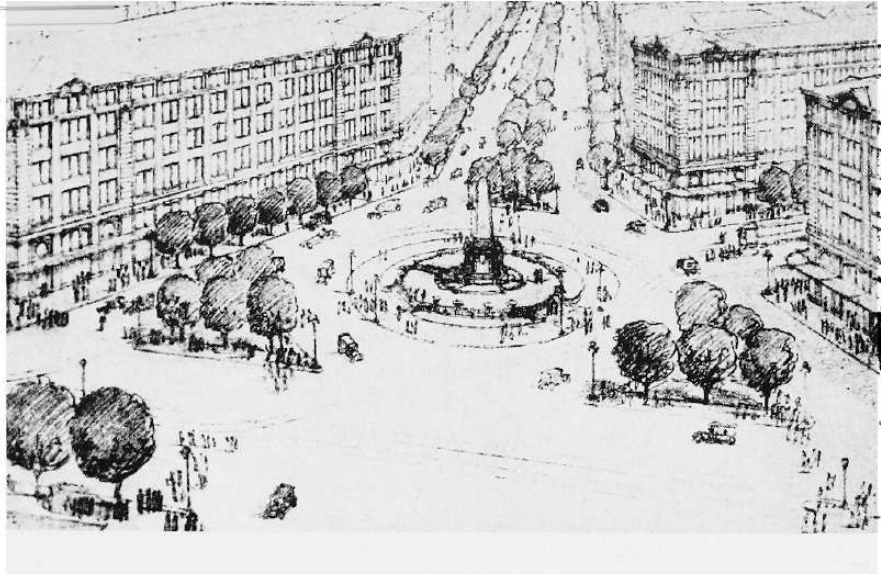


PLAN for the
intersection of Cedar,
Washington, and
Fifteenth Avenue South



Planning a City

MINNEAPOLIS, 1907-17

VINCENT OREDSON

PHYSICALLY, the city of Minneapolis would look very different today if the ambitious proposals made by some of its citizens early in the twentieth century had been carried out. Civic-minded Minneapolitans in the second decade of the present century were talking about a great scheme for the improvement of their city. Today, in libraries throughout the country one occasionally happens upon a document which is the result of this city planning project of a bygone era. The work was published as the *Plan of Minneapolis* by the Civic Commission of that city in 1917.

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A very simple arrangement had guided the physical growth of Minneapolis during its early years. The city's first street was the old territorial road which stretched across the open country from St. Paul and reached the Mississippi River above the Falls of St. Anthony. This road, once an Indian trail, later became Hennepin Avenue. As early as 1849 Colonel John H. Stevens occupied a farm on the west bank of the Mississippi near the falls. When the land was offered for sale in 1855, Stevens prepared for the expansion which was sure to come. He asked Charles W. Christmas to survey approximately a hundred acres. Streets were to be laid out roughly parallel to the windings of the river with other streets running at right angles. This system was carried out for a mile in all directions, where it was changed to the usual rectangular block system in accordance with

the lines of the quarter sections. The arrangement formed the base on which the twentieth-century commission built its plan for the city.¹

The sweep and magnificence of the proposals set forth in the *Plan of Minneapolis* reflect the unbounded faith and expectations which the planners had in the future growth of the city. Briefly, the report proposed that great axial parkways be constructed across the city; that municipal, art, administrative, and transportation centers be erected at designated locations; and that the "unsurpassed possibilities of a neglected water front" be developed in a series of extensive drives.²

These pretentious suggestions seem to have grown out of an idea presented at a dinner given by Mayor E. A. Merrill in the fall of 1909. Among the group of prominent citizens who attended was Lewis S. Gillette, a Minneapolis engineer and manufacturer, who had recently returned from South America. He described the elaborate layout in the European tradition of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro to two friends, Judge Martin B. Koon and William D. Washburn. It was suggested that something similar could be done in Minneapolis, which was then, through its lumber and flour-milling industries, emerging into national fame.

Among those who became interested was Wallace G. Nye, commissioner of public affairs for the Commercial Club of Minneapolis. He organized a group of forty-five men as a so-called Committee on Civic Improvements. Represented on the committee were the Chamber of Commerce, the Commercial Club, the St. Anthony, South Side, and North Side commercial clubs, the Board of Park Commissioners, the Engineers Club, the Retailers Association, the Municipal Art Commission, the Publicity Club, the Six O'Clock Club, the Women's Club, and the Trades and Labor Assembly.³

Although some of these groups were organized after 1900, many had long been established. The Chamber of Commerce, the Trades and Labor Assembly, and the Park Board were included to represent business,

labor, and government. Although the organizations represented had widely varied interests and purposes, they all expressed a desire to find remedies for the city's problems. Their willingness to co-operate reflected an awareness of the needs of a city that had grown from 46,887 people in 1880 to about 300,000 in 1909 with little concern for an overall building or traffic program. It was becoming more and more difficult to cope with the city's noise, congestion, and smoke, and many people felt that something must be done about them.

THE FALL OF 1909 was a propitious time to discuss city planning in Minneapolis. The construction of a post office, a union station, an art museum, and the monumental square known as The Gateway were then being considered. It was an opportune time to initiate a plan which would serve as a guide for appropriately locating not only these buildings, but others to be constructed in the future. A related problem, most urgent to the city council, was the elimination of railroad grade crossings and the establishment of an overall traffic program.

Also of concern at the time, particularly among a small but influential group of industrialists, was the matter of obtaining due recognition for Minneapolis from other parts of the nation. A word battle with the New York Grain Exchange in 1903 finally led to its recognition of the fact that Minneapolis led the world in flour production. A few years later another barrage of propaganda, this time leveled at the treasury department, obtained a Federal Reserve Bank for the city. Members of the Committee on Civic

¹ John H. Stevens, *Personal Recollections of Minnesota and Its People*, 118 (Minneapolis, 1890); Andrew Wright Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis, Prepared under the Direction of the Civic Commission, MCMXVII*, by Edward H. Bennett, *Architect*, 15 (Minneapolis, 1917). The pictures reproduced with this article are from the latter work. For a discussion of the early physical development of Minneapolis, see Calvin F. Schmid, *Social Saga of Two Cities*, 39-41 (Minneapolis, 1937).

² Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis*, 16.

³ Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis*, xi.

Improvements hoped that a city plan would gain further recognition for the Minneapolis community.

This group held its first meeting in November, 1909. At this and subsequent meetings it discussed the matter of a city plan at length and settled on a course of action. On January 7, 1910, the names of candidates for the group to be known as the Civic Commission of Minneapolis were presented for approval, and a resolution setting forth the new commission's purpose was drafted. It stated in part that the commission would investigate and report upon "the advisability of any public works" which in its opinion would lead to the development of business facilities, the beautification of the city, the systematic control of traffic, and the reclamation of river frontage. The Civic Commission was an unofficial body without legal sanction of any kind. It was to prepare a printed report to accompany a comprehensive civic plan prepared by experts.⁴

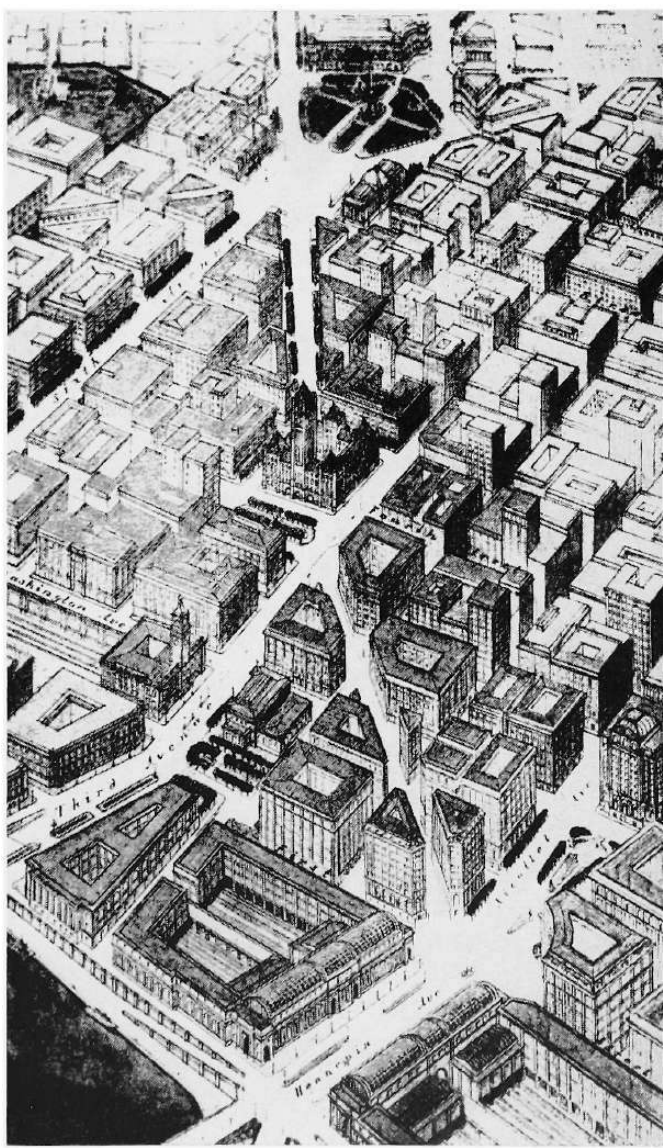
The commission consisted of eleven members — Russell M. Bennett, Henry F. Douglas, William H. Dunwoody, Lewis S. Gillette, John de Laittre, Martin B. Koon, Elbert L. Carpenter, Frederic W. Clifford, Jacob D. Holtzermann, Edward C. Gale, and John Walquist. After this new group was organized, the Committee on Civic Improvements disbanded.

The forming of this new organization was very significant to the future of the plan. The backgrounds of the members, ten of whom had large business and manufacturing holdings in Minneapolis, suggest the reason. Bennett was one of the discoverers of iron ore in northern Minnesota; Carpenter and De Laittre founded lumber companies, and the latter was mayor from 1887 to 1901; Douglas and Dunwoody were flour milling and grain company executives; Clifford founded the Cream of Wheat Corporation; Gillette headed the American Bridge Company and several other construction steel companies; Holtzermann owned a de-

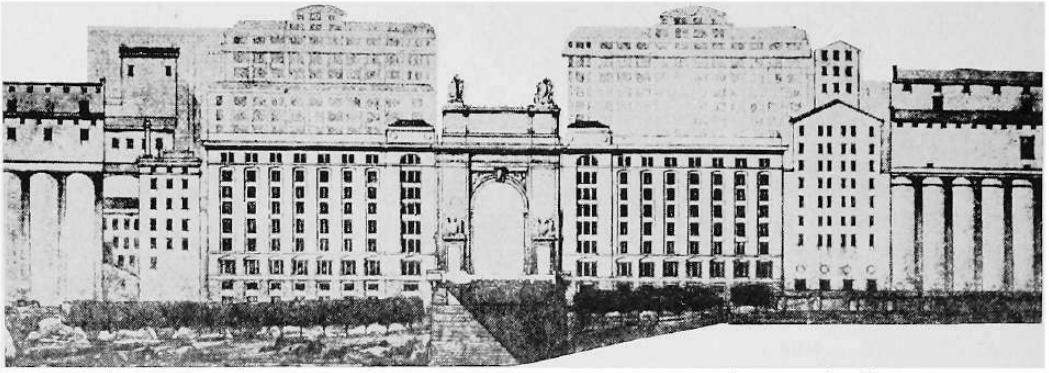
partment store; and Gale and Judge Koon were prominent lawyers. Several of these men had been connected with other planning projects. The eleventh member of the commission, Walquist, was appointed by the Trades and Labor Assembly and was the only tradesman in the group.

