulate the park systems of other cities in hopes of bolstering the city’s metropolitan reputation, they were also influenced by the emergence of the automotive industry and auto road racing in the United States. The opportunities presented by the automobile led the city to deviate from previous parks and boulevard models in pursuit of something unique for the period – an engineered speedway. Ultimately, a formal plan was prepared which espoused many of the principles of the City Beautiful movement. However, the vision for a speedway would continue to impact the systems design. The parks and boulevard system that resulted has had an enduring influence on the form and growth of Oklahoma City.
Acknowledgements

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that have helped to shape my understanding of the city.

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Introduction

Decisions are cumulative, leaving a strong legacy - valuable and encumbering - for each successive generation of inhabitants. The form of a settlement is always willed and valued, but its complexity and its inertia frequently obscure those connections. One must uncover - by inference, if no better source is available - why people created the forms they did and how they felt about them.

*Kevin Lynch, Good City Form*

I began this thesis process with the intention of providing an overview of the early planning and development history of Oklahoma City, hoping to discover how the city came to be what it is today. I believe a historical understanding of place is a vital component of a complete design process. Understanding the forces that have shaped the environment around us reveals just as much about where we are going, as it does where we have come from. As someone who has previously done urban planning and design work in Oklahoma City and hopes to do more such work there in the future, I have a continued interest in improving my understanding of the forces that have shaped the City over its 120 year history. Such an understanding of the built form is difficult to obtain with any city, as ultimately one confronts the inherent challenges of history itself, a subject always open to interpretation. Still, in the case of Oklahoma City, the task is made that much more difficult due to the lack of research focused on the origins and history of city form and the failure of broader historical works to acknowledge the role of planning and development as part of a general historical narrative of city growth. However, what began as an attempt to assimilate existing information into a narrative focused on city form has migrated towards a detailed analysis of an understudied plan, the forces that impacted the planners vision(s), and its continued influence in shaping city form. If not for the wide net initially cast, I would never have discovered this story that now so intrigues me.
Little has been written about either the history of what came to be called Grand Boulevard or its ultimate shaping effect on Oklahoma City. A search of library catalogs using various terms related to the plan yields very little relevant analysis. The “Planning History” page of the City of Oklahoma City’s webpage offers this concise summary that ostensibly represents most of our city’s collective historical understanding of the topic:

“In 1909, following an extensive parks acquisition program, W. H. Dunn, Superintendent of Parks in Kansas City, developed the first Parks Plan for Oklahoma City.”

The Oklahoma Historical Society’s Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History & Culture offering is not much more help:

“In 1909 the city fathers of Oklahoma City turned to planning professionals for aid in creating their City Beautiful. W.H. Dunn, superintendent of parks in Kansas City, was engaged to develop a park and boulevard plan for Oklahoma City. Dunn’s 1910 plan, often referred to as the Park-Dunn plan, called for the purchase of two thousand acres for city parks and the construction of Grand Boulevard. Although some progress was made on the scheme, due to high costs it was not fully implemented, a common problem with City Beautiful plans.”

Unfortunately, in no other source have I been able to find a reference to the “Park-Dunn plan” despite its “often use.” With such a limited amount of accurate information available, it is no wonder that the plan has received so little attention. Every so

often, perhaps once a decade, small parts of the story are retold, with varying levels of accuracy\(^3\) in a local newspaper. There are also a few examples where someone has attempted to travel along the route and describe the remnants of the boulevard as they exist.\(^4\)/\(^5\) But even the best of this fragmented collection of references offers a flimsy understanding of the plan’s origins, its historical significance, and its continued influence on the city’s urban form.

**Brief Overview**

In the early days of 1909, a plan emerged to build an expansive parks and boulevard system to encircle Oklahoma City. Such systems had evolved during the parks movement era of the late nineteenth century and had become a common feature of major cities throughout the United States. While Oklahoma City leaders in many ways wished to emulate the park systems of other cities in hopes of bolstering the city’s metropolitan reputation, they were also influenced by the emergence of the automotive industry and auto road racing in the United States. The opportunities presented by the automobile led the city to deviate from previous parks and boulevard models in pursuit of something unique for the period—a engineered speedway. It was with this vision for a park and speedway system that the Oklahoma City Parks Commission established the general layout of the system and began placing land under contract. In 1910, W.H. Dunn, the Superintendent of Parks in Kansas City, was brought in to produce a formal plan. In the plan, Dunn applied the principles of the City Beautiful movement to the Parks Commission’s original proposal, and highlighted the need for the addition of interior parks and boulevard improvements. Many of Dunn’s designs for the individual parks were realized, but his influence on the system’s

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Peterson was forced to author a correction 10 days later after people who remembered the events that occurred some 40 years earlier came forward to point out that Dunn was in no way to blame.


overall design was quite minimal. Instead, it was the principles of the earlier parks movement and the initial vision for an auto speedway that had the greatest influence on the ultimate form of the Oklahoma City parks and boulevard system.
Before we begin the story of Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system, it is important to understand the historical context in which the plan emerged. A “parks and boulevard system” is a model very much rooted in the park movement of the nineteenth century. Thus, this provides the jumping-off point for our analysis.

Throughout the latter part of the 19th century, the American city swelled in size as hoards of workers left farms and foreign lands, flooding in to fill the new factory jobs of America’s industrialization. This rapid population growth and industrial development overwhelmed the city’s existing capacities, producing a range of worsening conditions. Cities struggled with congestion, overcrowded housing, air and water pollution, deficient sanitation systems, and a range of class and ethnic tensions. These squalid conditions, along with the new industrial economy and advancing technologies, encouraged suburbanization, inspired a reform movement, and created an environment of change. All of which contributed to the momentum of the ongoing nineteenth century park movement that shaped the urban form through the establishment of parks, parkways, and playgrounds that ultimately served to enhance the whole of the American city.

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8 McShane, “American Cities and the Coming of the Automobile, 1870-1910”. pg 33.
Early Suburbanization

Following the Civil War, a transformation of the American city's physical form began as new suburbs sprang up to meet the demands of an emerging middle-class. Unlike the European pattern, which accommodated growth by adding new rows of housing to the existing urban edge, American cities pursued a suburban model made up of "detached homes on large lots."\(^{10}\) This unique growth pattern is most often attributed to the American people's "Jeffersonian ethic [which] idealized agrarian virtues"\(^{11}\) and valued independent land ownership. However, this cultural disposition does not fully account for the shift towards suburban living. Public health theories of the day, which claimed that death and disease were more likely to occur in "congested housing and in areas with inadequate sewers," likely played a significant role in the shift. Public health professionals advocated for environments that: increased natural light, improved ventilation, and incorporated salubrious vegetation; qualities provided by the detached suburban form.\(^{12}\) Many middle- and upper class Americans chose to flee the deteriorating social conditions and unhealthy environment of the industrial city for the status, safety, and health promised by suburban living. Municipalities, with the help of private developers, encouraged this exodus by providing faster and more efficient transportation and by investing in new suburban park systems that attracted the rising middle- and upper classes to a new suburban lifestyle.

Transportation Technologies

This expansion of the American city was only possible with corresponding advances in transportation technologies, which enabled affordable and convenient access to new suburban housing developed miles from the city center. Urban transportation systems evolved throughout the 19th century and with each advance the accessible area of the city grew.

Horse-powered systems, enhanced by the introduction of

\(^{10}\) McShane, "American Cities and the Coming of the Automobile, 1870-1910". pg 36.
\(^{11}\) Boyer, Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning. pg 4.
\(^{12}\) McShane, "American Cities and the Coming of the Automobile, 1870-1910". pg 36-38.
Figure 1. - Transit and the Availability of Suburban Land

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Average Speed (in m.p.h.)</th>
<th>Half Hour Commuting Radius (in miles)</th>
<th>Land Available for Development (in square miles)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Horsecar</td>
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<tr>
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<td>78.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trolley</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>113.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** 'Land Available for Development' assumes no geographical impediments to development (rivers, lakes, mountains, etc) within the appropriate radius.

"Trolley speeds were increased to higher level as the technology was improved after 1900"

horsecars, which increased speed by traveling on rails, were a primary means of urban transport throughout most of the century. The railroads began to carry regular commuting traffic during the 1850s. Other types of steam-powered transit, including elevated urban railroads, were attempted in the latter part of the century but widespread adoption was limited the expense of these systems. One steam-powered alternative that did see some success, especially in cities like San Francisco, which featured steep inclines, was the cable car. However, by the 1890s, all of these systems would be surpassed by the speed and efficiency of the electric trolley car. 13

Funding for these transportation systems typically came from private developers who profited from the value added to their adjoining lands. Lacking sufficient means of land use controls, municipalities did all they could to encourage suburbanization with favorable franchising policies and fare structures that eased the path to suburban development. 14

The park movement emerged as observers of nineteenth century American city began to attribute its substantial failings to the artificiality of the form, which had caused an inharmonious break from the natural order. 15 The idealization of America’s rural past, along with a desire to capture and enhance natural beauty, produced a movement that fought to preserve large swaths of the natural landscape before the city’s expansion made the possibility “too late.” Much of the movement can also be attributed to a “familiar notion that parks were ‘the lungs’ of the city.” 16 Shaped by the beliefs that called for more space, more light and better ventilation; the park movement shared much in common with the ideals that led to the suburban detached house. While the movement began in order to enhance the lifestyles of wealthy city dwellers, over time the principles of the movement were adopted

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13 Ibid. pg 12-44.
14 Ibid. pg 47.
by reformers who hoped to instill the qualities of nature, and in some sense suburbia, into the fabric of the congested industrial American city.

