

Unpublished memoir by Daniel Burnham (1846-1912)  
Ryerson & Burnham Archives  
The Art Institute of Chicago  
Transcribed by Lynda Seasley, July, 2012,  
with assistance from Jack Brown and Mary Woolever  
Daniel H. Burnham Collection 1943.1, restricted box 81.1

We are a serious people and we know it. Like all serious people we have a majestic sense of devotion to duty. We have been concentrated in the field of commerce and manufacturing. We have put forth our energy to gain our end and have reached, but we are not happy.

We have held ourselves too closely to business until our visage has become a mask set in one pattern, and neither we nor our neighbors are much in love with it. In late years we have been trying to play a little, to caper nimbly and be glad, but we tire of this and too easily slide back into the habitual mood wherein we have been wont to wear a path from the work shop to the home.

The World's Fair was built by us. History says so, and some of us think we have evidence to make us realize this fact, but I, for one, can't always do it; because we seem so different from the men you would suppose could carry such a thing into execution.

We are too solemn, [though the same people (~~strike through~~)] we may have more money now, we may have that added intelligence brought to us by the years of [added (~~strike through~~)] life, we may have some spirituality bred of more intelligence, but we are the same people and are too solemn. We need to dream more and not to be ashamed of dreaming, and we need to have another dream come true as did the Fair, else we shall forget, and become like owls, not only brooding in darkness but not believing there is any such thing as light.

We have skyscrapers enough, the Lord knows, and may he forgive me my part in their ugliness! Now we want beauty and we want [it badly (strike through)] great beauty. Is there a man here who was not thrilled when, [at (strike through)] in the twilight his launch silently swept him out from beneath the [arches (strike through)] overhanging arches of the bridge, [?? (strike through)] and he found himself floating in the Court of Honor?

[Why? Because of bigness (strike through)]

Do you remember it, and how your eyes filled with tears of a joy you cannot define in any human words. It was beauty, that harmony of lines and colors that goes deeper with us than does anything else [than music (strike through)] created for us.

“Think deep enough and you think musically” says Carlisle. “It is the very central element of us and of all things, Song”. “The Greeks fabled of sphere harmony. It was the sense they had of the inner structure of things.” [Burnham is quoting Thomas Carlyle, but these are not exact quotes. They’re close, but not exact.]

We have money and we have dirty air and streets, and dirty air and streets we shall continue to have until a great and noble object of beauty is built on the lake front. Every candidate for the Mayoralty since I can remember has promised to clean the streets and suppress the smoke, and everyone has failed to do it. And every one will fail until the people wake up to the need themselves and demand reform. They will not do this until they have something on the lakefront of such beauty as to creat(e) great pride in it, and a sense of shame at any contrast with it caused by dirty streets. I say ‘on the lake front’ because there is no other down town spot left for beauty.

Let us have this exposition building, and let us make very beautiful it and its surroundings. Let us make it beautiful outside and inside, so beautiful that it shall take us out of ourselves, so beautiful that we shall be eager to show it to our visitors, without hastening them through or away from it.

There is no place except the lake front, and if the people earnestly desire to use any part of it for such a purpose, they will do it, provided you can make them want it long enough.