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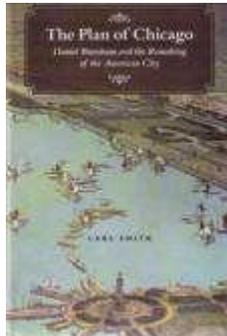
### Q&A with Carl Smith – “How the world came to be the way it is”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 11/09/2009 –9:05 am.

#### *First of three*

Carl Smith has had a ringside seat for this year’s celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Plan of Chicago.

In 2006, after a series of academic and publishing twists and turns, he came to publish a book about the document, more commonly called the Burnham Plan, after its principal author Daniel Burnham.



“The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City” (University of Chicago Press) received a lot of attention that year, but it really boomed as a local bestseller this year.

Not only was it a touchstone for many of the experts, planners and audience members involved in the hundreds of events that were part of the celebration, but it was also selected to be read and discussed throughout the city in October under the Chicago Public Library’s One Book, One Chicago program.

Suddenly, Smith, a well-respected professor of history and literature at Northwestern University, was a celebrity of sorts and found himself caught up in all the talk and thinking about the Burnham Plan --- and about the efforts today to plan for the future.

In a recent interview, he discussed the experience. In this installment from an edited transcript of that conversation, Smith ponders the great public interest in the Burnham Plan.

## THE BURNHAM BLOG

Urban planning touches every part of your day to day life. Join the conversation that is shaping the region for the next 100 years.

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## ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It’s rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

## 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. [\[MORE\]](#)



Photo by Stefani Foster

**Question: During this year's celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Plan of Chicago, the city and suburbs have gone ga-ga over that document. More than 1,000 events have been held throughout the region in 2009 to highlight the plan and the importance of regional planning. Did you ever envision anything like this when you began writing your book?**

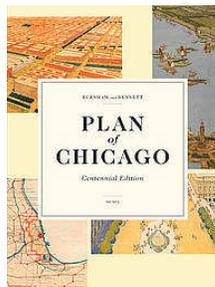
Answer: When I write, I always write with an idea of the general reader who is interested in the topic. This is the case with all the books I write, but this one obviously hit a cultural interest that was already there.

I knew the centennial was coming, but I did not have the centennial in mind when I wrote the book.

In 2006 before the Burnham Plan Centennial started its work, I spoke on this book at a number of places, including the major cultural institutions of the city, and I was both surprised and gratified by the size, enthusiasm and knowledge of the audiences,

The Burnham Plan Centennial group became aware of my book and saw it as a very fortuitous development. Their interests were --- by their remarkable series of events --- to talk about the past but with an eye toward how Chicago might think about its future.

Between the remarkable energy and imagination with which the Burnham Plan Centennial people put their events together and the longstanding interest in [the people of] Chicago in Chicago history in general and in the built environment in Chicago in general, this book received a larger audience than any of us anticipated, and it's obviously very gratifying.

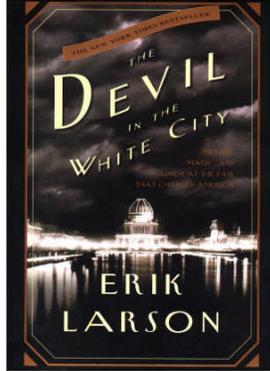


**Question: Why was there such great interest in the Burnham Plan?**

Answer: More than other cities in my experience, people in Chicago are interested in their history, and I think the particular appeal of Burnham and the Plan is that it connects so

clearly in the way the city actually looks today. People are naturally interested in how the world in which they live came to be the way it is.

There's also a desire to look for the key people who were very important in transforming the past into the world in which we live today, and Burnham provides this kind of charismatic figure.



**Question: To what extent did Erik Larson's book "The Devil in the White City" --- which dealt in part with Burnham's role in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition which sold more than a million copies --- influence the interest in the Burnham Plan?**

**Answer:** It's hard to gauge precisely, and I'm not sure it had any role in getting people interested in the Plan. But, certainly, when that many people read a book, half of which is devoted to a particular historical figure, it raises the visibility of that figure and, I would guess, generates an interest in Burnham's life which made a kind of bridge to the Plan as well.

**Question: Because of your book, you became a star of many of the Burnham events this year. How was that?**

**Answer:** I went into the profession of scholar and teacher because of my interest in this period as one of transformation of the 19th century world into the world in which we live, and to have the opportunity to talk about it with other people. To have this kind of broader interest is a scholar and teacher's dream come true.

People ask me if I get tired of talking about this stuff. The short answer is: No. Wherever I've gone, I've been very gratified by the interest and the intelligence and the energy of the audiences, and how much they just want to know and how much they're interested in talking about these things, including some of the shortcomings of the Plan. I've had a great time doing this.

*Next: "He was in their club"*