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The “hidden architecture” of the Burnham Plan

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 10/12/2009 –8:42 am.

The architecture of the 1909 Plan of Chicago is easy enough to see --- just look around.

Here’s Wacker Drive skirting along the northern and western edge of the central business district. Here are the verdant forest preserves, rich with trees and Nature in the midst of the sprawling metropolis.

Here’s North Michigan Avenue, and Grant Park, and Navy Pier, and the lakefront.

But, over the past century, there’s another sort of Plan-related architecture that’s much more difficult to see --- a “hidden architecture,” according to real estate expert Dick Roddewig.

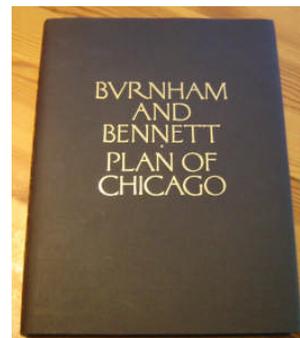
The law.

Over the past century, the body of laws --- enacted by legislators and interpreted by judges --- has been the framework in which implementation of the Plan has been carried out. Or, in some cases, not carried out.

It’s also been the arena in which ideas about the nascent field of urban planning in relation to private ownership and government regulation were initially worked out early in the 20th century, and have continued to be debated up to the present day.

Pulling back the curtain

Roddewig pulled back the curtain on this hidden architecture during a presentation in early October at John Marshall Law School. A more detailed, footnoted examination of the law and the Plan by Roddewig will



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

appear in an upcoming issue of the John Marshall Law Review.

The Plan, known widely as the Burnham Plan for its chief writer Daniel Burnham, is widely admired, but, in preparing for this presentation, Roddewig did something that few people, even fans of the document, ever do. He read and closely studied the 30-page appendix, titled “Legal Aspects of the Plan of Chicago,” written by Walter L. Fisher.

It was, he found, a fairly pessimistic statement of the myriad legal issues that needed to be addressed if the Plan and its visionary spirit were to be carried forward. Indeed, Fisher wrote, “It is quite possible that some revision of existing laws may be necessary in order to enable people to carry out this project...”

And, in the coming decades, laws were revised --- albeit not very quickly.

“A brand new idea”

Zoning, for example, “was a brand new idea” in 1909 when the Plan was published, Roddewig says. And, except for a passing reference in the appendix, the document makes no mention of it in its proposals.



Yet, the concept of an orderly arrangement of land uses --- homes in one place, factories in another --- certainly fit the underlying rationale of the Burnham Plan which was to make Chicago and its environs a healthier, more efficient, better place to live.

“There was a feeling at the time,” Roddewig says, “that residential neighborhoods would inevitably decay into industrial neighborhoods. That there was an inevitable progression in the way neighborhoods develop, and it was a downward progress.”

Edward H. Bennett (right), the co-author of the Burnham Plan, was the consulting architect to the Chicago Plan Commission from 1913 to



1930, and essentially functioned as “the official upholder of Burnham’s vision of the new Chicago,” according to his biographer Joan E. Draper.

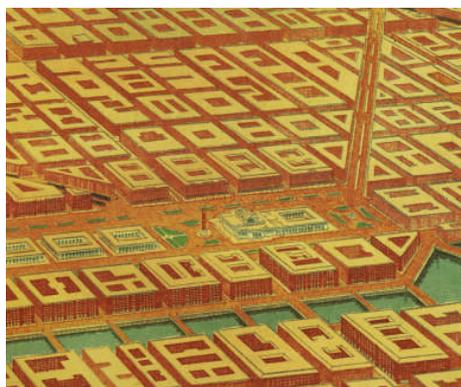
Roddewig notes that Bennett was one of many civic leaders who, during the 1910s and 1920s, felt that a city zoning ordinance “as absolutely necessary to the implementation of the 1909 Plan of Chicago.”

Indeed, Bennett led the effort in 1922 and 1923 to write Chicago’s first zoning law. But it wasn’t until 1925 when the Illinois Supreme Court ruled in a case involving the city of Aurora that it was legal for a municipality to impose zoning on land within its borders. The court wrote that “the growing complexity of our civilization makes it necessary for the State, either directly or through some public agency by its sanction, to limit individual activities to a greater extent than formerly.”

“The risk of fire and falling debris”

Another aspect of urban planning law that influenced and was influenced by the Plan was the imposition of maximum heights for buildings. Various laws, dating back to 1893, limited how high a building could go. “This was couched primarily as a safety regulation to ‘protect the public from the risk of fire and falling debris,’ ” according to Roddewig.

Anyone who has studied the Jules Guerin illustrations in the Burnham Plan has noticed that the city is envisioned as large blocks of buildings of identical heights for miles and miles across the cityscape. “Those drawings look like Paris,” says Roddewig.



The Plan never comes out and recommends uniform building heights. Yet, in a section on what he called the Heart of Chicago, Burnham writes that this central business

district will become so popular and important that uniformity will result from market forces.

“The ground, being devoted to business purposes, will become so valuable that the buildings will rise to the height permitted by law,” he writes. And, while no one’s ever made much about it, that’s what happened, at least in a couple places.

“If you look at South Michigan Avenue across the street from Grant Park, and along east Lake Shore Drive where the Drake Hotel is, you can see how the concept of a uniform cornice line height [i.e., uniform building heights] looks,” says Roddewig.

What happened was, those buildings went up in the 1920s when there was a maximum building height and they were constructed as tall as permitted. Changes in the building height laws, which permitted taller buildings if set-backs and open space were provided at ground level, led to a wider variation in building heights later.

Two visions

Grant Park is undoubtedly the result of the Burnham Plan, as is the development of the lakefront as a long string of parkland.

But they’re not exactly as Burnham envisioned them.

Burnham wanted to put three monumental culturally oriented buildings in Grant Park --- one in the center and one at each end. If that concept had been carried out, undoubtedly other buildings would have appeared up and down the city’s Lake Michigan shoreline amid the parkland that was created in the century since publication of the Plan.

But Burnham’s idea ran headlong into A. Montgomery Ward who, since 1890, had been waging a series of legal battles to keep buildings out of Grant Park. He argued that, since 1836, the land had been designated in legal documents as “Public Ground—A Common to Remain Forever Open, Clear and Free of any Buildings, or other Obstruction Whatever.”

In October, 1909, less than four months after publication of the Burnham Plan, Ward won a final victory in the Illinois Supreme Court. No new buildings would be permitted in Grant Park, period.

“And so,” Roddewig notes, “Grant Park today reflects a combination of two visions, the Burnham vision of a

cultural center, and the Ward vision of an open space preserved for the people of Chicago.”

The legal architecture that resulted in the combination of these two visions can't be seen. But, without question, it's been influential for a century now --- and will continue far into the future.