

# **Title:** Social Practice and the Laissez-faire Metropolis: Dwight Perkins in Chicago, 1895 - 1915

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**Abstract:**

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Chicago-based architect Dwight Perkins designed a prescient metropolitan plan for the American city that reimagined the polis as a terrain for sociological investigation and political activism. He collaborated with social scientists affiliated with the University of Chicago and with local, grass-roots activists to leverage design as a vehicle for social change. He argued that strategically placed, small-scale interventions would ameliorate the devastating impact that unplanned growth had on the urban poor and that these spaces would advance democratic social ideals in a city highly segregated by race, ethnicity, and wealth.

Not only was Perkins a pioneer in understanding the city as a heterogeneous collection of cultural groups, he also rethought the manner in which the city was visualized by mediating its architectural representation through the lens of the social sciences. He abandoned illusionistic rendering techniques and illustrated the city as a series of sociological data-maps that combined statistical facts on population density, disease transmission, mortality rates, and criminal activity with geographic projections of Chicago. This new cartographic strategy helped him to identify and create public spaces and social services that benefited underprivileged communities. In doing so, Perkins was one of the first American architects to challenge the socio-economic conditions of the laissez-faire metropolis. Although largely ignored in histories of urban planning and architecture, his nascent social practice contributes to a critical reappraisal of cities that remains relevant today.