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Q&A with Carl Smith – “he was in their club”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Tue., 11/10/2009 –10:33 am.

Second of three

Hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans and visitors learned more about Daniel Burnham and the Plan of Chicago this year during the centennial celebration of that document.

So did Carl Smith.

At dozens of events, Smith, the author of “The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City” (University of Chicago Press), appeared as the premier expert on the Plan. But, as much as he knew, he says he broadened his knowledge about Burnham by listening to other scholars and to Burnham’s descendants.



Moses (above) and Burnham



In this installment from an edited transcript of a recent interview, Smith tells about these new insights about the Burnham Plan and why it’s accurate to call it that.

Question: Obviously, after writing your book, you knew a lot about Burnham and his Plan. But were there things you learned this year that you hadn’t found in your research?

Answer: Absolutely. Among the things I came to appreciate more after talking with Kristen Schaffer is the influence of

Swedenborg on Burnham. I became curious of what the difference was between Burnham and Robert Moses and

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

others, and I think it was this sense of connecting to a larger transcendent whole and a positive spiritual force. It keeps him from megalomania, that sense that he is a servant and not a master.

I came to appreciate the way he fit into the larger planning history, listening to other scholars like Harold Platt, David van Zanten, Kristen Schaffer and Dennis McClendon of CartoGraphics. I've gone back and re-read the Plan a few more times. Every time I read it, I find new things.

One of the great developments coming out of this interest is the website of the Burnham and Bennett papers that the Art Institute of Chicago put together. I've been able to read with more care the draft that Burnham wrote. I'm very proud I helped prompt that kind of thing.

I got to learn stuff about Bennett I'd never known before thanks to the new materials that Lake Forest College has made available, particularly the remarkable photographs taken while people were working on the Plan.

I've learned a ton of things. That's a large part of the fun of this.

I also met his family!

Question: Technically, we should call it the Burnham-Bennett Plan since they were the co-authors. But most people refer to it as the Burnham Plan. And, in your book, you agree with that.



Photo by Stefani Foster

Answer: I always have made clear when I give a talk that Burnham hardly worked alone. He's the key figure, the figure without which there might not have been a Plan at all. But there was the extensive work of Edward Bennett and the key members of the Commercial Club committees, for instance, Charles Norton on down, and people like Charles Wacker, after Burnham's death, who promoted it.

Burnham is the inspiration for it. The Commercial Club had right at hand, as one of its members, this person who directed the construction of the Columbian Exposition, basically the largest civic triumph in recent

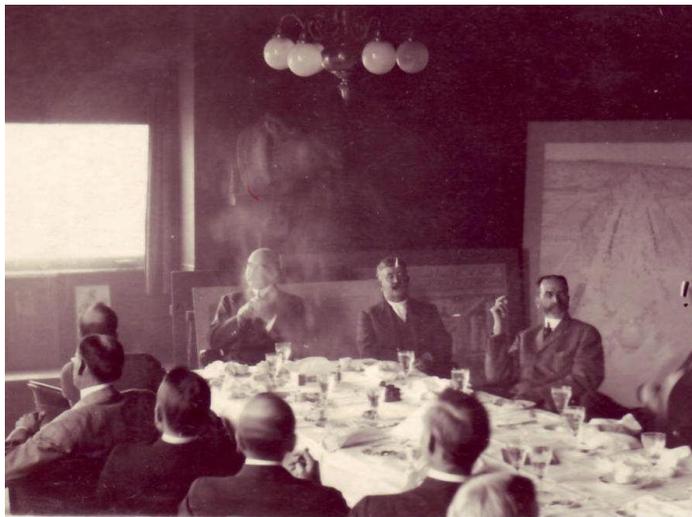
memory and who's now experienced in doing the plans for Washington and Cleveland and San Francisco and Manila and Baguio.

The distinctive things about the Plan of Chicago are: First of all, it's made up of a lot of different parts. It has different recommendations, related to each other and related to the whole idea of Chicago as a region.

Second, rarely have proposals like this been stated with such eloquence, and here, very possibly, Burnham's Swedenborgian faith is linked to this. Yes, it's about making this place a sound big city. But it's also about connecting it to eternal values

Third, no other plan had so powerful a group behind it as the Commercial Club. One of the things that were remarkable to me as I was writing this was how much the rest of the city looked to this small, private organization, how much the city was interested in their work. This group had a kind of cultural power and visibility that has no equivalent today.

Why they picked Burnham was because he was the premier planning figure in America, one could argue. He was profoundly interested in Chicago, and he was one of theirs. He built their houses. He built their office buildings. He built their fair. He was in the Club.



Burnham (to the right of man behind cigar smoke) and other Chicago leaders