**Early Romantic Landscapes**

The park movement finds its origins in the early work of Alexander Jackson Downing, America’s first landscape architect. He borrowed from the British romantic tradition, and began advocating for romantic landscapes during the 1830s and 1840s. His ideas, which “emphasized vistas from rolling hills with curving drives to provide access to both graves and picturesque views,” 17 were first put to use for the design of cemeteries, beginning with Boston’s Mt. Auburn cemetery in 1831. This form of landscape gained in popularity and, following the Civil War, similarly designed cemeteries began popping up in cities throughout the United States. Typically, these cemeteries were located on quiet, isolated, suburban landscapes of especial beauty; but because they were still in close proximity to congested cities, the romantic cemetery landscape began to serve multiple functions:

“*The cemeteries soon became important urban recreation places. As the only landscaped, carefully maintained lands available to the general public, they became popular places for Sunday afternoon picnics and for drives in the newly popular carriages.*” 18

The popularity of these cemeteries created demand for similar landscapes not primarily intended for the somber purpose of honoring the deceased. Wealthy Americans looked with envy to the pleasure grounds of England and France. It didn’t take long for cities to respond to these demands.

**A Place to Promenade**

In New York City, America’s most congested city, the construction of Central Park put forth a model to be emulated whose influence

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17 Ibid. pg 53.
18 Ibid. pg 53.
is still felt today. In 1858, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, a protégé of Downing’s, partnered to win a competition for the park’s design. Their design embraced Downing’s ideals of “informal layout and picturesque vistas” and included a substantial network of drives “reserved exclusively for private carriages.” The design of the park placed a considerable emphasis on these drives and the experience of the wealthy users that traveled them. City streets that passed through the park were built below grade, blocking views of the park, while providing continuous pleasure for the well-heeled park user who passed over these streets on dedicated bridges. The special privileges, open air, and beautiful scenery made the park a popular destination among the city’s elite.

Central Park inspired a new tradition of park making and inspired a number of new systems that attempted to copy its success. Perhaps no one was more excited by the idea of parks than real estate developers who saw a means by which to attract wealthy users to their developments. The streets adjoining the park, Fifth Avenue and Central Park Drive, soon became the most desirable addresses in all of New York City. It became known that “the man who attracted a park for his subdivision guaranteed its success.” This created intense competition among developers, each desiring that new parks be located by their property. They were often even willing to donate the land necessary to secure the improvements.

These urban pleasure grounds were at first primarily for the benefit of the wealthy. The park fulfilled the middle- and upper class’s need for a symbol of their newly acquired status. Brisk rides through the park in the “evening or weekends became an important facet of life for those who wished to show that they had achieved financial or social success.” Use of the parks by the working class was often discouraged. For Brooklyn’s Prospect

19 Ibid. pg 53.
20 Ibid. pg 56.
21 Ibid. pg 56.
22 Ibid. pg 50.
Park Olmsted insisted on the prohibition of “ball playing” and restricted the park drives to private carriages.

Over the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many municipalities began acquiring land and planning park systems similar to that found in New York City. Many early park systems borrowed from the ideas of Olmsted, who himself continued to design parks for many cities. Across the country a host of similar systems featuring large parks, usually in the hundreds of acres, and interconnected by a network of dedicated drives, or parkways, soon emerged. These early systems were typically located in the suburbs, though sometimes included special routes for suburbanites to travel downtown or between suburbs. Chicago formed a metropolitan park board in 1869 and by 1880 had acquired some 2,000 acres of parks. In 1883, Horace W.S. Cleveland, who had earlier competed with Olmsted for the right to design Central Park, put forth a plan for a system of parks and parkways in Minneapolis. Mr. Cleveland also designed a similar system for Omaha, Nebraska and his work generated enthusiasm throughout the Midwest. The park movement reached its peak in the 1890s as the electric trolley produced a “great wave” of suburbanization. Charles Eliot produced a plan for a metropolitan park system in Boston, which by 1902 would feature over 15,000 acres of parkland and protected wilderness. While a great deal of gratitude is owed to men such as Downing, Olmsted and Eliot, for the landscapes they preserved that continue to enhance city life today; the motivations for this movement, which stratified classes by encouraging the suburbanization of the wealthy, remain an issue of political debate. Still, they demonstrated a model for subsequent efforts. The park systems that they built were adapted as part of a more holistic approach that sought the equitable treatment of the city and its people.
Figure 2. 1915 Map of Kansas City Parks System

ml=y> (18 May 2009).
Towards a City-wide Parks and Boulevards System

Following decades of discussion and debate, in 1893 Kansas City published its first plan for a parks and boulevard system that would transform the form and beauty of the city indefinitely. The plan was produced for the Kansas City Parks Commission by George E. Kessler, a German trained landscape architect and later an early leader in the field of planning. His work highlights a shifting perspective on the design of parks and boulevard systems and their role in the city. While the plan placed the majority of improvements on the city’s suburban edge, as previous systems had always done, his system also wove interior parks and boulevard into the fabric of the urban city. The plan included five interior parks of note, and sprinkling of smaller parks, as well as, a boulevard network that served to connect the various components. This original plan was augmented considerably over time as the city expanded and with the addition of Swope Park, which was donated to the city in 1896. The park system that developed from Kessler’s plans bestowed on Kansas City a beauty and urbanity that was noticeably absent from other frontier American towns. This was not simply a suburban park system for the enjoyment of the elite. The plan emphasized parkways, improved connections between different parts of the city and looked to bring definition to the city’s broader form. Kessler’s vision for Kansas City was an extension of earlier park ideas, and provided a model for a park system that engaged not only the suburban edge, but also the urban interior. The plan for Kansas City reveals a new attitude in the role and intended scope of park system. Not solely concerned with the whims of the wealthy, this Kessler’s plan sought to improve the city as a whole.

Reforming the Chaotic City

As the American city continued to expand, the suburbs provided a safe haven for the middle- and upper class, shielding them from the harsh realities of life in the industrial city. While improved transportation and investments in new suburban park systems continued to enhance life in the suburbs, conditions in the

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26 Mel Scott, *American City Planning since 1890* (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 1995), pg. 15
American city grew worse. The severe exploitation of the working class and the terrible overcrowding found in tenement housing began to attract the attention of civic reformers.

The overcrowding was serious. In 1894, the average density of New York City was 143.2 persons per acre, which exceed that of the most crowded European cities. Further, in New York’s 10th Ward the population was an unconscionable 626 persons per acre. The publication of Jacob Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives* in the mid 1890s heightened this awareness of the issues through vivid descriptions of slums and urban “degradation.” With this heightened awareness of worsening conditions, the movement away from the “unnatural and unhealthy” conditions of the inner city that inspired suburbanization, added a “movement of benevolence to elevate, through natural and beautiful surrounds, the whole urban population.” 27 By ameliorating the conditions of the environment reformers believed they would heal the social and moral ills of urban society. 28 Thus, their efforts sought to reorient the American city, which had been “cut off from the harmonies of the natural order,” by infusing it with the “values and ethos of the rural past,” which they believed to be the foundations of American society. 29

Many of the efforts of this reform movement focused on improving the urban and environmental form of the city itself:

“The improvers believed, the essence of every social problem was part of the fabric of the city and embodied within it; all varieties of social, physical, and spiritual disorders - crime, saloons, decline of the birthrate, physical fatigue, a steady deterioration of mind and body - developed out of the chaos and physical

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28 Ibid. pg 18.
29 Ibid. pg 8.
disarray of the urban form. This disorder was a “contaminating poison,” recruiting members of the lowest grade of humanity.”

They assumed that if they could modify the environment, in ways, perhaps, that emulated the suburban homes and parks that so enhanced their own lives, they would be able to bring “discipline” to the chaotic inner city and ensure “stability... and ... progress.”

Tenement housing was a grave concern and reformers constantly sought way in which they could introduce the superior qualities of suburban living into the city. For instance, in 1879, a “dumbbell” tenement, so named for the shape of the building footprint that resulted from the introduction of light-wells, enhanced tenement living conditions by slightly increasing light and improving ventilation. This is but one example of the various efforts that were taking place during this era.

The reformers were also strongly influenced by the principles of the park movement, notably the provision of space, natural beauty, vegetation, and salubrious fresh air. “It was believed that where the balance of nature had been destroyed and harmony upset, sickness and disease inevitably followed; only nature could maintain the health and well-being of the urban residents.”

Urban parks it seemed would cure every social ill. Reformers believed parks could be used to “teach men to be virtuous and self-reliant,” to enhance beauty and opportunity for reflection, and to “breathe health and hope into the poor and downtrodden.”

