

## THE BURNHAM BLOG

Vision & Theme

About the Logo

Centennial Committee and Staff

Sponsors

Newsroom

News Coverage

Press Releases

E-News & