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W. R. B. WILLCOX: THE ARCHITECT AS SOCIAL CRITIC

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A THESIS

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Chapter 1

THE BACKGROUND

The American architect at the turn of the century faced the prodigious task of reconciling his traditional role as the servant of privilege with the exigencies of technological revolution, burgeoning cities, and a rapidly expanding industrial society. Capitalists needed factories and office buildings that would use expensive land with a maximum efficiency and a minimum waste. The use of steel and the availability of free vertical space suggested the skyscraper as the most expedient form the buildings should take. Most architects looked at these new structures, shuddered at their ugly crudeness, and, turning to Europe for their precedents, copied the buildings they found there. Engineers could have helped develop the relationship between technology and architecture. Instead, the architect regarded the engineer as a barbarian and, alienating himself from his time, took refuge in the classics.

However, a group of architects, centered in Chicago, chose to face the challenge directly. They evolved design principles that exploited the new material, steel, and the technological skill of the engineer to produce buildings suited to the needs of their commercial and industrial clientele. Louis Sullivan, John Wellborn Root, and Frank Lloyd Wright, the most articulate spokesmen for this group of architects, felt the new building form was uniquely American and gave concrete expression to that

ephemeral abstraction. John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, commenting on this period in American architecture, have said that: "So much of the argument for a national style roared out of Chicago instead of New York that the debate appears to have been between . . . the 'cultured and leisured' versus the 'uncouth and untutored,' the East against the West, a regional argument conducted in national terms."¹

To the Eastern architect in 1890 Chicago epitomized all that was crude and uncivilized. In that year an act of Congress authorized a World's Fair commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America to be held in Chicago in 1893. John Root was appointed consulting architect, and his partner, Daniel Burnham, was appointed chief of construction. Eastern architects came, with a missionary air, to show the benighted Westerner how the classic orders could be adapted to the prairies. John Root died before he could voice his objections. Daniel Burnham capitulated, because, as Louis Sullivan commented waspishly, he ". . . believed that he might best serve his country by placing all of the work exclusively with Eastern architects; solely, he averred, on account of their culture."²

An estimated 50,000,000 awestruck sightseers visited the resulting staff-and-plaster fantasy land of gleaming white classic buildings. The Columbian Exposition represented the climax of tensions between East and

¹John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p. 203.

²Louis Sullivan, The Autobiography of an Idea (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 320.

West, nationalism and regionalism, in a dramatic and impressive way. Visitors to the fair went home to duplicate the Greek and Roman forms they had seen.

The World's Fair lent impetus to a Classic Revival in architecture that was already under way. It had an even more important long-range effect upon city planning. The roots of the "city beautiful" movement can be traced to the Columbian Exposition. The massing of monumental buildings about a central axis impressed visitors with an idea of what a real city could look like. In 1902 Daniel Burnham was appointed to a commission to renovate Washington, D. C., and the same design elements that were used in the Fair were employed in that project. The wave of enthusiasm for city planning touched off by the Fair and the plan for Washington, D. C. coincided with a progressive enthusiasm for civic reform, and local civic improvement clubs expanded to include planning among their objectives.

The first official planning commission was established in Hartford, Connecticut in March, 1907,³ and in that year Charles Mulford Robinson, an architect closely associated with city planning, defined the need for a city planning specialist "to put before the community a vision of what its own town might be and should be."⁴ He suggested a commission that would include "one member who would stand not for engineering alone, nor for architecture alone, nor for landscape design alone, nor for sculpture

³Mel Scott, American City Planning since 1890 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 80.

⁴Ibid., p. 69.

alone, but for all these together and comprehensively, as one who has made a special study of the general science and art of city planning."⁵

The need for change in laws governing land tenure and taxation was implicit in city planning proposals. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the son of the great landscape architect responsible for Central Park in New York and a landscape architect in his own right, commented upon the relationship between land tenure and successful city planning at a City Planning Conference in 1910.

The methods of taxation and assessment greatly influence the action of landowners, and of those having money to invest in land, buildings, or building mortgages. They have a direct influence upon the speculative holdings of unproductive property; upon the extent to which development is carried on in a scattered sporadic manner, involving relatively large expense to the community for streets, transportation, sewerage, etc., in proportion to the inhabitants served; upon the quality and durability of building; and, in those states where property is classified and taxed at varying rates, upon the class of improvements favored. . . .

As to the influence of methods of taxation in determining the physical improvements undertaken on private property it will be enough here to cite a single example. In Pennsylvania the law provides for a classification of land as agricultural, rural, and urban, of which the second is taxed twice as much as the first in proportion to its value, and the third three times as much as the first. As applied within city boundaries, vacant fields held for speculative purposes are commonly taxed as agricultural property. Under these circumstances the man who draws his savings out of concealed and untaxed intangible investments and builds a house is not only punished by a tax on the money he puts into his house, but is taxed two or three times as much on the land as his speculative neighbor who does nothing but play dog in the manger and wait for "unearned increment."⁶

⁵Ibid., p. 69.

⁶Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., "Introductory Address on City Planning," Second National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion, Rochester, New York, May 2-4, 1910 (Boston, 1910), pp. 15-30. Reprinted in Roy Lubove, The Urban Community; Housing and Planning in the Progressive Era (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), pp. 89, 91.

To many city planners frustrated by real estate speculators, by the prohibitive cost of land, and by an electorate unwilling to vote for the funds necessary to carry out the plans, Henry George's proposal to tax the unearned increment accruing to lands held out of use for speculation seemed the most reasonable tax reform. Lewis Mumford, an architectural critic and a Georgist, commented upon the fate of the single tax in the Progressive period. ". . . Perhaps George's chief defect was that he wished to slip in a revolutionary proposal without touching any of the other dominant activities of American society; whereas, once his principle was admitted, many other institutions and ways of life besides the rent of land and its appropriation would have been affected. He wished to produce by political sleight of hand what was in fact a moral conversion."⁷

The revolutionary implication of the single-tax were not apparent to many of those concerned with civic reform in the first decade of the twentieth century. Henry George seemed, to them, quite respectable.

The career of Walter Ross Baumes Willcox is uniquely interwoven in the rise and eclipse of the Chicago architects, in progressive city planning, and in the single-tax movement. His writing reflects the tension between what he sees as Eastern eclecticism and Western innovation. His work on a plan for the City of Seattle, an impressive engineering masterpiece, and its subsequent defeat at the polls led him to a commitment to the single tax that was, in Mumford's words, a "moral conversion."

⁷Lewis Mumford, The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), p. 44.

While his years as a teacher are important and perhaps the most fruitful of his career, they are only suggested in this study. The years he lived in Seattle are pivotal. It is during these years that his view of the architect as a businessman building beautiful buildings changed to a view of the architect as a potential leader in social reform. This transformation is a reflection of the time and the place in which he lived.



Photograph 2

W. R. D. Wilcox in his drafting room in Burlington, 1900.



Photograph 1

W. R. B. Willcox in his drafting room in Burlington, 1903.



Photograph 2
The Willcox's Burlington House, 1899.

Photograph 3
W. R. B. and Mrs. Willcox, 1903.

Chapter 2

THE EARLY YEARS

I have struck a city, - a real city, - and they call it Chicago. The other places do not count. . . . This place is the first American City I have encountered. . . . Having seen it, I urgently desire never to see it again. It is inhabited by savages.⁸

To a young Easterner, newly arrived, that ugly, vital city was intoxicating. Full of unrealized ambition, longing to be part of the ferment, he roamed the streets of Chicago. At 24, Walter Ross Baumes Willcox had a job in the city, but he did not intend to spend his life selling advertising space for an uncle's trade journal called Electrical Industries. He simply marked time with the magazine and restlessly anticipated the call to some life's work his Baptist background had prepared him to expect. The steel-framed structures of buildings under construction seemed to speak to his condition. He wrote, years later, of his reaction to the buildings of Louis Sullivan:

Seldom, if ever, have I experienced a more conscious architectural thrill. Here was something new in the world, it seemed. Nothing else had made upon me an impression of similar character. . . . it seemed such a clean break with all the repetitious stuff of the past, as though a new day actually had dawned. I wished for a fleeting moment that I were an architect.⁹

⁸Rudyard Kipling, From Sea to Shining Sea (New York: 1899), p. 139. Reprinted in Charles N. Glaab, The American City, A Documentary History (The Dorsey Press: Homewood, Illinois, 1963), p. 337.

⁹Walter R. B. Willcox, "Autobiography," typescript, undated. University of Oregon Library, Eugene. Willcox Collection hereinafter cited WRBW.

His enthusiasm was uncritical. He was equally enthralled when the Columbian Exposition opened. The World's Fair that Louis Sullivan likened to a contagious disease with "symptoms . . . of progressive cerebral meningitis"¹⁰ and that Frank Lloyd Wright recalled as a ". . . tragic travesty" and ". . . senseless reversion . . ."¹¹ reaffirmed Willcox's momentary wish to become an architect. In the presence of the White City, he recalls, "I knew . . . I was going to spend my life at something which had to do with buildings."¹²

Willcox's family was not happy with his decision. While his father had, at one point, encouraged Walter's interest in architecture, it seemed to his family that 24 was much too old to begin, again, as a student. To allay their fears as much as to bolster his own courage, he wrote the master, Louis Sullivan, for advice. Sullivan was apparently encouraging. The following fall, in 1893, Willcox was admitted as a special student in architecture at M.I.T.¹³ Walter's father, Monson Alvah Willcox, should have understood his son. He had been expelled from Rochester University, had graduated from Colgate (Madison), in 1862, and was admitted to the bar in New York City. Within the year he left the law, entered Union Theological Seminary, and became a Baptist preacher. After marrying Sarah Elizabeth Mason in 1863, he moved with her to Burlington, Vermont. Walter was born there in 1869 and grew up between two brothers in a close, though undemonstrative family. He was an

¹⁰Louis Sullivan, Autobiography of an Idea (New York: Dovers Publications, 1952), p. 325.

¹¹Frank Lloyd Wright, A Testament (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 33.

¹²W. R. B. Willcox, "Autobiography," p. 89.

¹³Ibid., p. 90.

indifferent student and disliked school, preferring, instead, to explore the hills surrounding their Burlington home. He delighted, too, in building scale models of engineering projects and making carefully detailed drawings of the buildings in the town.

The family moved to Oswego, New York, around 1880. There boating on Lake Ontario occupied much of his time: sculling, rowing, kayaking, and, most particularly, sailing. He spent the summer of his thirteenth year on an old canal schooner, the O. M. Bond, bound for Chicago with a load of coal. When he returned to Oswego after the three-month working cruise around the Great Lakes, a baby sister, Helen, had been added to the family. His father, deciding perhaps that the boy had had enough of freedom, sent him back to Burlington to high school. Walter attended Colgate Academy for a time, after graduating from the high school and, when his father accepted the presidency of a small Baptist college in Kalamazoo, Michigan, transferred to that school.

Dissatisfied with what he could learn in school and unhappy because he felt unfitted for any kind of work, Walter, then 21, responded to family pressure to find a job by moving to Chicago. There he drafted for an architect for a few weeks, then went to work in the office of his uncle's magazine. His family was relieved: the boy appeared to be settling down. Walter was still discontent: "I don't know of anything that would bring me more joy than to compose a great piece of music, or to design a beautiful building. As an ordinary mortal, neither of these things is within my power, but I like architecture and can study it."¹⁴

¹⁴Willcox, Diary fragments (January 25, 1892), WRBW.

Lack of confidence kept him working half-heartedly for the magazine for another year, while he studied architecture informally by sketching buildings under construction and noting their progress. In the summer of 1893, "before the glory of the golden doorway to the Transportation Building"¹⁵ at the World's Fair he made his decision, quit his job, and threw himself into the study of architecture.

That fall, instead of entering M.I.T. as planned, he chose to go to the University of Pennsylvania. "How my time is occupied," he wrote in his diary during his first term,

I have my head in a buzz all the time, but having a happy time. Yet I have not a leisure moment I believe. Take just 15 minutes at noon and am back at work. I work from before nine until five thirty with that much intermission; and then the evenings and mornings, for I am getting up at 5:30. Must make this year felt; I must, but the work is fun and I'm pushing it. If only I could learn something of this business of drawing and water color and design"¹⁶

The students worked at their boards all day and talked architecture all night. They "complained together over the inconsistency of beginning the 'study' of a problem with a 'solution'. . . at the use made of 'documents,' which made it 'scholarly' to appropriate a design from Athens or Rome, but 'plagiarism' to lift one from New York or Chicago; on the theory, presumably, that the former were always good and the latter - well, usually, bad. We wondered why Richardson's work was arbitrarily and definitively 'barbarious' and even mention of Sullivan and his work taboo."¹⁷ The long hours at the drawing board and all-night

¹⁵Willcox, "Autobiography," p. 75.

¹⁶Willcox, Diary fragments (October 8, 1893), WRBW.

¹⁷Willcox, "Autobiography," p. 117.

bull sessions wore him down. He contracted hepatitis at mid-year and had to drop out of school.

Willcox never returned to school. Instead, he worked as a draftsman in the office of Penn Varney in Lynn, Massachusetts, just long enough to gain the confidence and experience he needed to open his own office. He decided to practice in Burlington and, for the first time, began to use his entire name, Walter Ross Baumes Willcox, to lend weight, perhaps, to his otherwise rather sketchy credentials. His increasingly frequent trips to Chicago to visit the gentle, decorous Evalyn Porter were expensive, and so, before moving to Burlington, he married the girl, "a good sort of chap with nice brown eyes,"¹⁸ he had been courting at long distance.

His first commission was a house for himself and his new wife. In the summer of 1899 masons began to lay the brick on the two-story structure, and in November the couple moved into the still unfinished house. In a scrapbook entitled "Brick Cottage Number One" Evalyn lovingly recorded the comments passersby would make about it. "I suppose this house is a combination of all the odd things Mr. Willcox could think of."¹⁹ It was, indeed, a funny-looking house and stood uneasily on its naked city site. A long bay window, extending from the first to the second story, lit the interior stairwell, adding warmth and texture to an otherwise flat face. It was an appealing house, withal, and Evalyn was pleased when an architect visiting Burlington emphatically declared the house good architecture.

¹⁸Willcox, "Autobiography," p. 120.

¹⁹Scrapbook (undated, unpagged), WRBW.

As ivy began to cover the facade and her gardens began to bloom, another architect declared it "the best piece of English country house work in the U.S." and "the prettiest house in Burlington."²⁰

Willcox's practice was enormously successful. His infinite patience with his conservative clients paid off. He indulged his taste for hats and fashionable suits, jowls began to suggest themselves on his smoothly handsome face, and a prosperous paunch developed on his short frame. His stolid, foursquare brick buildings, with the classic excrescences over windows and doorways so common to turn-of-the-century architecture, were popular. He designed banks, schools, office buildings. He won the competition for the town's Carnegie Library and designed a medical school for the University of Vermont and a horticulture building at Massachusetts Agricultural College (University of Massachusetts at Amherst). He did dozens of private houses. In 1918, long after he had left Vermont, he recalled his buildings to a friend visiting in Burlington: ". . . when I saw the postmark and found out you were in Burlington, I had a flashing thought of how I would like to be there with you and lead you around by the hand and introduce you to some of my children. Some are respectable, some are tiresome, some are queer, one or two are decent enough to be better and perhaps one or two are even better than that; at any rate I could have pointed to a couple of hundred progeny and said, 'See that? That's mine!'"²¹

Willcox's reverence for architecture was unbounded. His ability to express that reverence in his buildings was limited, perhaps because he

²⁰Ibid.

²¹W. R. B. Willcox to Charles Harris Whitaker, September 5, 1918, WRBW.

felt the heart of architecture lay in "style": an ineffable quality he could recognize but could not quite capture. He recognized Frank Lloyd Wright as a stylist rather than as a revolutionary genius.

I am free to confess that I am unable to analyze my feelings in regard to his work as a whole. It is beautiful, and beautiful in the way of quality. . . . his work is chaste. It seems never to be coarse, and it is possessed of coherence, unity, as to its character. It is always wonderful, almost always charming. I wish I could live amongst it long enough to get a true viewpoint from which to judge it. It is so greatly superior, in my mind, to the stuff the foreigners of the L'Art Nouveau (sic) practice are giving us and yet there is a relationship. I tell you what I hope to see him do. When he has become satiated with the straight line, the horizontal effect, I hope to see him tackle the curve, the circle and the ellipse and the rest of that family. He will do it with the same force and delicacy, the same beauty and frankness as characterizes his straight work today.²²

Willcox captured Wright's style. A former draftsman in Willcox's office, Charles E. White, working in Wright's studio in Oak Park in 1904, captured his innovative genius:

Wright's greatest contribution to architecture, I think, is his unit system of design. All his plans are composed of units grasped in a systematic and symmetrical way. . . . These units are varied in size and number to meet each particular case and the unit decided upon is constantly carried through every portion of the plan. His process in getting up a new design is the reverse of that usually employed. Most men outline the strictly utilitarian requirements, choose their style, and then mould the design along those lines, whereas Wright will develop his unit first, then fits his design to the requirements as much as possible, or rather, fits the requirements to the design. I do not mean by this that he ignores the requirements, but that he approaches his work in a broadminded architectural way and never allows any of the petty wants of his clients to interfere with the architectural expression of his design.²³

²²W. R. B. Willcox to Charles White, Jr., February 10, 1905, WRBW.

²³Charles E. White, Jr. to W. R. B. Willcox, May 13, 1904, WRBW.

Willcox apparently missed the important difference between his comments and White's analysis. It was the last sentence that caught Willcox's attention. He was limited by his conservative clientele, and Wright's flamboyant creativeness and cavalier treatment of his clients contrasted with Willcox's cautious politeness. He began to chafe at the restrictive environment of Vermont.

His discontent grew as he approached 40. The demands of his clients seemed increasingly petty. The horticulture building, for instance, took three years to build. At one point the plans were returned to the architect because one of the members of the Board of Directors objected to his use of the term "seminar room" to identify a small classroom. "I don't like these new finnick terms in a plain, every day farmer's college. If Harvard or Yale want to talk about seminars, . . . let them. I prefer to stick to the good, old fashioned names."²⁴ Willcox changed the name, re-submitted the plans, and fumed privately.

In the summer of 1906 Willcox was invited to design a condensed milk factory for the Van Camp Packing Company in Indianapolis, Indiana. It was a small building, but the experience of working with "Westerners" was a revelation to him.

. . . What is so unusual . . . the people having it in hand actually seemed to think that the architect was able to build a building without their help in regard to the minute details which my experience with Vermonters has let me to almost believe to be the only proper way. . . . Habit has gotten me out of the way of feeling the architects' true estate and I realized an effort in assuming my proper role. . . . then I gloried in the pleasure of it, it was invigorating, and I realized that only in a small way could I ever hope to serve

²⁴Frank Waugh to W. R. B. Willcox, October, 1903, WRBW.

Vermonters in that way. . . . It was a little thing but it tended to arouse the discontent that had been growing to something like rebellion, a feeling almost of self-pity, that I had to stay around here and fuss with the "old families" and their "conservative" ways.²⁵

Willcox had done well in New England. The biggest buildings in the community were his. His reputation in the area was assured, and he knew he had to leave New England or "lose ambition, energy, ideals and simply wait around here to die. . . ."26

Charles White agreed with Willcox's characterization of his conservative neighbors.

. . . as a matter of fact, I believe as you do, that the people of Vermont are pretty near the tail-enders of a procession of stoop-shouldered, leaden shod, pilgrims whose progress across the horizon is so slow, that the last man (your banking client across the street) will get badly bumped by the setting sun, if he doesn't mind his pace. . . . Give me a really clever crook or an optimistic gold brick man in preference to a virtuous snail, anytime.²⁷

Evalyn concurred in Walter's decision to leave. While she loved the life and the house they had built together, she recognized her husband's discontent: all his early joy and enthusiasm seemed to be drained away. The couple was childless. Evalyn had lavished a maternal affection on her flowers and on the comfortable, cluttered late-Victorian interior of her house, lovingly recording the progress of the garden or a change in decoration with all the care given a first child's baby book. She loved their summer vacation trips to the mountains and Christmases with all the family together, but she would happily put them aside, with

²⁵W. R. B. Willcox to Charles E. White, Jr., October 21, 1906, WRBW.

²⁶W. R. B. Willcox to Charles E. White, Jr., October 21, 1906, WRBW.

²⁷Charles E. White, Jr., to W. R. B. Willcox, October 30, 1906, WRBW.

scarcely a second thought, for any move that would restore her husband's accustomed eagerness for life.

Once Willcox made the decision to leave New England, the question of where to go was paramount. White wanted him to come to Chicago. Willcox considered Atlanta and New Orleans. Then, returning to Burlington from a meeting with his Indianapolis clients, Willcox struck up a conversation with a salesman returning from Seattle whose enthusiasm for the place was infectious. Willcox felt their encounter was prophetic, and he decided to investigate Seattle at first hand. His friends in New England were appalled that he would even consider the place. If Chicago was the edge of civilization, Seattle was beyond the pale. His friend, Frank Waugh, who taught horticulture in the building Willcox had designed for the Amherst campus, tried to dissuade him.

I have fully arrived at the conviction that this economic, intellectual and moral atmosphere is much to be preferred to that of the west. . . . I am certain that the atmosphere of Seattle, or any other western city, is not artistic, that it does not tend to develop the artistic instinct, and that there is very little recognition on any hand of artistic merit.²⁸

Then, more in resignation than dissuasion, he added:

God knows Seattle needs you. I honestly think you could do humanity more good there than any preacher who could be sent there. It would be an inspiring undertaking, too, to try to educate a crude and uncivilized people to some appreciation of art. . . . Perhaps there are some good people there. There were a few even in Sodom at its worst.²⁹

Even his western friend, Charles White, was not convinced Seattle was the place to go. ". . . someone must do the missionary work, and it

²⁸Frank Waugh to W. R. B. Willcox, November, 1906, WRBW.

²⁹Ibid.

may be the country is growing so rapidly, that they need, already, good men to show them how to spend their fast accumulating wealth, along truly (sic) ideal art lines. . . . Several people have told me that Portland is a much more refined community than Seattle. It has had (and is having) a normal, healthy growth, and is settled by a finer class of people. Seattle is more of a 'boom town.'"³⁰

Willcox left for a whirlwind tour of the city in November, 1906, simply to confirm his conviction that his meeting with the salesman on the train was a sign and that he had received a call to Seattle. He was excited by the possibilities for growth and described the evidences of civilization he found there.