Other early reforming efforts focused on improving sanitary conditions and placed an emphasis on the value of “enlightened education” for children who had not yet “developed tendencies toward crime and chaotic behavior.” Efforts to improve sanitary conditions most often came in the form of new water and sewer systems, while “school[s] and supervised playgrounds” became the “essential institutions” in the effort to empower and

30 Ibid. pg 16.
31 Ibid. pg 14.
32 Scott, American City Planning since 1890. pg 7.
33 Boyer, Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning. pg 37.
discipline youth. However, while many cities had invested in large, metropolitan park systems, "none had allocated a system of playgrounds for immigrant children." This slowly began to change. In 1889, the Boston Parks department established a 10-acre park for the working-class on the banks of the Charles River, and in 1893, Chicago added its first playground thanks to the generous donation of a local benefactor. The reformers' somewhat piecemeal efforts borrowed heavily from the work of the park movement and other civic improvement strategies that had been in progress for over three decades. Their efforts at civic improvement would soon be joined by a new movement, made up almost entirely by architects, landscape architects, and engineers, which would embrace many of the principles of reform while stressing the role of beauty in the ideal urban environment.

Conclusion

The park movement thus played a significant role in the social and physical changes that occurred in American cities during the latter stages of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century. Improved transportation technologies expanded the accessible area of the city. The increased land area, along with housing tastes that formed due to the condition of the city and contemporary theories of public health, fueled suburban growth and allowed for the creation of suburban park systems that embodied the suburban ideals that sought space and nature. While its early offerings, such as Central Park, were intended almost purely for the enjoyment of the wealthy, the principles of the movement were eventually adopted by reformers who sought to infuse urban centers with the salubrious effects of nature in an effort to ameliorate and educate the working-class. The City Beautiful movement ultimately organized these principles into a framework for city improvement, but the parks and parkway forms of the nineteenth century park movement remain at core of the parks and boulevard systems carried out under the guise of City Beautiful. The adoption of the park systems physical

34 Ibid. pg 21.
35 Ibid. pg 22.
36 Scott, American City Planning since 1890. pg 8.
form into the catalog of the City Beautiful is easy to follow. One question that remains is, to what degree the questionable values of early park designer’s were carried through into future parks and boulevard systems.
The City Beautiful Movement

The City Beautiful movement had a significant influence on the changing forms of cities during the over an almost two decade period preceding beginnings of Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system. While the parks and boulevard system pursued by Oklahoma City would ultimately stray from City Beautiful ideals, the era of civic improvement created by the movement is likely responsible for the emergence of the plan in Oklahoma City. Further, the movement can be credited with codifying a number of ideas on the ideal form of the city, many of which are evident in the 1910 Dunn Plan. A fuller understanding of the history and principles of the City Beautiful movement provides some understand of the period in which the Oklahoma City plan emerged and a stronger basis from which to analyze the ideas advocated by Dunn.

The City Beautiful movement begins in 1893, when the amalgamation of previous efforts to reshape the urban environment came together at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The famed “White City” demonstrated the ordered environment, merging European urbanity with romantic landscapes and classical architecture to form a complete vision of the City Beautiful. Over twenty-one million Americans visited the exposition. There they experienced the aesthetics and form that cities would emulate for decades to come. 37

Proponents of the City Beautiful believed that “contact with the moral elite, public contemplation of nature, of civic orientation, of classical architecture [would] result in a new disciplinary order.” 38

The movement put forth a model for civic enhancement that could

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37 Ibid. pg 36.
readily be adopted. Subsequent expos, notably the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, would continue to refine these models and make them familiar to the public. Additionally, civic improvement societies, inspired by the books of Charles Mulford Robinson, formed in many cities across the country, including Oklahoma City. The City Beautiful movement did not strike suddenly, as it is often made to seem, but evolved out of many of the improvement efforts from the previous decades. The parks and boulevard systems carried out under the banner of the City Beautiful are a direct continuation of the models that originated as part of the park movement. City Beautiful practitioners began to look at these park systems as only part or a larger system of streets and open space that would organize the form of the city. They argued for the augmentation of the park system through the addition interior radial boulevards and avenues in an effort to bring the efficient travel and some of the grandeur of England and France to the United States. This was part of an effort to organize the overall form of the city. While the classical architecture of the movement would greatly impact the facades of American cities, the general form of the city proposed by the movement was merely the codification of ideas borrowed from elsewhere. Still, codifying these ideas into a comprehensive framework represented a substantial step towards the beginnings of the professional field of planning.

Charles Mulford Robinson was one of the most prolific writers of books on the City Beautiful and can be credited with refining and structuring many of the movement’s ideas. In The Improvement of Towns and Cities; or the Practical Basis of Civil Aesthetics, first published in 1901, he argues “that perhaps the best” street configuration should combine a grid, diagonal avenues, and ring boulevard or parkways. “The result is a wheel, super-imposed on a checkerboard.” The “hub” of this wheel would be the “central point” – like a town square or village green, and from this would emanate diagonal avenues able to handle arterial traffic,
connecting to the boulevard or parkway which would provide convenient “belt-line” connections.\(^{39}\)

One striking exemplar of this hub-and-spoke City Beautiful model was implemented in Chicago as a result of the 1909 Burnham Plan. While the 1909 Burnham Plan was carried out during a period of the transition towards a more comprehensive field of city planning, the ideas within the plan are clearly grounded in the City Beautiful movement started there sixteen years earlier. It was during this same era that the plan for Oklahoma City emerged. Thus, it is important to unravel these three components of the “best” street configuration and assess their influence on the scheme ultimately proposed for Oklahoma City.

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The Grid

The grid pattern was often seen as the foundation a good street system because it “offers maximum area for building development” and consistent distribution of resources, but many critics point out that it lacks interest, directness and opportunities for beautiful vistas, and thus is only one part of a more complete street system.⁴⁰ One grid plan of note is the 1811 plan for Manhattan, about which Frederick Law Olmsted comments:

“...There is no place in New York where a stately building can be looked up to from base to turret, none where it can even be seen full in the face and all at once taken in by the eye; none where it can be viewed in advantageous perspective...Such distinctive advantage of position as Rome gives St. Peter’s, Paris the Madeleine, London St. Paul’s, New York, under her system, gives to nothing.”⁴¹

While the criticisms of the grid are, in some sense, warranted; it is the common layout of many American cities, especially in the Midwest as a result of federal government surveys. When Oklahoma City was opened to settlement with the Land Run 1889 it inherited the grid of the township-and-range surveys. The township-and-range system was established by the Continental Congress in 1785 to standardize the descriptions of new lands acquired as the country expanded west by employing a rectilinear system of surveying. The surveys organized land into thirty-six square mile areas, called townships, each containing thirty-six sections of one square mile, or 640 acres, each. Each section was typically further subdivided into four 160-acre plots, which were distributed as agricultural homesteads.⁴² In Oklahoma, the one-mile section boundaries were designated as rights-of-way thereby producing a one-mile grid of section roads across much

⁴⁰ Ibid. pg 21.
Figure 4. 1905 Map of Oklahoma Township

of the state. The widths of the rights-of-way vary, however, depending on the statutes and treaties in effect. For instance the rights-of-way in Indian Territory range from 49.5 feet in the Creek Nation, where Tulsa is located, to no required rights-of-way in the Quapaw area, which is located in the northeast corner of Oklahoma. In Oklahoma Territory, which encompasses most of the modern Oklahoma City metro, the width was established by the Organic Act of 1890 which specified 66-foot rights-of-way along section lines. It is still common to see new Oklahoma City subdivisions built on a 160 acre parcels which have to that point remained intact and are surrounded by a network of arterial streets built along the section line rights-of-way. So Oklahoma City had the “checkerboard” from the start, but before the proposal of the new parks and boulevard system it was noticeably lacking the other components.

**Parkways and Boulevards**

In the early 1900s, there was a range of terms used to describe the thoroughfares which connected the parks to form a complete system. According to Robinson, across the country streets which were “precisely similar” might be referred to as either: parkways, avenues, or boulevards.

The term boulevard itself, evolved from a Dutch word for bulwark, and was used by the French to describe these streets and promenades built on the site of demolished city walls. This transformation from a city wall to a modern boulevard is, according to Robinson, what gives these systems their “European Vogue.” Many of the encircling boulevards built throughout the United States were an attempt to emulate the forms of the boulevards found in Europe’s most beautiful capital cities:

> "This is the ring, or concentric, plan. Its most distinguished exemplar is Vienna, with the famous Ring-strasse...a majesty that has lately rendered Vienna famous. Good types, too, of this plan are the circles of “inner” and “outer” boulevards in Paris,

43 Ibid. 115.
Figure 5. Vienna in 1858

Figure 6. Vienna circa 2000
Surrounding the city just as the fortifications they replaced, a proper boulevard was meant to “encircle the town.” However, around the turn of the century, boulevard came to mean simply a street of “especial width” with “park-like” features and appearance. The term avenue had even less meaning and was often used to describe streets with “pretentious houses,” while the street itself only sometimes resembled a boulevard. According to Robinson, while both boulevards and avenues often linked to parks, the term parkway uniquely refers to a thoroughfare that by necessity guarantees such a link. Its role is to “offer suitable approaches to the parks and stretch enticing suggestions of park beauty” into the urban fabric of the city. Thus, while avenues and boulevards are typically designed in a “dignified and stately” manner; the parkway is more closely related to the park system than to streets, and thus could be designed as a “picturesque, gentle, and softly winding [sic]” connection to other park elements.44

The term parkway was coined by Frederick Law Olmsted in his 1868 report, Observations on the Progress of Improvements in Street Plans, With Special reference to the Park-way Proposed to Be Laid Out in Brooklyn.45 The road was given its name due to “six rows of trees alongside the roadway, essentially making it a very narrow, elongated park.” Olmsted proposed it as an “urban highway restricted to private carriages, with wagons and common carriers banned.” Thus, the parkways were closely related to the exclusive park drives found within Olmsted’s parks.

The road that would ultimately be proposed as part of Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system could be accurately called a boulevard or a parkway. While obviously not intended to

44 Robinson Charles Mulford, *Modern Civic Art*. pg. 307-308
45 McShane, “American Cities and the Coming of the Automobile, 1870-1910”. pg
Figure 7. The Radial Avenues of Paris

Figure 8. 1792 L’Enfant Plan for Washington, D.C.
replace fortifications, it does stay true to the boulevard tradition of
encircling the city. Thus it is more a boulevard, then simply a road
of “especial width.” Certainly, too, the term parkway is a fitting
description as the road was intended to connect the parks, provide
“suitable approaches,” and quite unfortunately, ultimately
embraced the ideals of class separation found in the examples of
Olmsted.

**Diagonals and Radials**

The final component of Robinson’s three-part configuration was
the diagonal or radial avenue. These were viewed as important
because they provided more direct travel and interested
opportunities for aesthetic enhancement:

“...the diagonal avenues afford economy of communication,
vistas of much possible beauty, and open squares and space that
grateful to the eye and of no little sanitary value. The weight of
aesthetic consideration is overwhelmingly in favor of what may
be called the Washington, as distinguished from the Philadelphia,
or New York, plan.”

46 Robinson, *The Improvement of Towns and Cities; or the Practical Basis of Civil
Aesthetics*. pg 21.

Hausmann’s work Paris and L’Enfant’s plan for Washington D.C.
were often credited by supporters of the City Beautiful movement
for demonstrating the virtues of diagonals. While the rational for
requiring them is a topic of debate, they were very much a part
of the thinking at that time. Oklahoma City, for the most part,
lacked any such radial avenues. While the 1910 Dunn Plan would
attempt to “complete” Oklahoma City’s system by adding a series
of interior diagonal avenues to the existing grid and proposed
encircling boulevard, it appears that these diagonal avenues were
never pursued.
Conclusion The City Beautiful movement had a major influence on the era of civic improvement and planning that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. The movement utilized many of the forms found in the capital cities of Europe and adapted models that evolved out of the American park movement of the nineteenth century. These ideas were assimilated to produce a somewhat rigid understanding of what components were desirable, or even necessary, to produce a great city. The era of civic improvement initiated by the City Beautiful movement, along with the ideas the movement espoused, shaped the context in which the plan for Oklahoma City's parks and boulevard system would emerge.
The vision for Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system emerged during an era of great optimism and excitement as the city’s population swelled and development boomed. Only two decades earlier, with the great Land Run of 1889, the city had been founded in what is one the more incredible events in the history of urbanization. From the chaos of its settlement, which did the city few favors in terms of its initial urban form, the city evolved over a twenty-year period of booms and busts that tested even the most hardened frontier souls. During the first decade of the twentieth century Oklahoma City expanded rapidly. Population swelled from 10,037 in 1900 to 34,452 in 1907. Then, in just three years, from 1907 to 1910, as Oklahoma became a state and Oklahoma City became its new capital, the population almost doubled to 64,205, making Oklahoma City the 87th largest city in the United States. During the two decades following its founding, municipal government had played a minimal role in shaping the growth and form of the city. The City carried out a number of water and sewer infrastructure projects, which did to a degree impact where development would occur. Then, as automobile ownership numbers began to grow, more and more attention was focused on paving the streets.

Things began to shift in 1902, when a Park Board was established, a precursor to formal planning in many cities. The local City Beautiful movement gained some momentum in 1903, when a group of prominent wives formed the Civic Improvement League of Oklahoma City to advocate for “beauty and cleanliness and health” of the city. The group initially planned to seize the authority for the “laying out of city parks, streets, pavements,

47 “City Fathers in Session,” The Oklahoman, Oct 08 1901.
48 “For a Park Fund,” The Oklahoman, May 29 1902.
sidewalks” and “the location of trees, etc.” Yet, much of the planning and expansion continued to be driven by private real estate developers who were building out, expanding the city along new streetcar lines, building swaths of new suburbs, and using every measure possible to entice city dwellers to live on the urban edge. Some of these developers engaged high profile engineers and landscape architects, especially following the World’s Fair in St. Louis in 1904, which brought attention to many of the leading practitioners involved in the City Beautiful Movement, notably George E. Kessler.

By 1909, the pioneers of Oklahoma City had regained their confidence and optimism, and with an unusually vigorous boosterism spirit set about transforming the city with a “gigantic” parks and boulevard project. It is fitting that Oklahoma City would undertake this effort in 1909, a “great benchmark” year in the history of planning. It was the year of the First Annual Conference on City Planning, and also the year Burnham published his Plan for Chicago. It was in this climate of planning progress and civic improvement that Oklahoma City put forth a vision for a great public works project that would reshape the city for years to come.

A Grand Vision

The vision for the parks and boulevard system emerged on January 3, 1909 when local newspapers sensationnally debuted the Parks Commission’s proposal, as in this article from The Oklahoman entitled “Boulevard To Encircle City”:

“Parks that will rival those of cities ten times its size,

boulevards fit to remind the traveler of the wonderful highways

in the environs of Paris, the greatest automobile race-course in

America, if not in the world – with such stupendous projects not

49 “A City Beautiful: Civic Improvement League Is Organized,” The Oklahoman, Mar 06 1903.
50 Scott, American City Planning since 1890. pg 95 – 100.
Envisioning a Speedway

merely in view but already in part accomplished does Oklahoma City enter the year 1909.\textsuperscript{51}

The paper, which would support the project throughout the four months leading up to the bond vote\textsuperscript{52}, gives a sense of the booster spirit with which the project was approached. It is interesting to note that from the start, the project is interchangeably described as both a “parks and boulevard system” and a “auto speedway.” While the idea for a parks and boulevard system was based off a common model born out of the park movement and further revised under the guidance of the City Beautiful movement, an auto speedway was a much newer invention that speaks directly to the influence of the automobile in interpreting these previously established models.

From the beginning, it is clear that unlike the park systems of previous eras, the Oklahoma City system would be shaped by the growing influence of the automobile. Many of the articles written in favor of the project discuss the “auto speedway”\textsuperscript{53} and how it would be the ideal course to host major auto races. One claim latched on to by many of the proponents, and printed repeatedly in The Oklahoman, is that the flat topography of the city, along with the design of the boulevard, offered opportunity to create the greatest racecourse in the world. The initial newspaper announcement quotes an “automobilist of more than national prominence” as saying:

\begin{quote}
"Savannah or the famed Long Island course are not to be compared to this. At the former place the drivers could not take the bad curves at more than 65 miles an hour without inviting the..."
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} "Boulevard to Encircle City: Plan an Expenditure of $400,000," The Oklahoman, Jan 03 1909. The article includes a map, which shows the earliest version of the boulevard plan.

\textsuperscript{52} According to Clark, they spent the previous months going over the plan and had “treated the editors and reporters of all four daily papers as if they were a part of our Board” who obliged and “held their news for months.”

\textsuperscript{53} "Boulevard to Encircle City: Plan an Expenditure of $400,000."
Figure 9. Newspapers promote the Park Commission’s speedway vision

The Oklahoman, Feb 7, 1909.
disaster to their cars; but on the Oklahoma City track you have no turn that Wagner or Nazzare, could not plunge around at 90 miles an hour.” 54

And subsequent articles continued with this theme:

“Its sharpest turn is four times the curve of a half-mile race track. Its limit in twist is a 1,000-foot radius. So near to a straight-away is all its course that full speed of the highest horsepower will necessitate neither halt nor turn-over. It will be the fastest auto-course not only in this country but in the world.” 55

At first glance, it is difficult to figure how this project - being implemented by the Park Board - became a plan for a high-speed raceway. It certainly does not make sense in light of what we know about Will H. Clark, the park commissioner who was the central figure pushing for the plan’s adoption 56. In 1907, when Clark joined the Board, he had this to say when asked about his policies: “I have no plans to offer; I hardly yet know what the duties are, but will favor plants that add to the beauty of the city” and said his intention was to “teach the children to love flowers.” Still, he did make clear early on that he saw streets as an opportunity, stating “it is really not within the province of the park commissioners to consider the parking in the avenues and streets of the city” but Clark was “hopeful that plans may be formulated that will beautify every public thoroughfare in Oklahoma City.” 57

54 Ibid.
56 Elmer T. Peterson, “Grand Boulevard Had a Rough Time,” The Oklahoman, May 17 1952.
57 “New Commissioner Man for the Place: Will H. Clark Has Advanced Ideas on Parks and City Beautification.,” The Oklahoman, Jan 17 1907.
At the time the city claimed only 219 automobiles, though some believed that that number would soar to 500 by the end of the year. Still, with only 500 automobiles, why would they need almost 30 miles of "speedway" out in the country? Quite simply, infrastructure for local travel was not the primary concern. Rather, as the articles imply, this was envisioned as a true racecourse with hopes of attracting largest road races being held in the America at the time.

