

The Chicago Fair of 1893 was a populist fun fest; Grand Central and Pennsylvania stations glorified mass transit; impressive museums and libraries were open to everyone, as were the great civic parks in almost every city. However, Hitler's and Stalin's use of the classical design vocabulary established for many people that not only might such designs not be appropriate to the modern era, but also that they were the language of oppression. It is understandable why the sponsors of the conference wanted to distance themselves from classical architecture, which had been renounced at Harvard for almost twenty years; the problem is that they confused it with civic design. There is still confusion about this today.

Not acknowledging the civic component of urbanism turns sidewalks and public spaces into utilitarian places between buildings, providing little more than light and air and passages for pedestrians. Most urban plazas of the past fifty years provide good views of the buildings they front but are devoid of social significance. The research of Jan Gehl and William H. Whyte, among others, has helped establish how people use public space, and that in turn has helped show designers how to configure and furnish sidewalks and public places so that they will be used and thus regain significance in community life. Other lessons for the design of civic space have come from the devices retailers use to attract people to shopping precincts. "Place-making" has become a slogan of modern-day retailing. With retailers saying, "Hey, this stuff really works," civic spaces have again become important in city design as a means of attracting people to the city and of keeping them there. Urban designers are now in demand to provide the inspiration for such places.

Defining civic spaces with groups of buildings designed by different architects at unpredictable intervals over a long period of time is a central task for the urban designer. As designers have rediscovered the importance of civic spaces, they have also discovered the devices used in the past to pull such places together: the guidelines of Baron Haussmann in Paris, those for the Back Bay in Boston, and the more abstract, form-based street walls and setbacks of New York City's original 1916 zoning code. These elements of civic design derive from the classical tradition, but they are abstract enough to be incorporated into zoning codes. Zoning codes always determine city form, but the modern codes that came into use in the 1960s introduced floor area ratios as the basic bulk control, making the shape of buildings an