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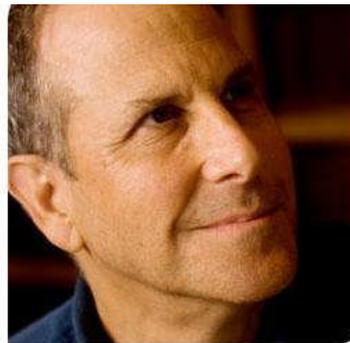
### Q&A with Carl Smith – “All this energy”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Tue., 11/13/2009 –9:32 am.

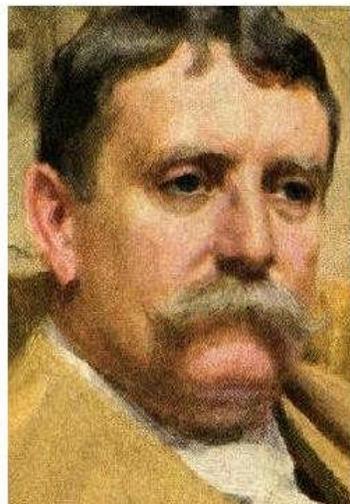
#### *Third of three*

That was then, Carl Smith says. This is now.

Throughout this year, Smith, the author of “The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City” (University of Chicago Press), has been asked how Burnham, the principal author of the Plan, would react to today’s planning challenges.



Smith (above) and Burnham



That’s not the right question, he would say. The right question is: How are we going to react to today’s planning challenges?

In this final installment of an edited transcript of a recent interview, Smith talks about the responsibilities of today’s generation to do what Burnham did -- to look the future in the face and to make decisions on how we want it to be.

**Question: What are the lessons people should learn from this year?**

Answer: That the world that we live in is one that people like us created, and that we have the responsibility and the power to change it and not accept it as the way it is.

## THE BURNHAM BLOG

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

Whether you agree with the specific proposals of the Plan, the larger lesson there is that you can take on a task like this and be effective and try to re-make your world for the better.

A lot of people ask what would Burnham have thought of this and what would Burnham have thought of that. That's an interesting historical speculation, but the great lesson of Burnham is you learn from the past but you should not be imprisoned by the past.

You basically try to shape your own future the best you can in the moment in which you're living. Burnham was working 100 years ago. That was then, and this is now. He understood his historical moment, and the key is to try to understand and learn from Burnham but not be prisoners of him.

The problem that you have now is that the region is much larger, and there are many more municipalities and local governments, and trying to coordinate this is very, very difficult.

There is, I think, a larger sense that's quite unfortunate that we are in a zero-sum society. So there are winners and losers, that the pie is finite. So instead of trying to make the pie bigger and better for everyone, it's: What is to my town's benefit? It's very hard to get people to work together and to see the larger whole.

Some things that make it harder are probably to the good.

There is no group that has the kind of clout that the Commercial Club had then. We live in a very heterogeneous, complex, urban democracy. There are a lot of people then who didn't have much of a voice. For example, women did not have the vote in Illinois until 1914. There were all kinds of disempowered groups, by race, ethnicity or class.

It's a more complex time today so people rightfully want their voice to be heard and their interests to be met. The key is to find a way to do that, and still have a sense of the whole.

**Question: There was a lot of talk and interest in regional planning this year. Will it continue next year and beyond?**

Answer: I'm a historian. I deal with the past. But I would hope so.

A big issue now is how to take all this energy and how to direct it. I think there is a much larger awareness now to planning and planning issues. I hope it translates into meaningful action.