Beginning in 1904, the Vanderbilt Cup, running on a 30.24 mile course made up entirely of public roads in Long Island, was the first international auto race to be held on American Soil. It was established by William K. Vanderbilt, Jr. to "encourage American automobile manufacturers to challenge European quality." The roads were normally used by farmers on horse-pulled equipment but the "lure of an economic boon" was all the incentive needed for the Nassau County supervisors to turn them over for the races.

Figure 10. Farmers objected to races on public roads
Howard Kroplick, Vanderbilt Cup Races of Long Island (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2008).

58 "Estimate 500 Cars by Year's Close," The Oklahoman, Feb 07 1909.
59 Howard Kroplick, Vanderbilt Cup Races of Long Island (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2008).
Figure 11. In 1906 over 200,000 people gathered around the Long Island course

Figure 12. The Long Island Motor Parkway added overpasses for public roads
Figure 13. Construction of the Long Island Motor Parkway in 1908

Figure 14. 1908 course included eight miles of parkway and 11 new bridges
While the farmers may have objected, the races were hugely popular with crowds that streamed out from New York City. In 1906, over 200,000 spectators crowded around the course to watch the race.\footnote{Ibid.}

In 1908, the Automobile Club of America split from the Vanderbilt Cup and held their race in Savannah, Georgia. With the excitement created by the races in Long Island and in Savannah, it is understandable that Oklahoma City, with a population almost equal to that of Savannah, would see auto racing as a legitimate opportunity. The January 3rd article states:

"The possibilities opened by this auto speedway are enough to take away the breath of the ordinary southwesterner who is accustomed to associate the tremendous spectacle of the Vanderbilt cup races with the far away east coast."

Members of the auto industry in Oklahoma City promoted the idea that if they were able to host these races and with the significant enhancement to the street infrastructure, Oklahoma City would become "a great distributing depot" of the auto industry in the southwest.\footnote{"Undreamed of Possibilities Here," The Oklahoman, Feb 07 1909.}

The Speedway plan seems to be dominated by the idea of creating a world class auto course. Two years later, Will H. Clark, the primary force behind the plan, would describe the "many precedents" violated by the Oklahoma City plan, including:

"We also found that many cities did not allow automobiles on their boulevards, except at certain hours and certain days, and all under close restrictions as to speed. They [the other cities] established their boulevards with narrow places, hills,
right angles, etc., before the day of the automobile. We have
established a racecourse in our park system, contrary to park
ethics.”

The implications of the speedway vision are many. First, the fact
that it was intended as a racecourse may explain the great length
of the connecting boulevard. The purchase of the parks and of
the right-of-way on which the majority of the boulevard would
be built had already been negotiated prior to the announcement.
Thus, though ideas on what purpose the system should serve
would change over the next year, the size and layout of the system
were, generally, already in place. A boulevard of approximately
25 to 30 miles that is featured in each iteration of the plan is much
longer than what was found to be necessary in other park systems.
For example, in 1902 the Boston Park System contained over
15,000 acres of park land (compared to a little over 2,000 planned
for the Oklahoma City park system) and yet Boston only had
22 miles of parkway connecting the system. The great length
of the Oklahoma City proposal also produced an oblong shape
that hovered between three and three-and-a-half miles from the
city center. Detroit’s Grand Boulevard, which was designed by
Olmsted, wraps the city with a semi-circle to the river. This path,
which encircles the city with a radius approximately three miles
from the city center, encloses less than half the land area contained
within the Oklahoma City loop. This despite the fact that when
Detroit Grand Boulevard was proposed around 1880, the city had
a population almost twice that of Oklahoma City’s in 1910.

There were clearly legitimate reasons for wanting to make
Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system a racecourse
of international caliber. The automobile presented a new

62 Will H. Clark, *How Oklahoma City Secured Its Park and Boulevard System*
63 Scott, *American City Planning since 1890*, pg 22.
64 McShane, “American Cities and the Coming of the Automobile, 1870-1910”. Pg
59.
Figure 15. Birds-eye view of plan for Oklahoma City speedway

The Oklahoman, Feb 7, 1909
opportunity and with it a new challenge that previous park systems models did not completely account for. Still, the pursuit of this racecourse led to some fundamental errors on the part of the city. No doubt the economics of land values played a role in the isolated location of Oklahoma City’s parks system, but the vision of a speedway likely had a significant influence on the length and location of the boulevard improvements. As a result of this great distance from the city center and the tremendous amount of developable land encircled, Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system would remain isolated on the city’s rural edge for decades after its construction began.

An Oklahoma City Times city map published later in 1909 provides a look at the next iteration of the plan. The plan had shifted slightly from the speedway plan to show what closely resembles the final path the boulevard would take and it provides a more refined vision for the parks that were to be included in the plan (they were to be included in the speedway plan but not shown in the published graphic). While the map has only shifted slightly, the rhetoric moved increasingly towards the aspects of the parks and boulevard system commonly championed during the era of the park movement.

It appears the intent of the plan was to provide a place of escape for those lucky enough to own an automobile and to benefit certain real estate developers. In an article printed in The Oklahoman entitled, “Motor Way to Be Best in Country: Oklahoma City to Have Finest Grand-Boulevard Ever Constructed in U.S.” the author proposes that the boulevard will provide escape from the “unpleasantness” of the city:

"On this primrose path there will be none of the grade crossings, nor the halting unpleasantness of hucksters, pedestrians, sand"
Figure 16. Initial vision for park and boulevard system

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma [map]. 1909. (18 May 2009)
And in an article published in 1910, Will H. Clark’s reveals some of the underlying motives of the Oklahoma City Park Commissions’ work:

“We are also acquiring many miles of valleys, and draws and creeks for parks and parkways, inside our greater park system, with driveways on each side of them. This avoids the low grounds being settled up by the negroes and poor whites, so that we may eliminate the filth, disease and crime that accumulate and exist in such places in our cities.”

The plan was apparently never intended to address the desperate need for parks in the urban center or, in any way, improve upon the quality of life for average citizen as some reformers were then attempting to do in other cities. At least, this was the belief of Henry Overholser, one of the most respected leaders of Oklahoma City. Overholser had earlier spearheaded efforts that included bringing new railroads to Oklahoma City and, himself, spent $108,000—a “staggering amount” at the time—on a Opera House that brought a dose of high culture to the frontier town. In a series of editorials that he presumably paid to have printed, he sagely makes his case as to why voters should turn down the park bonds. In a piece aptly entitled, “Some Good Reasons Why The Boulevard Bonds Should Not Be Voted,” he calls into question the rationale behind the plan. According to Overholser, Oklahoma City had at the time a desperate need for small neighborhood parks suited to serve “the masses” living in the city’s center. Stiles park, a two-acre park located just outside the center at 8th and Harrison, was the only close-in park serving this purpose.

65 Parker, “Motor Way to Be Best in Country: Oklahoma City to Have Finest Grand-Boulevard Ever Constructed in U.S.”
66 Clark, How Oklahoma City Secured Its Park and Boulevard System.
Overholser claimed the “proposed bond issue does not provide for an adequate system of small parks.” He points to the need for a general scheme that provides parks within walking distance before moving forward with any plans. He even goes so far as to say that Clark’s proposal was “a system which apparently is designed to increase the value of suburban lands several miles from the heart of the city” and said it would take “a great many years” before the land surrounding the improvements would ever be developed. 67 On this point, even he probably failed to realize how “great” a many years it would take, as only some 50 years later did development finally begin reach most of the areas that made up the plan. In another editorial he estimated that it will require another one-half million dollars to “build the boulevard and place it in shape so that it would be a credit to the city” and in an impassioned plea wrote:

“To allow the park board money to squander in buying and condemning the right of way for twenty-six miles for an automobile drive around the city is a ridiculous proposition of itself and no voter should allow himself to be duped into voting bonds for such a purpose.”

A person of Overholser’s standing, likely had access to information and details that we will never know. While he was unable to convince the voters in Oklahoma City of the plan’s flaws, his writings likely provide some insight into the political origins and motivations of Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system.

Days before the debut of the first plan for Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system hit the newspaper, the parks commissioners presented their plan to members of the Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber, which has been a force of influence throughout the

city's history, met with Clark and the other Park Commissioners on December 30, 1908 to review their ideas for the park system. Based on later comments from Clark, it seems the reaction of the Chamber was favorable, though the Chamber leadership decided it would not go on record in favor of the proposal until they had more time to investigate the proposition. To carry out this task the Chamber formed a committee that included Anton Classen, a notable city leader, real estate developer, and principal in the Oklahoma City Railway, which owned and operated the city's street trolley network. According to comments made by Park Commissioner Clark and later reported in The Oklahoman, it was the Chamber of Commerce, presumably on the recommendation of this three-man committee, that requested that the Park Board engage the service of Wilbur H. Dunn, a landscape architect who had worked closely with George E. Kessler to carry out the implementation Kansas City's Parks and Boulevard System. The Chamber requested that Dunn be hired to examine the Oklahoma City Park Commissions's plans and report back with an expert assessment of the plan's feasibility. It very likely that the idea to hire Dunn came from Classen, who had worked closely with Kessler and his partner Henry Wright on a range of projects that included portions of Classen Boulevard and Belle Isle Park. At the time, Belle Isle Park was being constructed near the end of Classen Boulevard, presumably to attract trolley users and suburban home-buyers, and make the most of a lake used to cool the trolley systems' power plant. Dunn was not brought in to consult on the project until after the vision for the plan had already been set forth, with options on some of the land already under contract. Despite the quality of the report that Dunn would eventually provide the city, the strength of the initial vision and the persons committed to seeing it come to fruition was already in place.