AT THE Civic Commission's first meeting, on January 21, 1910, Dunwoody was elected chairman. Gale, who was named secretary, was asked to gather information on the work of similar commissions at home and abroad. At the next meeting, on January 24, Bennett displayed a *Plan of Chicago* published in 1909 to serve as an indication of what lay ahead of the commission. This formidable

PROPOSED route of Park Avenue from The Gateway via the City Hall to the Civic Plaza



⁴ Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis*, xi.



PROPOSED water front at Sixth Avenue South

work apparently impressed the members favorably, and they became interested in its authors.

The two architects responsible for the Chicago plan were Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett. In response to invitations, both agreed to work on a similar plan for Minneapolis. Burnham offered advice from time to time, giving his services free of charge. In April, 1910, Bennett was hired by the commission as consulting city planner. He was to go to Minneapolis for a year and a half to produce a plan for the city. His assistants were Clarence C. Howard and William P. Cowles. Others on the city planning staff were Marcel Vilain, designer and artist, and Jules Guerin, an artist who had worked on the Chicago plan. Office space was provided by William H. Eustis, a Minneapolis realtor.

Preliminary plans were ready by December, 1910, and a report on what had thus far been accomplished was then published. It was reprinted, complete with illustrations, in the *Minneapolis Journal* of December 20, 1910. In general, the proposals made at that time were substantially the same as those later presented in the commission's final report.

While the plan was being drafted, and after long delay, a site for a new post office was finally selected. It was to be erected on property owned by Eustis, without regard for the plan. Demolition of the buildings on the site had already begun when the sponsors of the plan attempted to delay construc-

tion and select another location. Eventually the commission decided, over Bennett's protests, in favor of the original site. The main features of his plan, however, met with the approval of the commission and his services were retained to work out details of the final report.

Shortly after the post-office incident, the Trades and Labor Assembly made clear its position regarding the commission. When Carpenter advised that it was necessary for the commission to levy an assessment of \$250 as organized labor's share in the project, the assembly voted twenty-one to one to withdraw its delegate, and Walquist resigned from the organization.⁵

BENNETT and his staff continued work for a year and a half, during which time there was little action on the part of the commission itself. In May, 1912, the completed plans were placed on display on the ground floor of the McKnight Building. A women's organization known as the Friendly Visitors' Conference, presided over by Mrs. E. L. Carpenter, opened the exhibit, and Gale spoke on the plan. He explained that the commission did not plan to take any action at that time, since it expected to make still further additions and alterations in the plan, and he announced that the final report would be published in book form in about a year. A total of twenty thousand dollars would be

⁵ *Labor Review* (Minneapolis), January 5, 20, 1911.

expended before the commission's work was completed, said Mr. Gale.⁶

Many of the proposals in the plan staggered the imaginations of those who saw the exhibit. For example, it called for three new major arterial streets with extensions, which were to converge on a magnificent plaza in the vicinity of Sixth Avenue and Tenth Street. At this junction was to be erected a civic center with a municipal auditorium, a library, a concert hall or opera house, a hall of records, a municipal museum, public gardens, and possibly a museum of natural history, a high school, technical schools, and a temple of justice.

The first new artery was to extend from the plaza in a direct line from the Institute of Arts to Lake Harriet, cutting diagonally through block after block of solidly built residences. The second street was to be formed by extending Park Avenue so that it would connect the City Hall and the proposed transportation center at The Gateway with University Avenue via a new bridge across the Mississippi at Nicollet Island. The third traffic artery was to connect the plaza with the Tenth Avenue bridge. Eighth Avenue was to be improved as a major northwest-southeast artery intersecting the plaza.

These proposals were later worked out in minute detail in the commission's final report, which suggested that these new traffic arteries, varying in width from a hundred to two hundred and fifty feet, would also "perform a most important function as fire barriers," and would redeem property values in "blighted districts." It was suggested that in the city's business section the main arteries "should not be less than 125 feet wide." The commission's report offered this warning: "It may be a grave mistake if this advice is not acted on now—the region may be infested by skyscrapers and widening in the future will be therefore a practical impossibility."⁷

⁶ *Minneapolis Journal*, May 8, 1912.