The most unexpected impression on me was that of the general atmosphere which does not strike me as "western" as Chicago, or other places in the middle west. The people are from all over the country and are a genuinely cosmopolitan lot. . . . All that surprised me because I was expecting to find the superficial appearance of things on the "wild and woolly" order.³¹

He noted evidences of "Eastern" refinement in some of the buildings and was pleased at the number of good restaurants he found. Summing up the bright prospects for his future in Seattle, he wrote White:

". . . granted its commercial atmosphere, it is coming along otherwise, and at least there is business doing there in large proportions And . . . I would rather take my chances for business in a kindergarten than in a cemetery."³²

³⁰Charles White to W. R. B. Willcox, October 30, 1906, WRBW.

³¹W. R. B. Willcox to Frank Waugh, December 7, 1906, WRBW.

³²W. R. B. Willcox to Charles E. White, Jr., November 11, 1906, WRBW.

³³W. R. B. Willcox to William Seward, January 14, 1907, WRBW.

It took him the better part of a year to close his practice and sell his house in Burlington. He and Evalyn took the Grand Tour of Europe, accompanied by his mother, during the summer, and then, in the fall of 1907, moved to Seattle. They left a comfortable home, a successful practice, family, and friends because he ". . . found that enthusiasm has been oozing away these last years and that must be stopped, at least until I have added more years to my life. I want to get where larger things are doing and take a chance at getting my share: I may fall down completely, but if I do, I will have made a fight and that is something worthwhile."³³

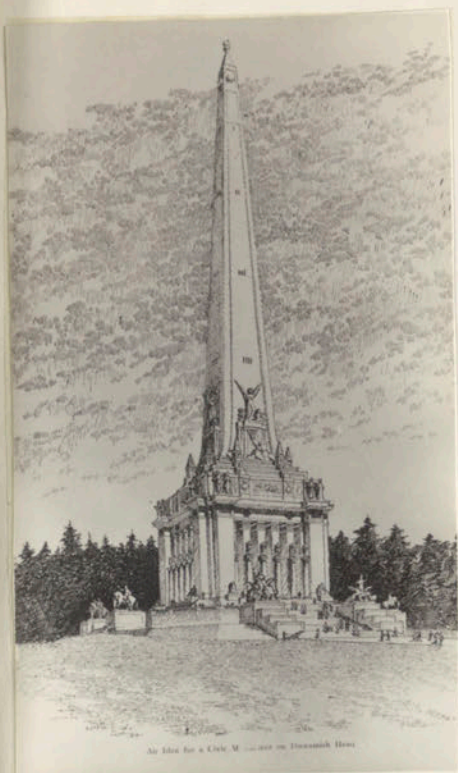
³³W. R. B. Willcox to William Sayward, January 16, 1907, WRBW.

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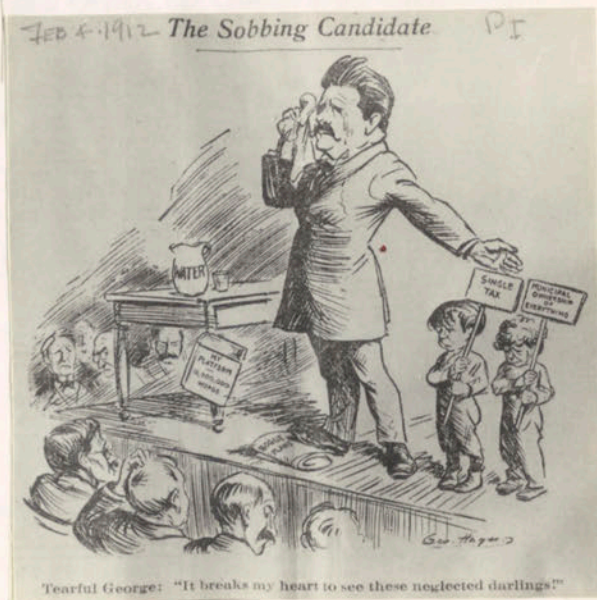


CIVIC CENTER GROUP, LOOKING SOUTH
ON CENTRAL AVENUE, SEATTLE, WASH.

Photograph 4
Projected Civic Center for Seattle, 1911.



An idea for a City Monument on Duane Park Hill.



Tearful George: "It breaks my heart to see these neglected darlings!"

Photograph 5
Projected monument, designed by Willcox, for the Civic Center, 1911.

Photograph 6
George Cotterill, candidate for mayor and opponent of the Plan, cartooned in the Post-Intelligencer, February 4, 1912.

Chapter 3

SEATTLE: THE CITY PLAN

When Willcox arrived in Seattle he found a city of exuberant self-confidence and optimism in spite of the depression that followed the panic of 1907. The newspapers looked toward a future of unbounded expansion and unlimited opportunity. The depression seemed a minor and temporary blemish on an otherwise rosy picture. Seattleites felt a pressing need to prepare for the increased tonnage they assumed would be clearing their ports as soon as the Panama Canal was opened. Most important, as the terminus of the Great Northern Railroad, Seattle confidently awaited an influx of immigrants and capital from the East. Seattle businessmen were quick to pre-empt and expand plans for an exposition celebrating Seattle's commercial potential, first proposed by a group of Alaska's gold rush pioneers in 1905. In 1906, an exposition corporation was formed, and, in a burst of enthusiasm, its organizers contemplated including ". . . all the countries bordering upon the Pacific Ocean, including the islands of the sea."³⁴

The Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition was one of several trade fairs that proliferated in the wake of the success of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. James J. Hill, who brought the Great Northern to Seattle and who opened the Exposition, promised: "The future belongs to

³⁴George A. Frykman, "The Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, 1909," Pacific Northwest Quarterly, LIII (July, 1962), p. 89.

you. Secure in the advantage of location, yet laying hold of the larger national heritage, you can indulge no ambition too high, no faith too certain, no hope too great."³⁵ Seattle businessmen hoped the fair would lure Eastern investment capital and, like the Chicago Exposition 15 years earlier, dispel the conviction among Easterners that the Westerner was: ". . . a flamboyant individual, loud in his self-assertion, arrogant, and grasping. . . careless of art as of law. . . in fine, a crude, goodsouled, but noisy giant, with an ineffable local conceit and no sense of proportion."³⁶ It is questionable whether the commercial and cultural aspirations of the fair were realized. While it did return a four percent dividend to its stockholders, a feat unprecedented in the history of American world's fairs, the exposition was largely regional in influence.³⁷

The enthusiasm generated by the fair did, however, provide the impetus for the development of a comprehensive city plan, just as the Chicago Exposition in 1893 laid the ground-work for a Chicago city plan and the subsequent book, Plan of Chicago, published in 1909.³⁸ On October 16, 1909, the president of the Seattle exposition, Joseph E. Chilberg, "threw a switch" and wiped "the fairy city. . . from the map of Seattle."³⁹ Within two weeks, Cass Gilbert, president of the American Institute of Architects, addressed the Washington state chapter of that organization at a banquet given in his honor. Willcox had given Gilbert a tour of the

³⁵James J. Hill, Address Delivered at the Opening of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (Seattle, June 1, 1909), p. 24.

³⁶Frykman, p. 89.

³⁷Ibid., p. 99.

³⁸Mel Scott, pp. 103-104.

³⁹Seattle Post-Intelligencer, October 17, 1909, WRBW. Hereinafter cited P. I.

city and the exposition grounds that afternoon. At the banquet that evening, Gilbert suggested that the architects spearhead a drive for a comprehensive city plan for Seattle. Newspapers and businessmen, as well as architects, responded with enthusiasm. Commenting editorially upon the "great daily waste of human and animal labor and of fuel" that an inconvenient and unplanned city causes, the Post-Intelligencer added:

The people here ought now to consider the need of a more definite and more convenient plan for the city. Delay will merely increase the cost of doing what Seattle must finally do Why not take up the question of planning a civic center? It will pay to do it now.⁴⁰

Planning was not new to Seattle. In 1893, engineers presented a plan to develop the waterfront that would eventually provide 150 miles of port facilities. A massive regrading program in the first decade of the twentieth century removed a hill to provide level land for commercial development. In 1903, John C. and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the best landscape architects in the country, had provided Seattle with a park and boulevard plan.⁴¹ The plan Gilbert suggested, however, would include all aspects of city development in one comprehensive plan. Willcox embraced the idea wholeheartedly.

Despite the official optimism of a city with a burgeoning population, Willcox's practice limped along in a state of chronic depression. The few commissions he had received were for residences. Aside from acute

⁴⁰P. I., November 1, 1909, WRBW.

⁴¹Herbert Croly, "The Building of Seattle: A City of Great Architectural Promise," Architectural Record (July, 1912), pp. 1-20. Philip R. Kellar, "Washing Away a City's Hills." World Today, XIX (July, 1910), pp. 703-708. Dorothy A. Johansen and Charles M. Gates, Empire of the Columbia (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 509-510, 515-518.

financial embarrassment, the enforced idleness drove both Willcox and his partner, William Sayward, to distraction. Sayward was particularly impatient. ". . . small houses as a steady diet are beginning to get on my nerves. . . . We have two more fine fat prospects but that seems to be about as far as they get with us."⁴² Sayward was an aggressive and ambitious man. A former draftsman in Willcox's Burlington office, he was designing for the famous firm of McKim, Mead, and White when Willcox decided to move to Seattle. Willcox needed a partner. Sayward convinced him he was the man. Now, with a notable lack of tact, he searched for a way to escape a relationship that had not proved as beneficial as he had hoped. He returned east in 1911 to care for an ailing father. He never came back to Seattle, though Willcox retained his name on the letterhead of the firm until 1914.

While Sayward fumed, Willcox prepared a scheme for the formation of a Municipal Plans Commission that he presented to a special meeting of architects and businessmen on January 28, 1910.⁴³ The Post-Intelligencer waxed eloquent over the inherent potential of the Municipal Plans Commission. ". . . beauty is as much a valuable municipal asset as business. Seattle . . . can be made a beautiful city; its beauty should develop with its business, and citizens and officials of all classes should help in the work."⁴⁴

⁴²William Sayward to Ellis Lawrence, June 15, 1909. Ellis Lawrence papers, University of Oregon Library, Eugene. Hereinafter cited EL.

⁴³Seattle Times, January 29, 1910, WRBW.

⁴⁴p. I., February 23, 1910, WRBW.

The conjunction of Progressive intentions and city planners' assumptions concerning the nature of the city are expressed in the

Pacific Builder and Engineer:

The American Architect, in bringing out some of the points emphasized in the City Planning Congress, recently held in Washington, states that the economical rather than the esthetic side of the problem received the major portion of the deliberations. . . . Another expression of the congress was that one of the main features responsible for most of the ills resulting from congested living in the big cities is the present system of taxation.

Instead of having private land owners take the unearned increment in the land values as private profits, it was suggested that the city itself should take at least part of the increased value of land and use these profits for the public improvements. . . . It was the sentiment of at least a part of the convention that slums exist because there are profits for somebody in compelling people to live in slums.

. . . The justification of this plan lies in the assumption that since the city has given the property its increased value, the city has a perfect right to acquire part of this value in taxation.⁴⁵

This use of Henry George's single-tax concept seemed, to most of the leaders in the city planning movement, the logical land reform necessary to the successful completion of a city plan. Three single tax proposals would be included on the ballot in Seattle at the same time the completed plans were submitted to the voters in 1912.⁴⁶

A committee composed of architects, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Commercial Club prepared a charter amendment creating a Municipal Plans

⁴⁵Pacific Builder and Engineer, January 26, 1910, WRBW.