68 “C. Of C. Directors Like Park Plans: Committee Named to Confer with Board; Clark Satisfied,” The Oklahoman, Dec 30 1908.
69 “How the Money Will Be Spent If Bonds Carry: Park Commissioner Clark Tells of Board's Plans in Detail for Public Enlightenment,” The Oklahoman, Mar 07 1909.
In accordance with the recommendations of the Chamber of Commerce, Dunn was hired to report on the Park Board’s proposal. On January 30, 1909, Dunn accompanied Park Commissioner Clark and engineer Brownell, along with a group of three real estate men on a tour of the parks and boulevard land. On February 1, his initial report to the Park Board was read to the City Council. In the report, Dunn complimented them on their foresight and provided some data to demonstrate the cost savings of purchasing the land and developing the parks in advance of development. Though he didn’t say so, the placement of the parks far outside the city limits, in a position to enhance life on the edge of the city, seems to be consistent with the suburban park systems carried out during the heyday of the park movement and adopted by many proponents of the City Beautiful:

"Located, for the sake of economy, almost always on the outskirts of a city, the parks are far...from the crowded districts. [They are] designed to add beauty to the present and future city rather than benefit its poor." 72

Another aspect Dunn considered is the size of the parks, which the Park Board had planned to make extremely large. The planned parks included:

Northeast Park (now called Lincoln Park): 720 acres
Southeast Park (now called Trosper): 620 acres
Southwest (now called Woodson Park): 160 acres

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70 "Park Project Found Feasible: Kansas City Expert Pleased -- Praises the Level Grounds," The Oklahoman, Jan 31, 1909.
71 W.H. Dunn, Feb 01, 1909.
72 The letter is dated "2/1/1908" though it is quite clear that this was an error as the newspaper record documents Dunn’s visit on 1/30/09. The letter was re-printed in its entirety, with only minor edits, as part of Dunn’s 1910 Parks and Boulevard Plan which was bound and distributed on February 1, 1910, with the addition of new work, including detailed plans for the parks, along with perspectives and sections of the boulevard.
73 Robinson, The Improvement of Towns and Cities; or the Practical Basis of Civil Aesthetics. pg. 154.
Dunn stressed that while these three parcels are "admirably adapted for use as pleasure grounds," the sizes are "considerably in excess of the necessities for Park purposes." He also questioned the overall strategy of placing these large parks far way from the inner city and miles past the existing edge of development:

"It is quite essential to secure at least one park of large area, but the maintenance and improvement of more than one such park would eventually become burdensome and would not afford the same accessibility as would the same number of acres more generally distributed over the city.

"In acquiring these larger holdings then, it would seem advisable to dispose of considerable of their area, retaining the picturesque valleys and promontories and such uplands and portions as would be selected in a more thorough study by the landscape architect."

One thing that Dunn made very clear is the need for a plan "that covers the whole city." Having worked closely with Kessler on the Kansas City park system, Dunn could no doubt appreciate the importance of a city-wide system:

"In conclusion I wish to call your attention to the equally important advantage of acquiring the interior parks and playgrounds at the earliest opportunity, and with your proposed bond issue of $400,000 quite a sum should be available for this purpose." 74

73 The fourth, Northwest Park (now Will Rogers) would be added to the plan later.
74 Dunn
Figure 17. 1910 Parks and Boulevards Plan by Wilbur H. Dunn

Source: Dunn, 1910.
By stressing the need for interior parks and playgrounds, Dunn was clearly concerned about the plans unbalanced focus on the city edge. However, by lending his expert name to the feasibility of the plan and allowing that the $400,000 would somehow be sufficient to also provide the much more necessary interior park system, Dunn provided the support the Park Board needed to move forward. The Chamber and the paper got behind the project and on April 27, 2009, by a vote of 2,833 to 1,329\textsuperscript{75} the bonds were approved.

**The Dunn Plan of 1910**

In October of 1909, Dunn once again returned to Oklahoma City to “direct the plans for the new parks and boulevards.”\textsuperscript{76} Over the next three months he would refine the thinking provided in his preliminary report, offering up a more thorough analysis of the overall project, including detailed thoughts on the individual parks and the boulevard layout. In February of 1910, all of this information, along with a number of beautiful sketches, was compiled into what I believe to be Oklahoma City’s first complete “plan” entitled Oklahoma City: a report on its plan for an outer parkway and a plan for an interior system of parks and boulevards. It seems with the naming of the report that Dunn hoped once again to stress the importance of the interior system, while actually dodging responsibility for the origination of the outer parkway.

**Interior Parks and Boulevards System**

Perhaps the most important feature of the new Dunn Plan was his proposal for a system of interior parks and boulevards (shown in orange on plan, see Figure 18). The comprehensive system included the “careful” selection of a number of existing roads that he that he suggested should be widened into boulevards to connect the business center to the Grand Boulevard. Included in this scheme are four diagonal boulevards – Northeast, Northwest, Southwest and Southeast – which were laid out to pass “through an almost entirely unimproved section” and would provide addition short cuts between the business center and outer

\textsuperscript{75} Peterson, “Grand Boulevard Had a Rough Time.”

\textsuperscript{76} “Kansas City Architect Here to Aid Park Board,” *The Oklahoman*, Oct 26 1909.
parkway, thus creating the radial spokes so beloved by the City Beautiful practitioners.77

In addition to the interior boulevards he also makes room for a new central park, stating:

“A central park of sufficient area to permit of handsome embellishment, located in the heart of the city, or as near the business district as practicable, will provide a pleasure and recreation place for a large number of inhabitants who may not be so fortunate as to own a motor car or other pleasure vehicle, nor even have the spare time to reach the outer pleasure gardens. The value of such park, conveniently located, will be of inestimable value.”78

The “Central Park” was to consist of approximately 135 acres in size on the undeveloped land north of Tenth Street, between Durland and Laird Avenues, in the close-in northeast section of the city; and encouraged the opportunity be taken advantage of “at the earliest time your Honorable Board feels that it may be undertaken without embarrassment to the outer park plans.”79 Whatever he meant by use of the word “embarrassment” is hard to know, but it is clear that once again Dunn was stressing the importance of interior parks closer to the city center.

Unfortunately for the sake of the city’s residents, his suggestions on the interior system would be largely ignored.

The Outer Parkway

Another major change Dunn attempts to introduce is the revisioning of the “speedway” into something more akin of a Parisian Boulevard. He explained:

77 Ibid. pg 21.
78 Ibid. pg 24.
79 Ibid. pg 26.
Figure 18. Perspective proposal for Santa Fe Railroad overpass
Source: Dunn, 1910.

Figure 19. Perspective proposal for Grand Boulevard
Source: Dunn, 1910.
Figure 20. Plan proposal for Santa Fe Railroad overpass
Source: Dunn, 1910.

Figure 21. Section proposal for Grand Boulevard
Source: Dunn, 1910.
"It, therefore, appears advisable to combine our primary plan for a motor car speedway with a wide parkway, providing at the same time, and at little additional cost, a pleasure drive around the city."80

As for the parks, his detailed plans reduced the amount of land and introduced large water features. For example, in Northeast Park (now Lincoln Park) he proposed the construction of a dam forming a new 50-acre manmade lake and suggested that 260 acres be sold for private development, reducing the effective size of the park from the originally proposed 744 to 434 acres.81 Likewise, in the Southeast Park (or Trosper Park) he proposed a 104-acre manmade lake that would surround an 18-acre island perfect for a "principal place of amusement."82 Southwest Park (now Woodson Park), at only 160 acres, was not large enough to permit the sale of developable land, but did, in Dunn's opinion, provide space for a small lake. Also, the report introduced Northwest Park (now Will Rogers), though it seems that the park had only recently been decided upon as Dunn had yet to secure surveys from which to design the layout.83

81 Ibid. pg 13.
82 Ibid. pg 16.
83 Ibid. pg 18.
Figure 22. Plan for Northeast Park, now Lincoln Park - 434 acres

Source: Dunn, 1910.
Figure 23. Plan for Southwest Park, now Woodson Park

Source: Dunn, 1910.
Figure 24. Plan for Southeast Park, now Trosper Park

Source: Dunn, 1910.
Figure 25. January 3, 1909: Initial plan showing possible auto course routes

Note: parks were already planned at the time of this map's release, but they were not shown. Also, the gray shade represents development circa 1909.

The grid is in square-miles.