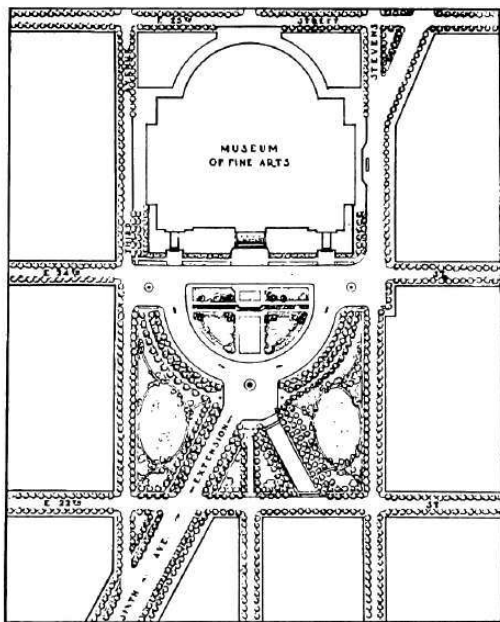
⁷ Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis*, 19, 22, 54.

⁸ Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis*, 45, 53.

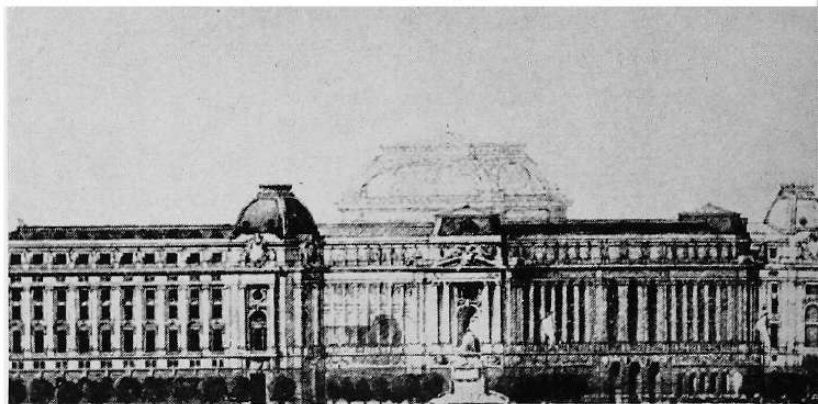
In order to protect the population of south Minneapolis "from the evil results that always follow the bad housing conditions and absence of opportunities for wholesome recreation common in large cities," the commission proposed to widen Nicollet and Cedar avenues to provide for the construction of "playways." Park-like strips along these wide streets, it was contended, would give children ample play space close to their homes. Other shorter streets were planned to form a ring road around the central business district. "The demand for circulatory traffic regulations alone," reads the report, "are sure to make necessary the creation of circular intersections."⁸

To take advantage of the opportunities presented by the Mississippi River, the river drive was to be extended past the Washington Avenue bridge and continued through the city on both sides of the Mississippi, taking in a view of the Falls of St. Anthony. The final report recommended that "a series of low-level and high-level drives on each side of the River be constructed . . . with park embankments following their routes. . . . A series of 'ramps' will lead at various points

PLAN for the Institute of Arts and vicinity



ELEVATION of the
proposed Civic Plaza
looking northwest



from the low-level to the high-level drives. The upper drives on each side will be at an elevation above the railroad tracks, connecting with all street bridges. The lower drives will afford direct access to the River.”⁹

The commission also proposed that the outer edge of Nicollet Island be developed with an encircling drive. “The manifest destiny of Nicollet Island is to be a park,” the report predicts. For this purpose the island would have to be cleared, and “water-gardens, aquaria and similar features would naturally be added to it from time to time,” the report continues. It then makes the startling suggestion that “The central portion is splendidly suited for a great stadium, large enough indeed for an aeroplane field. Areas for aeroplanes to alight in must be ultimately provided. . . . A centrally located aeroplane field will be of importance, and Nicollet Island could not be better placed for this purpose, with a natural means of approach for flying machines formed by the River valley in either direction.” Members of the commission expressed the conviction that “irrespective of its use for aeroplanes, its availability as the greatest of all playgrounds cannot be over-emphasized. The quadrennial Olympic Games, last held at Stockholm, could well be held here, when they come to America in happier days [after World War I]. All sorts of outdoor sports could be provided for. The river on both sides invites river-swimming pools in summer, and in-