⁴⁶The Erickson Amendment, the Griffiths Amendment, and a limited Single Tax Amendment proposed by the Chamber of Commerce. The Griffiths Amendment: 25 percent exemption of building improvements first year and progress to full single tax in four years. The Erickson Amendment: exempt all building improvements at once.

Commission. The amendment appeared on the ballot in the spring election. Membership in the proposed Commission, as provided in the charter, purported to represent all the interests of the city, again reflecting the predominantly commercial outlook of the city.⁴⁷ Representatives from official city bodies included three members of the City Council, one from the Board of Public Works, one from the Board of Education, one from the Park Board, one from the County Commissioners, and one from each of 14 special interest groups within the city. Of these 14 special interest groups, only two represented labor interests. The rest, with the exception of the Pacific Northwest Society of Engineers, the American Institute of Architects, and the Bar Association, represented commercial or real estate interests.

Willcox, as secretary of the Seattle Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, spoke at a variety of luncheon clubs and interest groups to enlist voters in support of the proposed amendment. Again and again he emphasized the commercial utility of a city plan and the aesthetic assumption that beauty and utility are one.

⁴⁷Members of the Commission and the organizations they represented were: R. H. Thomson, chairman, Board of Public Works; J. J. Heffernan, Board of Park Commissioners; M. J. Carrigan, Board of County Commissioners; Edmund Bowden, Board of School Directors; W. H. Murphy, Frank P. Mullen, Max Wardall, City Councilmen; R. H. Ober, Northwest Society of Civil Engineers; W. R. B. Willcox, Washington state chapter, A.I.A.; C. J. Smith, Seattle Chamber of Commerce; J. D. Jones, Seattle Commercial Club; Henry Drum, Seattle Manufacturers Association; W. L. Onstott, Central Labor Council; Judge C. H. Hanford, Seattle Bar Association; George Littlefield, Seattle Real Estate Association; M. R. Hogg, Carpenter's Union; Kenneth Mackintosh, Waterfront Owner's Association; James Anderson, steam railroad companies; J. C. Ford, marine transportation companies; Norwood W. Brockett, street railroad companies; J. W. Maxwell, Seattle clearing house.

Charter Amendment Number Eight strikes me as one to which no one who informs himself in respect to its provisions can object. It would seem calculated to satisfy the longings both of those who desire the so-called "city beautiful" and those to whom a "city business" about which we have heard somewhat during the present political campaign, is the disideratum [sic].

Certainly it is a businesslike proposition for Seattle to prepare far in advance of actual needs for the exigencies of a tremendously growing population. . . . Direct routing of traffic throughout the entire city, unimpeded by difficult grades and time consuming congestion at focal points, means the release, in the aggregate, of an enormous amount of time and energy to profitable industry, as does also the simplification of methods of freight handling.⁴⁸

In a burst of enthusiasm, Willcox would deliver his peroration:

A haphazard, piecemeal growth of a city defeats economy, efficiency, and uniform contentment, while a systematic ensemble, encompassing the convenience, comfort and pleasure of its citizens, makes for all these things and results in a city from which those who have prospered largely do not hasten nor those less fortunate long to depart, an experience common to more than one of America's great, rapidly growing cities. New York and Chicago, because of a Topsylike growth, now suffer probably the most indecent and wasteful traffic congestion of any cities in Christendom.⁴⁹

The first objection to Charter Amendment Number Eight appeared within a week after it was proposed. Willcox addressed a meeting of the Queen Anne Improvement Club and left before he could hear objections both to the expense of the plans and the club's lack of representation on the planning board. He should have stayed. The Queen Anne Improvement Club formed the nucleus of the opposition that ultimately defeated the plan. For the time being, however, dissent came from disorganized small voices. Charter Amendment Number Eight, establishing a Municipal Plans Commission, passed handily in the spring election.

⁴⁸p. I., February 16, 1910, WRBW.

⁴⁹Ibid.

Willcox was nominated by the Washington state chapter of the American Institute of Architects, along with Carl F. Gould, a Seattle architect who later became head of the Department of Architecture at the University of Washington, to represent the Institute on the newly formed Commission. Hiram C. Gill, the mayor of Seattle, was to appoint one of the two men nominated. Before he could do so, a member of the Queen Anne Improvement Club filed a restraining order, charging that the charter amendment was unconstitutional. The Post-Intelligencer dismissed the injunction editorially. "The application for the restraining order rests upon broad organic grounds, and it is not likely that the court will experience much trouble in disposing of the issue. Legal interference with the appointment of the work of the Municipal Plans Commission will be regretted by the people of the city. Citizens of Seattle voted for the Municipal Plans Charter Amendment with intelligence, unusual interest and enthusiasm, because they fully realized the importance of the measure and its rather intimate relation to the future of the city."⁵⁰

The Post-Intelligencer was right. The injunction was disposed of quickly and Hiram Gill appointed the members nominated by the various interest groups. Willcox was chosen to represent the A.I.A., and Reginald Heber Thomson, the controversial city engineer, was chosen as the temporary chairman of the Commission.⁵¹

Kenneth Mackintosh, appointed by the mayor to represent the Water-front Owners' Association, was subsequently named permanent chairman of the Commission. This appointment may have been made to allay the fears

⁵⁰P. I., April 14, 1910, WRBW.

⁵¹P. I., May 5, 1910, WRBW.

of waterfront interests who were opposed to a \$17,000,000 sea-wall project proposed by the city engineer. Property owners all over the city were suspicious of Thomson. His broadgauged and ambitious plans for Seattle had already literally moved mountains. He had sluiced 5,000,000 cubic yards of earth into the tidelands in the interest of moving traffic through the business district economically, thus "regrading" Denny Hill. Another 3,000,000 cubic feet of earth had been removed as the Municipal Plans Commission was being formed. As the city engineer for 18 years, Thomson had extraordinary power under the city charter, and he exercised it. He had secured the city's water supply, supported a municipal lighting system, built the city's sewer system, and advocated the construction of a municipal railway system. The Times suggested a sinister connection between his position of power and James J. Hill's franchises in the city. That newspaper, unfriendly to Thomson, referred to him as the "Brains of the Administration" and went on to describe him as "quiet, secretive, diplomatic, taciturn, smiling, obliging, indifferent, masterful or disdainful, according to his mood and his purpose. He never swears nor loses his temper. The big things he does are under his breath - in the secret conclave of the private office with men who control millions in property or money. The public never knows the inside facts. Yet Thomson has never been accused of dishonesty."⁵² While Thomson had never been accused of dishonesty, the mistrust generated by the power he wielded remained. The Commission was empowered, by the terms of the

⁵²Seattle Times, May 12, 1907. Reprinted in Grant H. Redford, ed., That Man Thomson (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1950), p. 5.

Charter, to find an out-of-town expert, an engineer whose interests would be unquestionably professional. On September 1, 1910, the Commission selected Virgil Bogue to prepare a plan so comprehensive that it would accommodate a projected population of one million and cover an area of 150 square miles.

Virgil Bogue had worked in Seattle before. He had planned the Seattle waterfront and tide-land area with Thomson in 1893 and 1894. He had built railroads across the Andes in Chile and Peru. He discovered Stampede Pass in the Cascades for the Northern Pacific and had been the chief engineer for the Union Pacific. While he had been involved in the plans for bridges, harbors, terminals, and docks, his special interest was railroads.⁵³ His selection by the Commission over John C. Olmsted, the landscape architect and the other candidate for the position, reflects both the direction the city plan was to take and the pervasive influence of R. H. Thomson.

The Municipal Plans Commission presented the completed plan for the city of Seattle to the City Council on September 30, 1911. It was clear that Seattleites were preparing to change their wild and woolly image with a vengeance. Hiram Gill, elected on an "open city" ticket in December, 1910, was recalled six months later, and the city, bent on reform, was prepared to show the world it, too, could be beautiful. The plan, unlike most civic plans of the time, was primarily concerned with engineering solutions to transportation problems centered on harbor development, arterial highways, and a variety of rail transportation, including a rapid

⁵³New York Financial World, August 6, 1910, WRBW.

transit system. It was an impressive work, rivalling the Plan of Chicago in its scope. The report emphasized port and waterfront development, with almost half the text and 16 of the 19 maps covering this phase of the plan.⁵⁴

The section that caught the public fancy, though, was the Civic Center, a popular feature of city plans during this period. The concentration of public buildings in one place seemed an efficient and economical way to deal with the problem of acquiring property with the smallest amount of speculative profit. Too, it seemed that it would be easier to keep an eye on public officials if they were all together. Most important, it provided a monumental way of showing the public where its money was going. Perfunctory attention was paid the buildings, which were more suggestive than completed designs. They were pie-shaped to conform to the star-shaped pattern of the boulevards radiating from the middle. The boulevard opening to the west and the waterfront was to have an imposing water gate "where our own notables and representatives of foreign nations may be received in honorable state."⁵⁵ To the north, another boulevard connected the railroad stations to the Civic Center. Clearly, visitors to Seattle would be impressed with an efficient and well-run city.

Five hundred copies of the Report of the Municipal Plans Commission, a formidable and turgid volume, were printed so citizens could familiarize themselves with the details of the plans before going to the polls in March when they would vote on adopting the plan. The Post-Intelligencer

⁵⁴Charles Mulford Robinson, "Planning for Seattle's Future: A Review of the Report," Architectural Record, XXXI (February, 1912), pp. 164-170.
⁵⁵p. I., September 3, 1911, WRBW.

ran a series of 17 articles explicating the plan to the public. The Times, not to be outdone, commented waspishly: "As there were but five hundred copies published - and as not one man in one thousand would find the opportunity to read the same even if a greater number had been published - the public are remaining in ignorance of what that report contains."⁵⁶ The Times went on to publish a concise review of the entire report in a Sunday supplement.

Willcox sent the ten copies of the Report allotted him to his friends in the East. He was awestruck at what the Municipal Plans Commission had done and was proud of the part he played in their accomplishment. He wrote to C. H. A. Wager, an English teacher at Oberlin College and a boyhood friend:

As for myself, the book I sent you contains the results of much of my work the past year. Just for your own benefit I want to tell you what parts of the book I turned out myself. I shall be interested to have you know not, however, because of any literary merit, I assure you, but such as it is I did it. The Commission delegated me to prepare its own report which is in the front of the book. The "Introduction" I wrote, but it was afterwards, at the last minute, revised and cut down by Mr. Bogue so that, as he says, it is neither his nor mine. The chapter on "Civic Center," "Playgrounds," "Height of Buildings" and a few paragraphs at the opening of "Municipal Decoration" are as I left them. The suggestive sketch for the "Civic Monument" I made in a few days while the forms were held open for it. While unstudied it may interest you to know I did it, if you fail to discover my initials in the corner.

I imagine I shall never have to do with a greater project, nor one whose results may be as far reaching. It has been glorious fun and gives one the pleasurable sensation of having been connected with something worthwhile. The campaign for its adoption is just beginning and before it goes to the people for a vote next March there will be lots more work in connection with it but of a different sort. Wouldn't you smile to see me haranguing

⁵⁶Times, November 19, 1911, WRBW.

the Populace in the supposed interest of, as the Sun used to have it, the "Peepul"?⁵⁷

He reaffirmed an innocent confidence in the democratic process in a letter to Frank Waugh.