Source: graphic by author, based on map that appeared in The Oklahoman on January 3, 1909
Figure 26. 1909: Plan by Park Commission for outer park and boulevard system

Source: graphic by author, based on Oklahoma City Times Benham map printed in 1909
Dunn's City Beautiful Plan

Figure 27. 1910: Plan by Dunn showing interior parks and boulevards

Source: graphic by author, based on 1910 Dunn Plan.
Figure 28. Circa 2000: current freeways (red) built on boulevard rights-of-way

Source: graphic by author, based on Google Earth aerial image (18 May 2009).
The plan of the Park Board used the $400,000 in bond money voted in by city residents to purchase the land, which they did, purchasing 2,000 acres at approx. $107 acre; spending around $214,000 in all. The remaining funds would be enough to begin constructing the parkway improvements, but it was clear that it would not be enough to complete the project. The Park Board believed that the difference would be made up by platting portions of the acquired land for houses and selling for prices substantially more than $107 an acre due to the parks and boulevard improvements. The Park Board also made some deals to keep costs low, for instance, they promised to name southeast park after the former owner of the parcel – Trosper – if he would knock $30,000 off the price of the land. It seems they believed that similar deals would follow for each of the major parks, though it doesn’t appear that that was the case. Either way, they were quite confident that the development value of the improvements alone would cover all of the costs, believing that while they could likely recoup the $400,000 in 1909, in five years they would be able to sell of the land for as much as $2,000,000.

In August of 1909, Whit M. Grant and Paul M. Pope joined Clark on the Park Board and set about finalizing the route of the parkway before awarding contracts for grading and bridges. The Park Board continued to add to the project as exuberant landowners hoping to add value to their developments, donated land to increase park space and provided new playgrounds.84 It was promised that the road would be finished by the spring

84 “Park Board to Inspect Parks and Boulevards,” The Oklahoman, Aug 25 1909.
Along Grand Boulevard in Northeast Park.
Oklahoma City.

Figure 29. Grand Boulevard in Lincoln Park circa 1910
Source: Dunn, 1910.
of 1911, with fifteen of the approximately thirty miles set to be contracted out in January of 1910.85

Simply the idea of the boulevard began to have an influence on city form. As construction got under way, developers began to be attracted to new development opportunities beyond the cities edge. Even as early as Nov. 25, 1909, before Dunn’s Plan was even issued, there were developments advertising their locations near the major parks and close to the “Grand Boulevard.”86 Work on the boulevard progressed slowly, at first.

During 1911, the Parks department was said to have secured through donations “twenty small parks totaling 202.3 acres” and in all had spent over $600,000 to acquire and improve “2,323.85 acres of parks and boulevard land.”87 But that same year, then Park Commissioner W.F. Vahlberg, perhaps acknowledging that the right-of-way would not soon be built out, began planting 400 acres of boulevard right-of-way with crops that he expected to sell for $10,000, and he also gave permission to people living along the boulevard to cultivate the adjoining land because the Park Board would not be able to use it all in the present year. In spite of this setback, the booster spirit remained:

“Putting in cultivation the 400-acre right of way of the Grand boulevard has both practical and an aesthetic value. It will considerably enhance the revenue of the board and will save the taxpayers of the city just that much expenditure. We shall give the area the best possible intensive cultivation, and it will afford visitors a fine demonstration of the productive capacity

85 Parker, “Motor Way to Be Best in Country: Oklahoma City to Have Finest Grand-Boulevard Ever Constructed in U.S. .”
87 “Year 1911 Proves Era of Marvelous Development: Progress Shown on Every Hand: Oklahoma City Leads Others in Way of Civic Improvement,” The Oklahoman, Apr 22 1912.
of Oklahoma land. A 200-acre strip of fine alfalfa paralleling Grand boulevard will be one of the best means for advertising the agricultural resources of the state that could desired.”

In 1912, Oklahoma City was still in the midst of an amazing boom, which had seen the city grow by most measures from the previous year. An April 22 article that appeared in the Oklahoman is titled “Year 1911 Proves Era of Marvelous Development” and recounts the way in which the city had improved including the work that continued along the Grand Boulevard, which would assuredly “be in active use during 1912.”

However, by October of 1915, the Boulevard still was not complete. According to The Oklahoman, all that remained was “about thirty feet.” Even if that was true - which it almost assuredly was not - most, if not all, of the boulevard was merely a dirt road, nothing close to the wonderful Parisian boulevard sections dotted with shade trees that had been pictured in the Dunn Plan. The newspaper, which to this point had been overly optimistic when referring to the project, concluded by pointing out that “the boulevard is about twenty-eight miles in length, and is in only fair condition. A few spots are badly in need of repair.”

By 1916, the failings of the project could no longer be ignored. The Oklahoman carried an article with a subtitle that read “Police and Others Declare City’s Pride Is Now Its Disgrace,” stories recounted how detectives were trying to cut down on the number of illegal keg parties being held along the boulevard, even while the City Police department refused to patrol the boulevard which was still far outside the city limits.

In 1919, Joe H. Patterson, commissioner for public property,
confirmed that Dunn’s initial misgivings about the number and size of parks in the Park Board’s proposal had turned out to be correct. The article stated, “The land he intimated is a white elephant on the hands of the city, 640 acres having been purchased in the southeast part of the city at $100 an acre. Most of the land is at present devoted to agriculture, pastures and weeds.”92 Other City officials had similar criticisms of the boulevard and the failure to deliver the vision pictured in the plans. Mike Donnelly, commissioner of finance, “said that one trouble with city beautiful plans is that they are frequently disappointing when completed. He said a few years ago a plan for a beautiful boulevard was submitted to the public and four rows of trees and a beautiful walk along the boulevard were shown in drawings. But when it was completed there was no semblance to the original plan.”93

1920 - 1929

In the late 1920’s, the city handed over portions of the west side of the boulevard rights-of-way to a railroad freight company, that used it to build a 10-mile, $1 million freight bypass line. This was put into operation in December of 1928, when a new ownership group that included G.A. Nichols expanded the Oklahoma Railway Co. that operated the city’s streetcar system into the freight business. Before this, freight trains would commonly travel through the city up Classen Boulevard. City residents were so eager to get rid of the freight traffic that the city gave the company some of the rights-of-way needed to construct the line, giving up portions of what had become the notorious Grand Boulevard94 including a section of Northwest Park.95

There were a few bright spots. Portions of the boulevard, most notably along the southern section, had been developed in some accordance with plans, except for a few short sections where the

93 Ibid.
94 Allison Chandler, Stephen D. Maguire, and Mac Sebree, When Oklahoma Took the Trolley, Interurbans Special ; (Glendale, Calif.: Interurbans, 1980).
95 Oklahoma City (Okla.). City Planning Commission. and Hare and Hare (Firm), Report of the City Planning Commission, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1930 (Oklahoma City, Okla.,: City planning commission, 1931).
right-of-way had not been acquired. Also, in the latter part of the 1920's, in the far northwest area of the City, the boulevard had been adopted into the plan for Oklahoma City's newest and wealthiest suburb. G.A. Nichols hired Hare & Hare, a planning and landscape firm from Kansas City, to develop a plan for his Nichols Hills neighborhood. The plan embraced the boulevard, provided a winding path featuring a variety of park medians and landscape features.

1930 - 1950

That same firm, was in 1930 hired to complete Oklahoma City's first comprehensive city plan, in which they encouraged the city to finally complete the boulevard. The plan lists "the acquisition of all lands necessary to complete the right of way for Grand Boulevard" as one of seven "urgent projects," that stand out above the other concerns for city. Once again though the call would go unanswered. The boulevard was surely a failure, but it was still having an impact on the form of the city, and with the coming of the highway its impact increased dramatically.

As the City continued to mature, it seemed there was no hope that the plan for Grand Boulevard would ever be fully realized. In 1947, Harland Bartholomew – the "Dean of City Planning" and interstate highway expert stated in his Preliminary Report on Oklahoma City's appearance:

"Oklahoma City has not yet taken advantage of the excellent opportunity at hand for the development of an outstanding boulevard around the city on right-of-way which is now owned and known as Grand Boulevard. This has a 200 foot width throughout most of its 27 mile length, and could be developed into an outstanding parkway which would also be highly useful as a traffic artery."96

Despite this recommendation, one which had been repeated by planners for nearly half a century, the city failed to complete the construction of the boulevard in any way that resembled the visions and plans of the of Clark and Dunn. Much like the fortifications of European cities gave way to boulevards, the grand boulevard right-of-way gave way to another type of thoroughfare – the freeway. Over the next fifty years or so, significant portions of the boulevard’s rights-of-way would be utilized for the construction of the highways and interstates passing through Oklahoma City. Depending on how you look at it, this use of the rights-of-way for freeways is either the partial completion of the vision, a speedway that encircles the city, or the death of Oklahoma City’s grand attempt at the City Beautiful.

Even though much of the boulevard has been destroyed for the purposes of the city’s freeways, for some the dream never dies. In 1986, apparently inspired by thinking he contributed to MIT’s own Kevin Lynch, and, no doubt unbeknownst to him, emulating the blind enthusiasm of the original planners of the speedway, a member of the Chamber of Commerce’s centennial division proposed that the City recapture the Dunn’s initial vision, and link together the fragments of boulevard that remained after the highway improvements to create what he hoped would be “a signature location of international importance.”  

