

Sert's project was both a strategy for including U.S. cities in the expat ambit of the Euro-Modernist urban fantasies of the Charter of Athens and a bid to recover the lost influence of architecture—erstwhile mother of the arts—from its dissolution in an urban field dominated by planners. In his introductory remarks, Sert observed, “Our American cities, after a period of rapid growth and suburban sprawl, have come of age and acquired responsibilities that the boom towns of the past never knew.” This trope of maturity, suggesting that American cities were reaching a point where their undisciplined native morphologies needed to be brought under the umbrella of some greater idea of order, has proved durable (as has the repeated appropriation of the Harvard imprimatur for the personal ideological projects of imported celebrities from Sert to Gropius to Koolhaas).

Sert identified two hostile forces at which urban design was to be directed. The first was the “superficial” City Beautiful approach, which, he argued, ignored the “roots of the problems and attempted only window-dressing effects,” presumably both by failing to observe the “functional city” strictures of the Athens Charter and through its nostalgic forms of expression. The second hemming discourse was that of city planning itself, which, Sert suggested, had evolved to a point where the “scientific phase has been more emphasized than the artistic one.” Urban design, by contrast, was to be “that part of city planning which deals with the physical part of the city, . . . the most creative phase of city planning and that in which imagination and artistic capacities can play a more important part.”

The delicacy of this criticism surely reflected the dilemma of Modernist urbanism, with its growing conflict between a proclaimed social mission and a dogmatic formalism less and less able to make the connection. Nonetheless, Sert's contention that academic planning had become preoccupied with economic, social, policy, and other “non-architectural” issues was certainly true, and fifty years of subsequent experience—marked by intramural indifference and open hostility—only reinforced the conceptual estrangement. The other pole, the assault on the Beaux Arts formalism of the City Beautiful movement—a weirdly anachronistic straw man in 1956—was to prove more contradictory, if unexpectedly prescient. Sert, after all, was arguing that it was necessary to create a discipline that would restore an artistic sense to urban architecture, but he clearly had issues of taste with the City Beautiful, whatever his affinities might have been for its scale of operation, its protofunctionalist zoning, and its foregrounded for-