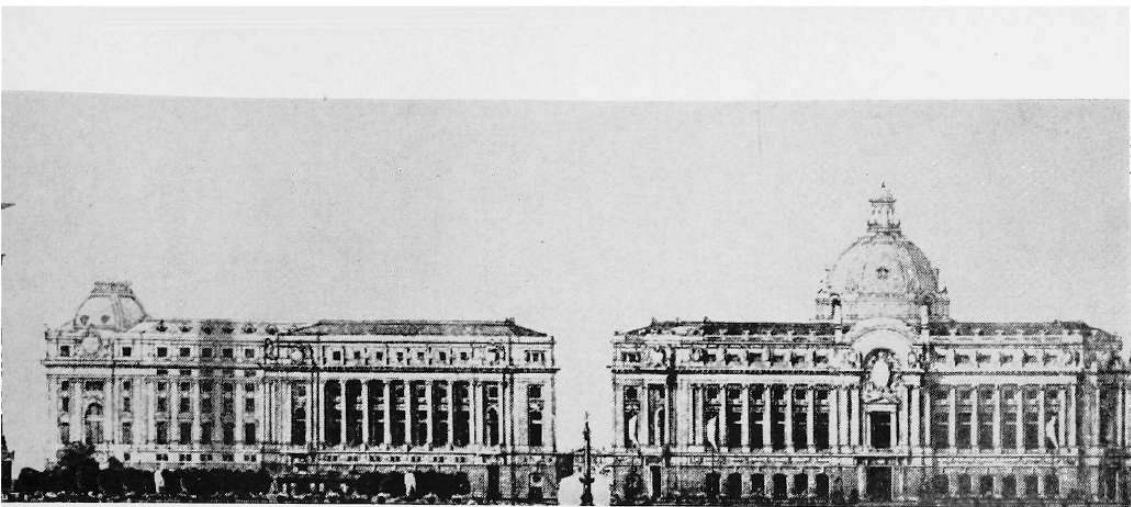
undated skating ponds in winter. Its possibilities for sports of all kinds are unsurpassed.”¹⁰

All these proposals were brought out in drawings, maps, and diagrams in the 1912 exhibition. The water colors of Jules Guerin were the show’s main attraction. Enthusiasm reached a peak during this exhibit, and some of the commission members commented publicly on the plan.

In an interview reported in the *Minneapolis Journal* of June 2, 1912, Dunwoody described the reactions of visitors to the exhibit and stated his views on the subject. He said that people at first showed signs of incredulity, but the longer they looked at the drawings the more they came to believe that the plan was workable. Some said it bolstered their civic loyalty just to look at the drawings, and even those who comprehended the immense financial cost favored it, Dunwoody said. He commented that “When the civic commission was formed our plans were on a smaller scale . . . but when we began to discuss them, it seemed to me that we ought not to stop at anything that did not take into consideration the growth of the city in the next twenty or twenty-five years.” He predicted that “there will be a city here of more than a million people, and that within the lifetime of the younger people we will

⁹ Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis*, 150.

¹⁰ Crawford, *Plan of Minneapolis*, 160–162.



have a million and a half," and he then added: "We have planned for such a population."

BY THE TIME the commission displayed the results of its work, other local organizations had become interested in various aspects of city planning. Among them was the Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association, organized in December, 1911, six months before the exhibit opened, when the local Publicity Club, the Minneapolis Traffic Association, and the public affairs committee of the Commercial Club merged. This new group had more vitality than any other in the city, and its two thousand members turned their attention to the immediate problems facing the community. Committees were formed to deal with smoke abatement, paving and bridges, taxation, public health, streets, highways, traffic, and housing.