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Figure 30. A nice place for trails near S.W. 36th and Villa
Source: Live Search Maps, 2009

Figure 31. Transition crossing South Santa Fe Rd.
Source: Live Search Maps, 2009

Figure 32. Highway just missed near N.E. 10th St.
Source: Live Search Maps, 2009

Figure 33. Right-of-way remains just west of MLK Boulevard
Source: Live Search Maps, 2009
Figure 34. I-44 consumes right-of-way under the Santa Fe Railroad
Note: Figures 18 & 22 show Dunn's proposal for the same Santa Fe overpass. Source: Live Search Maps, 2009

Figure 35. A truly Grand Boulevard passing through Nichols Hills
Source: Live Search Maps, 2009

Figure 36. Looking south just east of N. May
Source: Live Search Maps, 2009

Figure 37. Hefner Parkway near N.W. 68th
Source: Live Search Maps, 2009
CONCLUSION

An Enduring Influence

I took on this research with the goal of learning more about the early planning and development history of Oklahoma City, assessing the origins and influences that shaped early city form and, hopefully, identifying physical and social patterns that are likely to continue to influence the city’s growth. Before this process began, I knew nothing of the city’s parks and boulevard system other than what could be discerned from the fragments of Grand Boulevard that remain, and the existence of parks that now seem wholly unrelated. Simply the process of discovering Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system, and connecting its story to the broader historical planning narrative has been incredibly rewarding. Equally rewarding is the knowledge that Oklahoma City was very much a part of the early twentieth century planning scene; consulted by some of the leading practitioners, mentioned regularly in professional journals, and, ostensibly at least, embracing progressive models of city form. The unique character of the park and boulevard system’s design, engineered to serve as a high-speed race course, provides a fascinating topic for further study that has implications for the broader planning field. Still, among the joys of my journey into Oklahoma City’s history, there has been plenty of discouragement. Even one hundred years later, the results of the plan’s implementation are, for me, a disappointment. I would love to see the city today had Dunn’s beautiful renderings and thoughtful approach to interior parks and circulation become reality. In truth, this is but one of many of the major planning failures the city has experienced since it’s founding. Just like the plan for the parks and boulevard system, many of these failed plans have a substantial impact on city form, mostly negative, as they often fail to realize the vision initially put forth. While
I remain optimistic about the city and its future, and still wish to contribute to its continued improvement, for me this story highlights some of the very serious problems with the process that has produced these failed plans.

From a planning standpoint, the story highlights the propensity of Oklahoma City to adopt trends found in other cities in an effort to obtain greater metropolitan status. While this propensity no doubt exists in many cities throughout the world, Oklahoma City seems especially susceptible due to an apparent inferiority complex that it has struggled to overcome since its founding. In the case of Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system, this led to a vision for the system that seemed more interested in boosting the city’s reputation than it was in addressing any of the city’s actual needs. This is, in some ways, demonstrated by the unrestrained boosterism appearing repeatedly in newspapers and journals, beginning with the plan’s announcement and continuing until the realities of the plan’s failure overwhelmed the booster’s ability to propagate.

The influence of this desire for enhanced reputation is perhaps even more clearly demonstrated by initial vision for the parks and boulevard system. Rather than fully embrace the City Beautiful concepts subsequently presented in Dunn’s Plan, which shared much in common with the parks and boulevard ideas that Burnham used to brilliantly reshape Chicago, the leaders of Oklahoma City envisioned something that mixed elitist ideals of a previous era and an auto course that they assumed would attract world famous auto races and make Oklahoma City a major player in the auto distribution industry. These two influences affected the plan in dramatically different ways, but ultimately both contributed to the plan’s flawed implementation. By looking backward to the earlier park models found in cities they desired to emulate, Oklahoma City leaders, with the notable exception of Henry Overholser, failed understand both the positive and negative aspects of these previous plans, and disregarded
Dunn’s ideas which actually represented the park movement’s progression and refinement. The fact that they sought to build a “speedway” to serve as a perfect racecourse, is equally deserving of criticism. Enchanted by the great races of the Vanderbilt Cup and others, Oklahoma City leaders failed to focus on the possible day-to-day benefits of the parks and boulevard system in pursuit of the reputation and grandeur that would come by hosting international races. The prospect for hosting these races, even with the success found in Savannah, was incredibly small, and yet this dream had a substantial impact on the plan for Oklahoma City’s system.

The plans for Oklahoma City today often embody many of the same the attributes that hindered the implementation Oklahoma City parks and boulevard systems. The desire of City leaders (and often residents) to be considered part of the club of major cities plays a huge role in public policy. Further, time and time again, physical models carried out successfully in other cities are implanted into Oklahoma City without regard to the context or a fuller understanding of what why the elements were actually successful in the other city.

It interesting to consider that only now, one hundred years after that plan was produced, are we finally pursuing the construction of a true downtown park like that featured to serve as the “hub” of Dunn’s proposal. At this point, it appears a park of approximately 35 acres, located just south of downtown, will be constructed as part of Oklahoma City’s MAPS 3 civic improvement program. Since the City’s failure to adopt Dunn’s suggestions for interior parks and playgrounds, the downtown area has remained largely devoid of quality of open spaces (see appendix A). Once again, we are in some ways attempting to emulate a model found in a big city, in this case Chicago’s Millennium Park, though the current level of investment being discussed leaves little doubt that it will be difficult for Oklahoma City’s park to achieve any kind of comparable success.
Political Process

The mistakes in the visioning and design of Oklahoma City’s parks and boulevard system were made possible by an equally flawed political process. The political process that unfolded shares much in common with the processes that have unfortunately been repeated throughout the city’s history. It is a process where often: the real planning occurs behind closed doors, voters are manipulated by a complicit media and even constructive public discourse is limited.

The alignment of power between the Park’s Board, the Chamber of Commerce, and the newspapers, along with the rapid pace at which the events leading up to the bond vote unfolded, did not provide a legitimate opportunity for the vision for a parks and boulevard system to be digested by the public. The general idea for a parks and boulevard system was probably a good one, but upon the announcement of the plan it was immediately turned into a yes or no proposition for the public to decide. There was no examination of the plan itself and how it could be improved, rather, the rhetoric painted this as a choice between parks or no parks. In contrast, the plan for Chicago, which was presented to the public on July 4th, 1909, came as the result of years of work involving stakeholders from across the city. By no means did the Chicago public process reflect the standards of participation and equity we have today. However, it was produced through a “long, partially visible planning process,” not just a “finished document presented to the public without prior discussion.” 98

The initial vision for the parks and boulevard system in Oklahoma City was much more the latter. While the laws have changed and the process in Oklahoma City has no doubt improved from what it was, the reality is that the real decision-making process still has plenty of room for improvement.

Another interesting political lesson to takeaway is how the report of Wilbur H. Dunn was used politically to bolster support for the plan. A close reading of his report shows that he was

hardly enthusiastic about the outer parks and parkways being built without an interior system connecting it to the center of the city. However, because he obliged the organization that hired him by supporting their plan and assessing it to be feasible, his expert opinion, or at least the parts of it that were advantageous, were used to push forward an idea that he likely never would have supported by itself, separate from the additions and improvements he suggested. This is a valuable lesson both for an observer of the public process today that regularly utilizes hired consultants, and for someone who might someday consult and hopes to do so with integrity.

**In Closing**

Ultimately, I think that what you see throughout this story is the power of an initial vision. The initial vision for a park system and speedway is largely realized in Oklahoma City today. Dunn’s plan for a City Beautiful parks and boulevard system was never completely pursued, though the portions that were built out according to the Dunn Plan are certainly a credit to the city. The outer parks, which stayed fairly consistent throughout the plans, continues to serve the people of Oklahoma City, primarily as centers of recreation. In the end, the most significant influence on city form comes through the rights-of-way being used to create the city’s network of highways - our modern speedway. One hundred years later the influence of Oklahoma City park and boulevard system can still be seen.
Interestingly, by 1923, even as the population was in the process of rising from 91,295 to 185,389 by the end of the decade - moving the city up from the 80th to the 43rd largest city in the United States. The city still suffered from a lack of adequate public space for people living and working downtown. By this time, the publisher of *The Oklahoman*, E.K. Gaylord was willing to admit the problem. On March 18, 1923 he made this announcement on the front page of his paper:

“One of Oklahoma City’s greatest needs is a close in park. A search of the files of The Daily Oklahoman disclosed the fact that that statement had been published editorially more than a score of times in the last ten years. And in order to ‘practice what it preaches,’ The Oklahoma Publishing company has decided to help establish the first downtown park immediately.”
The park was located on the half block behind the Oklahoman building, starting at the alley on the west and extending east 275 feet to the publisher’s warehouse along the Santa Fe tracks. The depth of the park, from 4th street on the south to what used to be an alley running east-west through the center of the block on the north, was 140 feet, resulting in a park just under one acre in size.

Over the next six years Oklahoman Park greatly enhanced the quality of life in downtown, serving residents as an everyday park, and also as a central meeting place that hosted numerous downtown events, such as: sports broadcast, concerts, memorial services, and more. It was so popular in fact that it once attracted more than 15,000 people for a single event, with crowds overflowing into the streets and blocking traffic.

From the start Mr. Gaylord knew that as some point the Oklahoman would need the land for the expansion of their facilities. In 1929 that day finally came when the paper announced that construction of a new modern publishing plant was set to take place on the site of Oklahoman Park. Thus once again Oklahoma City’s interior was left wanting.
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