We still have the task of getting the voters to accept and adopt it as their plan, and while selfish interests are out against it, we have a strong force ready to campaign for it which fight is just about ready to be entered upon. I have faith that it will carry; I cannot believe that our people can defeat it. They have shown remarkable intelligence in the past (within my experience) in voting upon important measures, and the adoption of this report will mean so much, not only for the long future of the city but in a more immediate way by its advertising value, a thing your normal Seattleite is keen on, that I expect to see it carry. Such an act would place the city well to the fore as an example of civic alertness and wisdom.⁵⁸

While his confidence in the wisdom of "the people" seemed complete, he had intimations of the gathering opposition, the "selfish interests," and some suggestion of the direction their attack would take. Hiram Pratt, a realtor and self-proclaimed "Madison to Mercer Specialist,"⁵⁹ had sounded the alarm after one of Willcox's summertime slide lectures, before the report had been submitted. "It is absolutely certain. . . that the citizens of the North End will not approve any plan which directly or INDIRECTLY will result in the filling in of the North Shore of Lake Union. . . ." ⁶⁰ he wrote Willcox, enclosing a petition "To the Taxpayers of the North End." The petition warns darkly against possible regrades, soliciting signatures from North End citizens to be sent to the "Taxpayers League" of which Hiram Pratt appeared to be president.

⁵⁷W. R. B. Willcox to C. H. A. Wager, November 16, 1911, WRBW.

⁵⁸W. R. B. Willcox to Frank Waugh, October 27, 1911, WRBW.

⁵⁹Madison marked the northern extension of the business district while Mercer, farther north, defined the northern limit of the city.

Clearly, he saw himself as the spokesman for North End interests.

⁶⁰Hiram Pratt to W. R. B. Willcox, October 27, 1911, WRBW.

Willcox had replied to Mr. Pratt carefully and at length and had hoped the matter was settled.⁶¹ As he mailed off copies of the Report, optimistically predicting success in the March election, his private fears are revealed in fragmentary journal notes.

Nov. 10, 1911

Talked to Raymond Wright today about Cotterill's talk at Woodland Park Improvement Club. Cotterill thinks no need of adopting report officially; no city has done so; C.C. Civic Center is in wrong place; center should be on axis of 5th Ave; too great cost; would cloud titles. . . .

McMorris a member of the Plans Commission said meeting at University Club was "monkey and parrot" time with Goddard City Councilman opposed to plan there misrepresenting matters as usual. . . .

Spoke this evening at Longfellow School to small number on the Plans.

Nov. 14, 1911

Cotterill's letter in P.I. opposing Plans. Phoned Alden, Wright, Claussen, Baker and Hoffeditz on that subject. Cotterill's position is somewhat inexplicable except he wishes to attract attention.

V.B. Virgil Bogue called in P.M. Says Cotterill told him he liked the C.C. Says, after a talk with R.H.T. R. H. Thomson on phone that latter said the only thing to do is to let C. "blow off."⁶²

George Cotterill, former assistant to City Engineer Thomson, had just declared his candidacy for mayor on a platform of "radical reform." He supported a single-tax amendment (Erickson Amendment) and municipal

⁶¹Willcox assured Pratt the plan did not threaten Lake Union, and required regrades would be minimal. Adoption of the plan would in no way commit the taxpayer to immediate assessments, and proposed improvements would be undertaken only when citizens of the North End were ready for them. With the example of Denny Hill fresh in their memories, however, residents around Queen Anne Hill, in the heart of the North End, were understandably nervous lest their hill, too, be sluiced out of the way.

⁶²Journal fragments, WRBW.

ownership, and he was to be the opposition's most eloquent spokesman. His attack was clever. He did not reject the plan. Indeed, he thought it "splendid." However, "Seattle is not so poorly clad that we must needs officially vote upon ourselves something which would prove a veritable 'Shirt of Nessus.' Neither is our city so ill-proportioned or in such danger of deformity of growth that we need any 'Procrustean bed' as a standard by which to stretch or slash ourselves to assure proper development."⁶³

Cutting through the rhetoric, what Cotterill opposed was official adoption of the plan. He argued that the plan should be kept as suggestive but that the city should not commit itself, legally and irrevocably, to it. His argument seemed reasonable. It had wide appeal, and it opened the door for future piecemeal development, the very thing the plan was designed to avoid. Cotterill's earlier association with Thomson lent credence to his engineering expertise. He hinted darkly that some unnecessary regrades were contained in the plan. The Times was delighted. No friend of Thomson, the paper, too, opposed the plan and embraced Cotterill's candidacy. "R. H. Thomson arrived with the appearance of steam shovels in Seattle but he will retire with the rejection of the Civic Center Plans. . . . The people propose to get to the bottom of this civic plans movement, notwithstanding the bulky volume, the scarcity of copies and the monumental task of ferreting out just what the Commission is trying to foist upon the taxpayers of Seattle.

When the voters go to the polls they cannot be blamed for voting against

⁶³P. I., letter to the editor from George Cotterill, December 26, 1911,

the scheme - which action will be a good and effective way of settling it. There is nothing quite like a smashing blow in the forehead to level an ox that offers itself for beef."⁶⁴

Willcox worked doggedly on the campaign. "Once or twice a week from now until March I'll unload eloquence (?) on the patient public. There are others in the same business. I take my little bunch of slides and give the folks a picture show. That doubtless makes you smile, and I don't blame you; it does me when I stop to think about it."⁶⁵ He answered objections carefully and thoughtfully; still the opposition mounted. He wrote to Bogue in January. ". . . Cotterill. . . is so misrepresenting the report, misquoting in such a bald fashion, that, while it takes some time, he can be easily controverted, as you are aware. . . . I have tried to show up his careless (?) handling of the report but from past experience it is a question whether or not it

[Willcox's letter controverting Cotterill] will be published."⁶⁶

The Times disagreed with Willcox. "George F. Cotterill is performing a distinct service to the people of Seattle in exposing the ruinous tendency of the Bogue Plans. . . . He has met and vanquished that champion of regrades - former City Engineer R. H. Thomson - and he has clinched his argument by showing that rejection of the Bogue Plan at the polls March 5 does not mean that some of the good ideas contained therein may not be used."⁶⁷ Willcox and the other members of the Plans Commission and the

⁶⁴Times, December 21, 1911, WRBW.

⁶⁵W. R. B. Willcox to William Englesby, November 20, 1911, WRBW.

⁶⁶W. R. B. Willcox to Virgil Bogue, January 23, 1912, WRBW.

⁶⁷Times, January 25, 1912, WRBW.

Washington state chapter of the A.I.A. repeated their assurances endlessly and variously. Queen Anne Hill would not be destroyed. Adoption of the plan would not mean an expenditure of \$100,000,000. It didn't help. The seeds of suspicion were sown.

The meat in the cocanut (sic) of the opposition is the notion of the heavy property owners in the business district that the improvements planned provide for relief of the congested area and that means spoiling a monopoly of business area for them from which they gather exorbitant rents and therefore they are out to kill it. They are organized and have the money which is being spent in a volume of printed matter, circulars, etc., and in paid speakers and all that; their work is directed by the Building Manager's Association but they know the effect on the public if they came out under such a name so they formed themselves into a committee of the whole, as it were, and issue their printed matter as "The Civic Plans Investigation Committee," which certainly has a non-partisan flavor.⁶⁸

Once the issues were stated and sides taken, much heat and very little light was generated in the final days of the campaign. The Times seemed most intent upon destroying R. H. Thomson through opposition to the Plan. The Civic Plans Investigation Committee simply kept alive rumors of regrade and assessment which the Plans Commission repeatedly attempted to lay to rest. One desperate taxpayer managed to bring together all the threads of opposition in this bit of Holmesian doggerel:

Aye, tear the city inside out,
 And turn her upside down!
 We want a Civic Center
 In this good old Potlatch Town!
 We've won the wonder of the world
 With Thomson for our mentor;
 But what's a world metropolis
 Without a Civic Center!

⁶⁸W. R. B. Willcox to Frank Elliott, January 12, 1912, WRBW.

We want arterial highways
 In our Civic Center plan,
 That radiate to everywhere,
 Converging like a fan;
 When Bogue regrade assessments
 Their batteries unlimber
 They will give our population
 Short cuts for tallest timber.

Seattle hasn't streets enough,
 She's hampered by her highways
 She needs new angling avenues,
 New slant arterial byways;
 Her old square-corner thoroughfares
 Seattle has outgrown.
 She must have a star-like center
 Scintillation all her own.

Why hesitate that proud Queen Anne
 Is standing in the way?
 Did we not demolish Denny Hill
 And dump it in the Bay?
 No, nothing shall deter us,
 Neither waters, dales, nor hills,
 As long as our dear people
 Don's refuse to pay the bills.

We are building for the future,
 "Building better than we know,"
 And, in planning for that future,
 Prudence, common sense must go.
 Come along, then, Mr. Voter,
 Mark your ballot like a man,
 Saddle on your children's children
 This Bogue Civic Center Plan.

Aye! tear the city inside out,
 And turn her upside down!
 We want a Civic Center
 In this good old Potlatch Town;
 We've stood for slides, for shattered dams,
 For regrades, for recall -
 Let's carry through the biggest
 Baddest, boldest plan of all!⁶⁹

⁶⁹Times, letter to the editor signed Richard F. Marwood, Taxpayer,
 February 4, 1912, WRBW.

Chapter 4

THE TRANSITION FROM EASTERNER TO WESTERNER

On March 5, 1912, George F. Cotterill was elected mayor, and the plan was defeated. The election results were clear to Willcox. "Several things led to that defeat, the main underlying reason being that the people did not understand what a 'City Plan' meant - what it is for - what it would do; consequently, they were easy subjects for selfish interest to influence adversely which, I think, is a condition prevalent throughout our country, wherever city planning is to be undertaken."⁷⁰ This dispassionate statement, part of a nine-page analysis of the campaign for the Bogue Plan and its ultimate defeat gives little indication of the profound effect his work on the Commission and the results of the election had upon Willcox.

He had come to Seattle in 1907 as a successful businessman, a Roosevelt Republican convinced that hard work and earnest effort would make him an even more successful businessman. As the campaign for the adoption of the plan was getting under way he wrote his older brother who lived in England:

Our business has been just about enough to carry us along. . . . There are a bunch of architects hereabouts who are skating on similarly thin ice; it is not due to lack of ability but simply the depression of the panic which struck the world in 1907. . . . All that is necessary is to stop taxing a man who builds or produces anything else that is

⁷⁰W. R. B. Willcox to Ellis Lawrence, June 5, 1912, WRBW.

useful and tax the land he pleases to hold and call his own till he either has to part with it or use it. . . . When that is fixed we will see the end of conditions in which the property owner - those who own the earth - may not sit in the midst of plenty while the rank and file are in want and distress.

The church continues to expound the doctrine that the "earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" but the real estate owner has worked a change which the church has not discovered, and the real estate contingent are today the strong supporters of the church and are the people who see that the saying "the poor ye have always with you" continues to hold good. . . . don't think from my harangue that I am embittered; I am just calling the great bluff we call civilization and Christianity. . . . Few men have greater belief in God and his righteousness. It is because of that that I keep up my courage. If this world's mess was to me inexplicable: if I had to content myself with the notion that everything is the way it should be and that the ways of Providence are simply so inexplicable that we cannot understand them and that He, in His infinite wisdom intended it should be so in order to build up our faith and patience, why I should go the limit of agnosticism. But I don't believe anything of the sort. I believe there is a social law of God just as clean, just as sure acting, just as demonstrable as any other law of His, be it physical, chemical, electrical or other. The earth was intended for the use of mankind - all men - and was never intended for the sole use of some men. When some men own it, all others are in the position of slaves. . . .⁷¹

His practice had not prospered in the way he expected, and his attitude toward businessmen, the role of the architect in society, and the nature of "success" had undergone a fundamental change in those five years. His religious background converged with his progressive politics and his single-tax sympathies to produce a social gospel outlook.

