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### Agent provocateurs

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 11/16/2009 –10:38 am.

Today, we don't think of Daniel Burnham as a radical, as an agent provocateur. Yet, that's what he was.

Take a look at how barren the lakefront off Grant Park was in 1909 (below) --- and notice how the railroad tracks blocked people from getting to the water easily.



To go from that to today's park with its beauty and elegance, with its standing as Chicago's front yard (below) --- well, it was quite a journey. And it was a journey made because Burnham and his allies looked into the future and saw something radically different from what their eyes could see.



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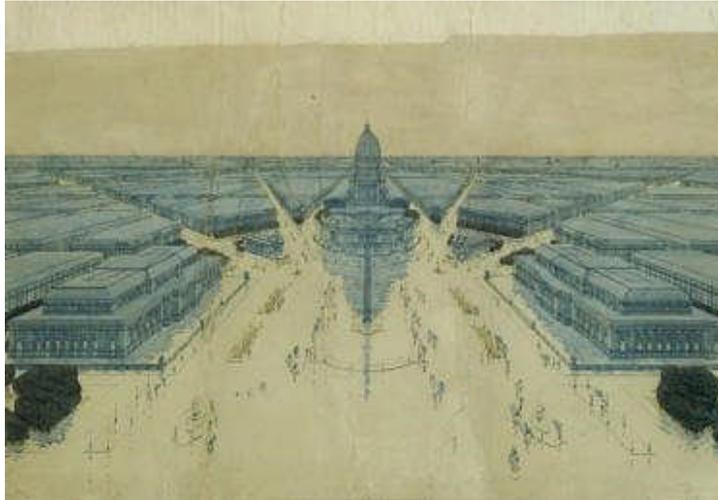
### ABOUT THIS BLOG

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. [\[MORE\]](#)

Look at the pages of the Burnham Plan. Jules Guerin's pretty drawings are wonderful, and they show a Chicago very unlike the city of 1909. The message was: If we plan and work together, we can reach this attractive, orderly, vibrant city.



Of course, the Chicago of the Plan isn't the Chicago of today.

In bringing to life the Plan's proposals, the people and leaders of Chicago adjusted them, refined them, rethought them. The result --- take Grant Park, as an example --- wasn't exactly what Burnham had in mind. But it was a vast improvement over what the city had been.

That was Burnham's role as an agent provocateur --- to be, in the immortal words of Reggie Jackson, "the straw that stirs the drink." To urge people. To nudge people. To spur people to act to make their city and their region better.

And that's the role Doug Farr took on Saturday during a panel discussion on the Chicago of the next 100 years during the concluding weekend of the Chicago Humanities Festival.

The discussion was one of three Burnham-related events in the Harold Washington Library Center that were the last official activities of this year's celebration of the centennial of the publication of the Plan. The others were an exhibit of Chicago-related classroom projects using the Burnham Plan as an inspiration and a second panel that examined the Chicago region's immediate needs in preparing for its future.

## To stir the drink



In his efforts to stir the drink, Farr (left), the founder and president of Farr Associates, a Chicago-based sustainable architecture and planning firm, eschewed nuance.

Instead, he shot from the hip with flat, ex cathedra statements, so baldly challenging as to be highly provocative. That was the aim --- to paint pictures of what the future Chicago might look like without having to worry about how to get there.

Like the Chicagoans of a century ago, if we see a goal to move toward, we'll head in that direction and land somewhere near it.

"In this region," Farr said at one point, "we don't need to consume any more land for the next 100 years."

No more sprawl? None, I guess.

"The neighborhood," he said, "is the essential unit of urbanism, of cities."

Okay, that's hard to argue with in a post-Robert Moses world in which the ghost of Jane Jacobs is the guardian angel.

"We will all," Farr said, "live in neighborhoods where we can meet our daily needs. That's how we should live in 100 years."

That's a pretty idea. But it raises myriad questions about where the "we" of that future will work, what happens to the car-inspired world "we" of the present live in, what people who don't live near Lake Michigan will do if they want to go swimming, and on and on.

"The missing element of sustainability is change in conduct," he said.

In other words, if we're going to have a greener world, we can't rely on tinkering with structures. We're going to have to live a greener lifestyle. That's easy enough to see --- if not to do.

## **No new skyscrapers**

Farr hit a drink-stirring trifecta with a slide showing an aerial view of his imagined future Chicago lakefront with (a) wind turbines in Lake Michigan, (b) all of the city's skyscrapers repainted white and (3) virtually no new skyscrapers.

When pressed by questions from the audience, he acknowledged that, yes, North Dakota would be a better place for wind turbines. The turbines in the lake, he said, were "symbolic, provocative."

Painting the Willis Tower (nee Sears Tower) and all of the city's other skyscrapers white would be a way of saving energy since white reflects the sun's heat rather than absorbing it.

No new skyscrapers?

"Tall buildings aren't the answer to any of the future's problems," Farr said. "We should stop doing them." Apparently, he was echoing the complaints of environmentalists who argue that skyscrapers only work if energy is cheap.

Regarding the need to increase the use of public transportation, Farr said, "Railroads will come back when highways go away." Then, he showed a slide of a bike-athon along the otherwise empty lakefront.

"We need to get cars off Lake Shore Drive," he said.

## **Slowing down cars**

Later, though, an audience member raised a real world complaint about these energy-conserving bicycles --- that pedestrians fear for their lives whenever bicyclists are nearby.

That complaint was handled initially by another panel member, John Tolva who oversees the link between technology and citizenship for IBM --- and who is a bicyclist.

"We should keep the sidewalk for people," Tolva said, and the statement was greeted by the only round of applause during the 90-minute session. "Bikes do not belong on the sidewalk.

"Bikes should be on the road, but, right now, the road is owned by cars."

Ah, but Doug Farr had an answer for that.

“As more bikes come onto the streets, drivers will adjust,” he said. “So bikes will slow down cars.”

A century ago, was Daniel Burnham as out there as Doug Farr? Yeah.

Does that mean Farr’s provocative ideas are the roadmap we should use, the way that earlier generation used the Burnham Plan?

Not necessarily.

But maybe. Maybe one of many roadmaps.