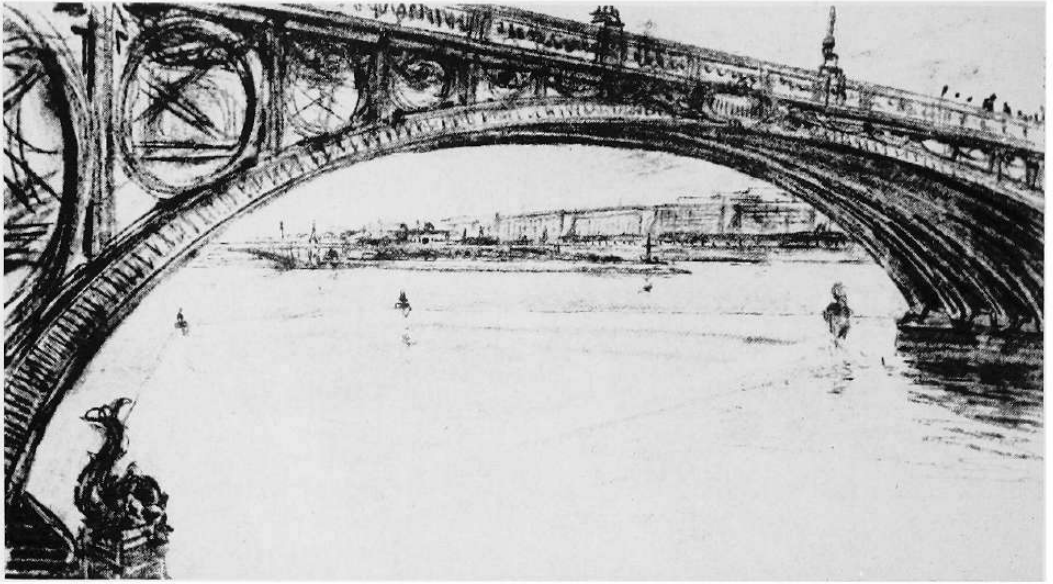
Although they were dealing with similar problems, there is nothing to indicate that these committees worked with the Civic Commission. Perhaps they agreed with the writer of an editorial in the *Minneapolis Journal* of November 29, 1911, who seemed to think that the commission's work was straying from the original traffic problem and was becoming too engrossed with beautifying the city.

The investigations of the new organization helped clarify the city's problems. Good housing was beginning to be considered a

necessary adjunct to industry. Slums were understood to be infectious, spreading from their original locations to surrounding areas. As realization of these problems deepened, proposals for city beautification became less urgent. The loss by death of Holtzermann, Koon, and De Laittre, and the resignations of Walquist, and later of Douglas, left the commission with only six of its original members, and undoubtedly further delayed the publication of its final report.

THE MINNEAPOLIS Institute of Arts, on which construction was begun late in 1913 and early 1914, was one feature incorporated in the plan that did materialize, and it became a major concern of the city at this time. The project was sponsored by the Minneapolis Association of Fine Arts, with which the six remaining members of the Civic Commission were associated either as members or as directors. As a matter of immediate concern, the institute took precedence over long-range city planning. Dunwoody in particular was instrumental in seeing this work accomplished, and his death in 1914 was a great loss both to the commission and to the community.

Upon completion of the art institute's building in January, 1915, interest in the city plan revived. The perspectives, sketches, and maps that had been prepared earlier were again placed on display in the galleries of the new building, and a small pamphlet ex-



PROPOSED *Sixth Avenue Bridge and Nicollet Island*

plaining them was printed and distributed free of charge.¹¹

To edit Bennett's proposals and write a final report, which was now long overdue, the commission obtained the services of Andrew Wright Crawford of Philadelphia. Five of the original members and a new one, Louis J. Holtzermann, now comprised the commission. After all the delays these men had encountered, the completion of the report was undoubtedly a great relief to them. A thousand numbered copies of the work were printed and made available to subscribers at an initial fee of fifty dollars.

The published report is an impressive folio volume of 347 pages, handsomely bound in red cloth stamped in gold, and illustrated with hundreds of sketches, maps, and diagrams, many of them in color, of the city the commission intended Minneapolis to be. The text is written with much care in formal style. It stresses the urgent need for the plan and for its early accomplishment. Some of the topics covered in the report are suburban and intra-urban transportation, housing, limitation of skyscrapers, parks and playgrounds, bridges, street fixtures, trees and flowers, smoke nuisance, railroads, industry,

zoning, financing, and legal problems. Although the undertaking was admittedly an ambitious one, the writers argued that the future city of Minneapolis was certain to be large enough to justify the improvements suggested and more. All the features of the plan, together with arguments for their acceptance and suggestions for financing them, are artfully presented in the report.

Unfortunately, the United States entered World War I in 1917 just as the plan was published. As a result, the latter did not receive much attention until after the war, when interest turned to domestic matters. The *Bellman*, a journal devoted to art and culture published in Minneapolis, urged in its issue for April 6, 1918, that work on the plan be started in order to create postwar employment, but its suggestion had little effect. Few subscribed for the expensive printed report, and most of the bulky volumes remained in the commission's possession.

In 1919, when a city planning enabling act was passed by the state legislature, reference was made to the plan. Later, in

¹¹ Civic Commission, *The Plan of Minneapolis* (Minneapolis, 1915).

1923, when the Minneapolis Planning Commission was established, an effort was made to carry out some of the plan's proposals. But the great transformation of Minneapolis envisioned by the commission did not become a reality. Although a great deal of effort went into the preparation of this plan, few of its proposals can be recognized in Minneapolis today. Four projects which were integrated in the plan and which were completed during the course of the work are the post office, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Gateway, and the Great Northern Terminal, sometimes called the Union Station.

WHAT are the reasons for the apparent lack of accomplishment by the commission? Those who are familiar with the plan say that it was impractical, that its proposals were too far beyond the city's needs, and that it would have been too costly. Certain changes that followed World War I also influenced the final outcome. Definitely prewar in character, for example, was the plan's emphasis on the decorative exteriors that mark European cities. As the use of automobiles increased after the war, it became more and more evident that the city's traffic problems could not be solved by following the plan's suggestions. Air transportation developed along lines that made impossible the use of an island landing field like that proposed in the plan.

A review of the personalities and events behind the plan reveal key situations which seem to have directed its course. Even before the loss of the six commission members and the outbreak of war, there were signs which did not bid fair for the plan's future. It was unfortunate that the Committee on Civic Improvements, which had represented a variety of city interests, was dissolved at the very start. This, perhaps more than anything else, accounts for the fact that the commission strayed so far from the problems which originally prompted interest in the plan. The commission's failure to insist upon the post-office site prescribed by the plan and the

subsequent withdrawal of the Trades and Labor Assembly also were serious setbacks. Bennett's exhibit, inspiring as it must have been, was not enough to restore lost faith.

The Civic and Commerce Association's practical projects, which uncovered problems that the commission and Bennett had scarcely touched, also distracted attention from the plan. It was clear that these problems could not be solved by beautification alone.

From the vantage point of the present, broader forces which affected the plan are apparent. It now seems likely that even if the plan as a whole had survived its early setbacks, most of its proposals ultimately would have been abandoned. One reason is the planners' exaggerated conception of the future size of Minneapolis. Instead of the million and a half people they anticipated, the city today has a population of only about half a million. In addition, the ideas on civic improvement presented in the plan were those of men who had built Minneapolis before 1917, not of those who inherited the problems of a postwar world. In the plan itself can be found, too, faint rumblings of the movement which has since blossomed into contemporary art and architecture. It would have been impossible for the plan to survive the impact of this new movement.

Today the plan is interesting and valuable largely for the light it throws on the city's development. It illustrates the kind of optimistic philosophy which was behind the rapid growth of the city. The otherwise practical men who indulged in this extravagant dream for their city's beautification had seen its population increase forty-eight per cent in the single decade from 1900 to 1910. Perhaps they were justified in believing that it would continue to grow at the same rate. What they did not and could not see was that with their lives an era would end — an era of initial growth. Neither could they see that with the new era would come a whole new, functional concept of art, architecture, and city planning that would forever mark as prewar the essential features of their plan.



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