His resentment at the state of his practice inspired an inquiry into the economics of land tenure. The defeat of the Plan convinced him

⁷¹W. R. B. Willcox to Arthur M. Willcox, November 13, 1911, WRBW.

that comprehensive city planning would fail unless preceded by a fundamental change in land tenure and taxation.

While Sayward, chafing at their continued inactivity, finally returned to the East and an Eastern friend felt "as if I were having a correspondence with a soul on the last verge and limbo of the world,"⁷² Willcox's commitment to Seattle was complete. "For myself I enjoy being in the midst of the building of a city. Naturally there is much that is rough and crude, undeveloped, but if it were not so there wouldn't be anything to do. Here is a slate practically clean and the making of a great city well is something to engage the interest and enthusiasm of - at least - the average architect. The crudity disappears from month to month; even since my advent the whole character of sections has been changed."⁷³ He was writing to an old golfing partner, a doctor in Burlington. "Interesting situations are constantly arising and the ordinary citizen gets mixed up in things much more than he does in the older communities. . . . I suppose it comes about because just about everybody is a recent arrival, in comparison with residents of older cities. . . . I. . . have never met up with a place where so many men . . . are constantly giving of their time to purely altruistic service Personally I have been more than fortunate in being drafted into service of one sort or another; why, I can't say, but I have been happy in it. . . . so goes life; how different from that of only a few years ago. Sometimes I feel like an entirely different person."⁷⁴

⁷²C. H. A. Wager to W. R. B. Willcox, April 2, 1908, WRBW.

⁷³W. R. B. Willcox to William Englesby, November 20, 1911, WRBW.

⁷⁴Ibid.

His mode of life, as well as his state of mind, changed. In December, 1911, Willcox moved with Evalyn and her sister, Edna Porter, to a cabin on Mercer Island in Lake Washington. "It is a weird sort of life, at work in the city and yet living in something approaching wilderness. The forest of firs begins at the shed door and continues up the hill in its primeval state."⁷⁵ The sharply sloping site precluded a lawn, and their garden became informal paths through the wild flowers. Evalyn planted seeds she had dried and saved from her garden in Burlington. The cottage he designed and built was of tongue-in-groove planks, shingled and left to weather. With two bedrooms upstairs and a kitchen, laundry room, dining room, and living room downstairs, the place was small enough to be heated by a large stone fireplace. Splitting and sawing wood took the place of golf for exercise and recreation. He was delighted, and astonished at his delight, with his role of semi-pioneer. "Many people here, you know, live after this fashion either on the Lake or the Sound though a lot of them seem satisfied - as I confess I wouldn't - with little board shacks, no water or proper sewage systems. Consequently, our change is not looked upon as eccentric, as it doubtless would be in other parts of the world."⁷⁶ The carefully tailored, proper, and prosperous young businessman from Burlington had disappeared. ". . . you should see me in my regalia: corduroy breeches and canvas jacket! At sight of me you would be inclined to draw your trusty steel in self-defense . . . My frau and her sister have both learned to swim this past summer, which is good so long as they are not placed in a

⁷⁵W. R. B. Willcox to Frank Elliott, January 12, 1912, WRBW.

⁷⁶Ibid.

position where they have got to swim to get out. . . . I have a little boat and go out astride the taffrail and get the seat of my trousers good and wet." Then he added, perhaps a little nostalgically, "I'll have to get back there one of these days or I will not know how to conduct myself in your rarified atmosphere."⁷⁷

Willcox was elected president of the Washington state chapter of the A.I.A. in November, 1911, and was re-elected the following November. "I hope I sufficiently appreciate the supposed honor but it is bought at a price, still I am glad to help along a good cause."⁷⁸ The deprecating tone is something of a pose. He loved the work. His closest friends were Chapter members: his social life and his working life were inseparable. Also, he hoped to use the Institute as an effective instrument for social change. The first step was to break the hold on the national A.I.A. held by Eastern conservatives and to obtain national recognition of Western "radical" chapters. Agitation for representation of the

Western contingent elected him to the Board of Directors of the national A.I.A. in 1913. "This professional recognition is a funny business. . . . There are twelve on the Board of Directors - three elected every year for three years - and here I am out in the Northwest corner of the country getting nominated from two of the biggest eastern chapters."⁷⁹ I don't know how it happens. The reason I speak of it is because it is all so foreign to anything that ever happened to me before and is all so much

⁷⁷W. R. B. Willcox to William Englesby, November 20, 1912, WRBW.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹New York and Philadelphia.



Photograph 7

Willcox house on Mercer Island, 1911. This house, when contrasted with his Burlington house on page eight, might lend credence to the idea of regionalism in architecture, if it were not compared with the monument on page 24, which was also designed in 1911 for the city of Seattle.



PORCH AND ENTRANCE FRONT RESIDENCE OF LEROY D. LEWIS, ENG. SEATTLE
WILCOX & SAWYARD ARCHITECTS

Photograph 8

L. D. Lewis residence, Seattle, 1913. This house, which appeared in the Architectural Record, is much more representative of Willcox's residential work in this period than his Mercer Island house. ("Portfolio of Current Architecture," Architectural Record, XXXVI (December, 1914), p. 362.)

the outcome of pure chance that it sounds like a huge joke for which I actually have a sort of feeling of shame that I should be a party to its perpetration."⁸⁰ While he didn't mention it, he had also been elected a Fellow of the Institute, the highest professional distinction, which he treated very lightly.

He was a peacemaker, a smoother of ruffled feathers, and was frequently called upon to arbitrate disputes between temperamental members in chapters all along the coast. It is a tribute to his talent as an adjudicator that opponents in the hottest debates regarded Willcox warmly and even, in some cases, lovingly. It was while arbitrating one such particularly nasty battle that his friendship with Ellis Lawrence, then an architect in Portland, developed. One of the members of the Portland chapter had accused another of malpractice, a fist fight ensued, and the Portland chapter demanded the resignation of the offending members. Willcox's decision in the matter is lost, but, as Lawrence wrote William Sayward: "Willcox won the affection of all the men present. I always liked him - probably because he was your partner, but these three days with him have made me think him one, if not the biggest, of all the men in the profession on the coast. I have never seen a man who had such splendid balance and poise."⁸¹

Willcox was as considerate and conciliatory with his clients as he was with his colleagues. He gave his careful attention to his client's smallest concern. If there was a disagreement over some design detail,

⁸⁰W. R. B. Willcox to William Englesby, December 3, 1913, WRBW.

⁸¹Ellis Lawrence to William Sayward, July 3, 1913, EL.

he would use gentle, humorous persuasion to win the client's concurrence. With the exception of his Mercer Island house, the buildings Willcox designed while in Seattle were like those he designed in Burlington, imitative rather than innovative. He was not consistent. The transition in his thinking, which he felt was from an Eastern point of view to a Western one, was best expressed in his writing and was not reflected in his architecture.

In 1914, when Lawrence opened the School of Architecture and Allied Arts at the University of Oregon in Eugene, he turned to Willcox to deliver the opening address to the students and faculty. Willcox felt there was an underlying "first principle" with architecture as with economics and with society. The purpose of an architectural education, then, was to help the student discover this principle and reveal this discovery in his design.

. . . the greatest indictment against our profession today seems to be that our own people are out of sympathy with what we are doing, are frankly contemptuous of our efforts, or as frankly ignorant of what we call architecture. With laborious effort, through intimate association with the requirements of our people, we may still develop an insight into their real purposes and acquire an ability to serve them directly and frankly. However imperfect our structures, they would then be the result of a living art, an art virile, if immature, charged with an instinct for truth, though sometimes hesitating and uncertain in expression. Such structures would be indicative of an initiative, an independence of thought, a freedom from servile adherence to forms adopted to other conditions, which is the mark of true culture.⁸²

Louis Sullivan, searching for a "democratic" architecture and a first principle "that admits of no exception"⁸³ expressed his principle

⁸²W. R. B. Willcox, "Address upon the Opening of the School of Architecture," November 19, 1914, WRBW.

⁸³Sullivan, p. 258, 221.

in the dictum "form follows function." Frank Lloyd Wright, searching for an "organic" architecture, expressed his principle in the dictum "form and function are one."⁸⁴ Both were attempting to articulate an alternative to the Classic Revival, which they identified with all that was decadent, Eastern, or European. One thing was clear to both of them. This new architecture could only come out of the West. Willcox agreed with them. While he hadn't their genius to give concrete expression to abstract thought, his address to the students clearly places him in the camp of Sullivan and Wright, loosely termed the "Chicago School." "Art. . . is simply a tangible expression of ideals in accordance with certain well defined principles. But most folks seem to think of it as an expression in accordance with certain well defined forms. And forms which are well defined are different among different people at different times. The principles never change and so, to restrict their use to certain limited forms always strikes me as small and mean and useless generally."⁸⁵

Lawrence asked Willcox to join the faculty of the new architecture school. Willcox, unsure of the adequacy of his own background, was defensive about education in general, referring to it as "high-brow stuff."⁸⁶ Besides he loved Seattle and still regarded himself as a practitioner, rather than an expositor, of architecture, despite the state of his practice and of his finances. He still hoped his position on the Board of the A.I.A. would allow him to bring Western economic and architectural principle to the effete East. He declined Lawrence's offer, for the time being.

⁸⁴Wright, p. 221.

⁸⁵W. R. B. Willcox to Arthur M. Willcox, August 29, 1915, WRBW.

⁸⁶W. R. B. Willcox to Charles Alden, November 17, 1914, WRBW.

Chapter 5

THE WAR YEARS

. . . I have a little house to build here and one in Burlington and that is about all, thank you, so you can see how encouraging it is for a man of my years and reasonable ambitions to be sitting around hoping for something worthwhile to do. But there has been enough other things pertaining to the Institute, etc., to keep me occupied.⁸⁷

Willcox corresponded with Charles Alden, an architect who had worked with him on the campaign to adopt the Bogue Plans in 1912. When Alden left for San Francisco to work with Bernard Maybeck on the Panama-Pacific-International Exposition in 1914, Willcox kept him informed about conditions in Seattle.

We are having an interesting exhibition of the situation today in connection with the rebuilding of the burned Grand Trunk dock. . . . The Port Commission, acting for the whole people - it is presumed - deem certain construction desirable, but can they proceed with it, even if it is in the interests of the people? They can not. The Council also wanted to do certain things on the waterfront and a hearing was held so that the Owners could tell them what they could and what they couldn't do. . . . But that is the usual process of getting our cities built - the citizens do what the owners of the cities let them do and that is about all. . . . So what is the use of going on trying to do any city planning when such experiences accompany every effort to get present needs attended to?

. . . our present day social arrangements make for cheapness, cheapness of structure. Structures have to be cheap since land is able to get the big end of any enterprise. Someday we will fix it so that folks can use vacant lands when needed and then we will begin to attend to the quality of our structures and the quality of our enterprises generally, as divorced from money and profit. . . . How fine it would be if

⁸⁷W. R. B. Willcox to Charles Alden, August 17, 1914, WRBW.

all the vacant land belonged to the city. . . . But then, you understand, the present day idea is that if the people themselves owned the land, incentive to industry would be removed.

. . . I might ask if you notice that "Fugitives arriving from Berlin declare that the Socialists are rising in revolt throughout Germany, following the execution of their leader, Dr. Liebknecht?" The Socialists appear to be the only Christians on earth today. The pagans masquerading as Christian nations have to call out troops to disperse anti-war demonstrations of the Socialists and execute their leaders. Well, they better do all they can this time - the monarchies - because this will be about all of the war business, after the revolutions are over that will follow this particular scrap.⁸⁸

This was in August, 1914. Willcox had prepared an elaborate report on the relationship between land ownership and city development for the Committee on Town Planning of the A.I.A. It had been coolly received. Commissions were so scarce he had had to borrow money to keep his house on Mercer Island. Worst of all, his conscience was sickened and outraged at the outbreak of war in Europe. "What an awful thing is the war! . . . What a hell this world is!"⁸⁹ "Pride of race, selfish craving for power, political and commercial, envy of other political powers, immeasurable conceit and blasphemous arrogance are the causes of war. . . . So I find myself without much interest as to the outcome, so long as it may be soon." He revealed his increasing sense of alienation as he closed this letter to Frank Waugh with, ". . . I have as yet found nobody in agreement with me."⁹⁰

The war, the failure of "any real city planning beyond a flower box or two,"⁹¹ the conditions of labor, and his faltering practice were all,

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹W. R. B. Willcox to T. R. Kimball, August 30, 1914, WRBW.

⁹⁰W. R. B. Willcox to Frank Waugh, undated (December, 1914?), WRBW.

⁹¹W. R. B. Willcox to his mother, September 15, 1914, WRBW.

according to Willcox, part of a faulty economic system that allowed a few men to own natural resources and to exact enormous profits therefrom. He had followed other progressives out of the Republican Party with Roosevelt in 1912. He considered himself ". . . a pronounced radical,"⁹² and his friends called him a Socialist. He was a single-taxer, a social gospeler, a pacifist, and an I.W.W. sympathizer. In 1916 he voted for Wilson for president, to stay out of the war, for a Progressive Republican (Poindexter) for senator, to stay out of the war, and a Socialist for prosecuting attorney, who had expressed anti-war sympathies. He made friends with the mill workers on his commuting route and was pleased when his cable-car and ferry boat acquaintances confided in him, "'The guys in the main office are for Hughes, of course, but by God, the boys here are for Wilson.'" In this letter to Thorfin Tait, a friend from his Burlington practice, a terra-cotta tile maker and a Democrat, he recounted his conversation with a lumberjack.

He said the 300 men in the camp were all Wilson; "But Hell, there won't be over 15 who will vote." Why not? "Why, why in Hell should they? What difference does it make? . . . All the difference between the Republican and Democratic parties you could put in your hat. Sometimes we have jobs and sometimes we don't no matter who's in." That reveals two trends, one for Wilson and one toward anarchy. Great country this when large bunches of the population have come to feel that there is nothing for the humble working man in either of our great parties. . . . Of course, I admit that I may be a bum reporter of conditions out here, but such opinion as I give you comes from a whilom Republican from the died-in-the-wool State of Vermont. Its a far cry from that blissful state of complacency to my present state of uncertainty, or let us say, unclassification, if that is a word.⁹³

⁹²W. R. B. Willcox to Arthur Willcox, December 11, 1913, WRBW.

⁹³W. R. B. Willcox to Thorfin Tait, October 20, 1916, WRBW.

The war cast an unrelieved pall on his spirit, and a wry cynicism bred of chronic depression replaced Willcox's former optimism. He had hoped to interest the architects of the Institute in the necessity for fundamental changes in land tenure, and they had largely ignored his attempt to organize them to effect these changes, through the Committee on Town Planning. His work on the Committee on Ethics brought ". . . a smile that turns up only one corner of the mouth and does not part the lips. . . . You shall not advertise - in the public prints; you shall not submit sketches in pursuit of a client - during business hours; you shall not cut prices - when a fellow architect is looking; you shall not undermine another architect when he has a job - unless you can make it appear you had him first, etc., etc., etc."⁹⁴

His acerbic comments were not confined to architects in this letter to Thomas R. Kimball, an Omaha architect who shared Willcox's views.

Give me your reasons for supposing you are going to vote for Mr. _____ for president, say. Tell me how much improved will be the condition of the Mexican workman when the U.S. has taken over his country. Explain how desirable it is that the militia be summoned to dispatch the greedy trainmen for presuming to think that civilization in its advance upon the universally shortened workday includes them in its lists. Reveal to me the righteousness of denying stevedores on our waterfront a 10% increase of wage, now that the cost of living has lifted twenty or thirty percent, and putting in their place the sons of well-to-do people at half what the workmen were getting. Expound the glories of our humanitarianism in providing the means of destruction of our brothers somewhere else. . . . Once parents sacrificed their eldest born for the love of God, and they did it with song and dance and incantations; now men sacrifice the entire brood of somebody else by neglect and starvation, if not by violence, for the love of God, because God desires the victory of each of the warring nations over her enemies. . . ."

⁹⁴W. B. Willcox to Thomas R. Kimball, August 23, 1916, WRBW.

He added, unnecessarily, "I have not been joyously happy in my own mind lately."⁹⁵

His despair deepened with America's entry into the war and the subsequent wartime regulations instituted by Wilson. The patriotic fervor of preparedness programs drew his particular scorn. "Are you in the militia, the coast artillery, the officers' reserve corps, or the Home Guard?" He wrote Thorfin Tait, "Do you wear a red, white, and blue button in your lapel? Are you strong for 'conscription' and the censorship of the press? Have you been attending Billy Sunday's spiritual feasts? Have you planted 'spuds' in your window boxes yet? . . . Why not tell me how you, a Democrat, view the autocratic methods adopted by the administration? How does Mr. Wilson sit upon your conceptions of government? How do you like the censorship, espionage, conscription, ideas so dominant among our representatives?"⁹⁶

He served for a year as second vice-president of the National A.I.A., but his interest in the Institute and in the business of architecture was waning.

The architectural profession has been, and is still I am sorry to say, a loss as a necessary part of our present day life. It has shut its eyes to life in its important phases and as a consequence, here in this country, it finds itself being looked upon as being of no use to anybody in connection with the work that needs to be done. . . . It is almost laughable to see to what extent the architects' aloofness from the important activities of life has now shunted him out of the way. His proper place has been filled by engineers and only a few have been able to qualify as having any idea of the things architectural

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶W. R. B. Willcox to Thorfin Tait, May 10, 1917, WRBW.

which need to be done in this new world. The profession has for years been under the direction of an old stand-pat crowd, men who live in the large eastern cities, who seldom, if ever, have been out of them, who think there is nothing worthy of consideration outside of those cities. . . .⁹⁷

Willcox's three years on the Board of Directors and one year as Vice President had been, primarily, an attempt on his part to gain recognition of the West within the Institute. During his first year on the Board two-thirds of the Board and the officers were from New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. They did not object to Willcox's presence. They admired, even loved, him, but they seemed not to listen to him. Now, as he retired in 1918, his work was beginning to bear fruit. ". . . at the convention just past, the membership of the Institute turned down the old outfit and installed men from every place but New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and even Chicago, except two. What have come to be known as the 'radicals' are in the saddle."⁹⁸ His friend Tom Kimball from Omaha was elected president that year.

Willcox withdrew from active participation in the affairs of the Institute but not from active correspondence with its new president. Kimball drafted a prospectus outlining the direction the Institute should take under his presidency that contained within it a proposal for a Committee on Reconstruction (later called the Post-War Committee). This committee was to address itself specifically to the task of making the architect a vigorous participant in society and was intended to be central to the Institute. Kimball sent a rough draft to Willcox for his comments with this notation: "It goes to you as one of the directors,

⁹⁷W. R. B. Willcox to Arthur M. Willcox, May 22, 1918, WRBW.

⁹⁸Ibid.

because of my Institute, you will always be what you always have been - i.e., President, Vice-president, Secretary, Treasurer, and Board of Directors. Give me a bare-handed reply accordingly. On the complexion of these replies depends the personnel of the forthcoming committees and the enthusiasm of the President."⁹⁹

Willcox turned down Kimball's request that he chair the committee. He felt he had given enough of himself to the Institute. He needed time to explore his new obsession. "We must . . . see the relation of the present economic order to life and bend our energies to correct that, so art is free to grow, so that the natural cravings among young people for the beautiful can be fed. . . . I am crazy enough to think I shall shortly attempt to write a book! Don't cross me from your list of friends till I really perpetrate that idiocy. But that is what I think I need a little time for."¹⁰⁰ He didn't write a book, but he corresponded indefatigably with his friends, exploring, rejecting, elaborating, and perfecting his economic theory which took Henry George and the single-tax as its first principle. His experiences in Seattle with his work, with the war, and with the condition of labor indicated to him that nothing could be done until the problem of land was solved.

The armistice allowed him a cautious glimmer of his former optimism. ". . . we are about to see some changes which will either make the world a great sight better place for the ordinary man or bring on troubles which will cause people to recall the war as a time of peace."¹⁰¹ But

⁹⁹Thomas R. Kimball to W. R. B. Willcox, August, 1918, WRBW.

¹⁰⁰W. R. B. Willcox to Thomas R. Kimball, October 27, 1918, WRBW.

¹⁰¹W. R. B. Willcox to Frank Willcox, December 25, 1918, WRBW.

a poem he wrote and sent to friends as a Christmas message reflected his state of ironic pessimism:

How bravely have the profiteers sustained the sacrifices women
made,

Who, living through long days and nights of hope and chill despair,
Have not withheld the dreaded loss of fathers, brothers, husbands,
sons,

That Peace, a just, enduring Peace may be the lot of peoples
everywhere.

How heartless now to doubt their loyalty, their loyalty to those
brave men,

Who, marching through the streets but few short months or weeks
ago,

Have jeopardized their lives, not once, but daily, at the battle
front,

That Peace, a just, enduring Peace may be the lot of peoples
everywhere.

How much, think you, they'll sacrifice of wealth, of trade
advantage, or of power,

Who, grinding out great profits from the whole world's desp'rate
need,

Have tossed aside the hopes of men and mocked them with the solemn
pledge,

That Peace, a just, enduring Peace, should be the lot of peoples
everywhere.¹⁰²

¹⁰²W. R. B. Willcox, "A Just, Enduring Peace," December 21, 1918, WRBW.

Chapter 6

THE ARCHITECT AS SOCIAL CRITIC

Tom Kimball refused to let Willcox withdraw from the Institute so easily. "A wise and thinking man once said in my hearing - what I have long thought, but lacked the initiative to voice - 'that the man whose impression has been most effectively and purposefully and indelibly stamped on the American Institute is W. R. B. Willcox, of Seattle.' . . . If my wise friend spoke even partial truth - how can you argue against helping the Post-War Committee keep within lines that lead somewhere?"¹⁰³

Willcox's irascible friend, Charles Harris Whitaker, editor of the A.I.A. Journal, radical and outspoken foe of the old guard in the Institute and secretary of the Post-War Committee, tempted Willcox with the promise of a special sub-committee on the land problem composed of all the single-taxers he could find. Willcox could not resist the combined appeals of Whitaker and Kimball. He formed a Post-War Committee within the Washington state chapter and prepared a report to the national committee on the relation of land cost, value, and taxation to architecture. He sent a preliminary report to Whitaker for his approval. "I hope you are satisfied; the anarchistic terminology seems fairly well censored; no mention, you see, of single-tax, Liebknecht, Lenin, Trotsky, Bolshevism, or Karl Marx, - Good God, I haven't even mentioned land."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Thomas R. Kimball to W. R. B. Willcox, December 18, 1918, WRBW.

¹⁰⁴W. R. B. Willcox to Charles Harris Whitaker, March 20, 1919, WRBW.

The report was perhaps too circumspect. The Washington state chapter endorsed it and sent it on to the national convention. There the land question was reduced to a very small item on a very large chart, and the report of the relation of land ownership and taxation to architecture languished and died on the floor of the convention in June, 1919.

Willcox's frustration was not confined to the Institute. He directed an outburst at H. Van Buren Magonigle, a New York architect and an old friend of his.

. . . this is a gnashing of teeth over the published statement that the Architectural League and a number of other artists societies, propose to pledge the country not to use German pencils, etc., as a sort of a slap on the German wrist for having slaughtered and maimed French and Belgian and various other men, women, and children . . . a gruesome joke.

. . . I don't remember hearing of any pledges pledged by artists or anybody else against the using of rubber when Belgian forces in the Congo committed atrocities, in times of peace! But Belgians committed the atrocities, just as the United States troops in Colorado shot and killed women and children . . . because their men presumed to stop work unless human conditions of work were provided. . . . And what of the atrocities of child labor, the phosphorous match, the glass factories, the coal bunkers, the sweat shops, the steel mills. Atrocities!

Bring not your pledge to me, my dear man. I love you much but I have no use for this backward facing business.¹⁰⁵

Magonigle's reply reflects the rising tide of nativist hysteria that swept the country at the end of the war. "I don't believe you really are a subscriber to the doctrine you pretend to advocate, which is pusillanimous, pacifistic, spineless, mushy, sentimental, unmanly,

¹⁰⁵W. R. B. Willcox to H. Van Buren Magonigle, November 25, 1918, WRBW.

womanly, weak, feminine, mollusk-like, cowardly, unmilitant, pro-German, poppycock rot."¹⁰⁶

Violent anti-German sentiment merged with even more violent fear of a Bolshevik revolution, and Willcox was both anguished and ironic at the suppression of the I.W.W. in Washington.

You will have noticed in your papers that Seattle has experienced a "general strike." From one of the common bystanders who is in a safe place to be tossed on the horn of capital, or bitten by the mad dog of labor, take it that accounts of the business are a joke.

. . . . To one who has been present and footed it five miles a day to get to his desk, the demonstration of the power of "labor" is complete. They do not need to riot, - just quit, really quit, and they have the busy little businessmen running round in frantic circles.¹⁰⁷

He was feeling cheerful in those early months of 1919 when he gave his eye-witness account of the general strike to Tom Kimball. He had been working on a large government housing project for the Navy Yard in Bremerton, and so he was, for the first time in years, free of financial problems. He was optimistic about the Peace Conference in Versailles. The way in which the strikers had refused to be goaded into violence delighted him. Most of all, he was certain that the Post-War Committee would demonstrate the ways in which architects could become vital to society in general, rather than anachronistic servants of privilege. Then Cass Gilbert, in reaction to an A.I.A. Journal editorial by C. H. Whitaker, attacked him as "mischievous, seditious, disloyal, and treacherous."¹⁰⁸ The full force of reactionary strength came home to Willcox. His report on land was not the only casualty of the convention

¹⁰⁶H. Van Buren Magonigle to W. R. B. Willcox, February 15, 1919, WRBW.

¹⁰⁷W. R. B. Willcox to Thomas R. Kimball, February 10, 1919, WRBW.

¹⁰⁸Cass Gilbert to Thomas R. Kimball, March 28, 1919, WRBW.

of June, 1919. The Post-War Committee refused to handle anything that smacked of controversy.

When the Bremerton job was finished, Willcox returned to his office and found he had to build his practice all over. With no commissions in sight and his hopes for the Post-War Committee smashed he withdrew for a time to the protection of his family on Mercer Island. He built an addition to their cottage and experimented with a variety of ways to pump water from the lake to Evalyn's garden. Tom Kimball provided Evalyn and Edna with game fowl breeding stock, and Willcox delighted in "the rainbow of colors they provide in the chicken yard. . . . not in their fighting propensities."¹⁰⁹ The summer was a brief idyll as he tried to decide the direction his life should take. On Friday evenings he could take the cable car and ferry home, generally bringing his draftsman with him, and they would spend a quiet weekend beachcombing, chopping wood, and listening to classical music. Peaceful gatherings with close friends and family, gentle diversions, were the substance of his life in this period of disillusion with the practice of architecture.¹¹⁰

"Some things are sweet and lovely after all. A week ago yesterday the Chapter had a sort of gathering on the shore of the lake and fellowship reigned, - the women-folks were along and added to the brightness of the occasion, color and otherwise, - they fed us men. But a little girl of six danced for us. On a rug over a camp floor, to the sound of

¹⁰⁹W. R. B. Willcox to Frank Willcox, December 20, 1919, WRBW.

¹¹⁰Interview with William Bain, former draftsman in Willcox's office and partner in the firm of Naramore, Bain, Brady and Johanson in Seattle.

unfamiliar music from a phonograph, she improvised the most innocent and lovely dances you can imagine."¹¹¹

That fall two events converged to complete Willcox's disillusionment with architects and with capitalists. In November, 1919, a parade of soldiers halted in front of an I.W.W. Hall in Centralia, Washington. Shots were fired, some soldiers were killed, and an I.W.W. member was lynched. The incident provided the excuse the government needed to round up and jail all the Wobblies they could find. In the wake of hysteria generated by this incident Seattle businessmen formed an organization called "Associated Industries," and published a newspaper called the Business Chronicle. Exploiting the "Centralia Affair," they printed an editorial calling for suppression of labor in general, of the I.W.W. in particular.

Real Americans must rise as one man in the righteous wrath of outraged patriotism. . . . We must smash every un-American and anti-American organization in the land. We must put to death the leaders in this gigantic conspiracy of murder, pillage, and revolution. We must imprison for life all its aiders and abettors of native birth. We must deport all aliens. The I.W.W., the Non-Partisan League, the so-called Triple Alliance of the State of Washington, the pro-German, Socialists, the Closed Shop Labor Unions, the agitators, malcontents, anarchists, syndicalists, seditionists, traitors - the whole motley crew of Bolshevists and near-Bolshevists - must be hunted down and hounded - outlawed by Public Opinion - until driven beyond the horizon of civic decency.¹¹²

Associated Industries then proposed an American Plan which embodied the spirit of their editorial. They asked all the organizations in town

¹¹¹W. R. B. Willcox to Thomas R. Kimball, July 22, 1919, WRBW.

¹¹²W. R. B. Willcox quoting the editorial from Business Chronicle to Thomas R. Kimball, November 22, 1919, WRBW.

to endorse their Plan, and when the Washington chapter of the A.I.A. endorsed it, over Willcox's strenuous objections, his disgust was complete. He was heartbroken. ". . . The reactionary forces won out and got their vote. . . . Just now, I do not feel the least interest in what the Chapter, or the Institute for that matter, does or does not do. I feel as if I had taken the last job in connection therewith. . . . I think I shall resign . . . not from miff, but because as I read over the program, I realize how away from interest in the various topics there listed I have come to be. . . . I want to be free from all the business with which I have struggled in various capacities the past ten years. I want leisure to see whether I am fitted to do something else, which may be as helpful after all. . . ."113

This time he meant it. Willcox greeted Kimball's retirement as President of the Institute in May, 1920, with relief. ". . . what work I did the past two years has been solely - I think I speak the strict truth - on your account. . . . I have acquired the conviction that, by and large, architects are, and choose to remain, of the old order. . . . Your administration - not because, but in spite of it - demonstrates the status of the profession. It prefers not to lead, but to follow, or stand still. Well, I get tired of standing still, or asking permission to move before doing so."114

In 1918, long before the nativist reaction to the general strike, Kimball had asked Willcox to chair the Department of Architecture at the

113W. R. B. Willcox to Charles Harris Whitaker, November 29, 1919, WRBW.

114W. R. B. Willcox to Thomas R. Kimball, May 17, 1920, WRBW.

University of Illinois. Willcox, declining the offer, wrote Kimball at the time: ". . . it would be hard to head back East. This is the section of the earth which is likely to witness much of the advance skirmishes for democracy in the near future. . . . There are more folks out here who dare to think, I believe, than back Eastward. A wave of discontent has hit the Western shores and shortly it shall be turning backward across this country and be working changes undreamt of in the 'educated classes' there. Am I wrong to think we are freer out here? . . . I would not last but a trifling interval in the midst of Eastern conformity."¹¹⁵

Willcox spent the year following his withdrawal from Institute activities honing his single-tax arguments against Whitaker's Socialism until, in 1922, Whitaker wrote with disbelief: "I just happened to look at the Bulletin for a moment and Lo and Behold! There you are going to be a Professor! And of Architecture! Good Lord! Professor Willcox! I weep!" His incredulous exclamations expanded into a jeremiad of one sentence.

Now don't get mad because you do not read into my clumsy phrases that which I intend them to mean or because I seem to cast aspersions upon the noble art of teaching and the ignoble business of practicing architecture because I do not mean any of those things and all I have to say that nothing much aint of any use until the natural resources of the earth are made free and I dont give a damn who knows that I said it even if all the faculty of the University of Oregon which the same I once addressed in pretty plain talk if they all know that I said it I still dont care a damn and if you are going to teach young people how to recapture the natural resources of the earth while making believe that

¹¹⁵W. R. B. Willcox to Thomas R. Kimball, July 17, 1918, WRBW.

you are teaching them architecture then I am with you but if the reverse is true then I am agin you as I am agin everything and everybody else that is keeping up the bluff!!!

Awaiting the receipt of news of your honorable or dishonorable intentions I am as ever until then anyhow CHW.¹¹⁶

Willcox had not made the decision to head the Department of Architecture at the University of Oregon precipitantly. He was frankly bored with the business of architecture and tired of the perennial battle to keep his practice from failing. Ellis Lawrence had extended the offer of an appointment to the faculty to him each year, and his friends encouraged him to take the offer. This year he made a careful accounting, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the appointment. In the end it was the hope that younger minds might be more susceptible to his principles than the older men within the profession that decided him. "Patience and enthusiasm directing, an occasional youngster may grow to spread the perfume of a lovelier flower than any that has ever bloomed, - at any rate, the chance is worth taking, I am sure."¹¹⁷

He was 53 when he left his home on Mercer Island for a new home on the Mill Race in Eugene. In his 15 years in Seattle he had become thoroughly Western. He identified the West as his home and as the hope for the future. His architecture was undistinguished, but the way he talked and wrote about buildings, combined with his magnetic warmth, could inspire in others the reverence he felt for architecture. His life there had been rewarding in terms of professional recognition if not of practice. The exigencies of the time and the amenities of the place had

¹¹⁶Charles Harris Whitaker to W. R. B. Willcox, August 10, 1922, WRBW.

¹¹⁷W. R. B. Willcox to Charles Harris Whitaker, August 16, 1922, WRBW.

broadened his social outlook. His great contribution was the missionary zeal with which he attacked the problem of making the architect an active, socially responsible member of the community. His failure to do so was a casualty of the time in which he lived.

Walter Ross Bruce Wilcox papers. Gregg Collection, University of Oregon Library, Eugene.

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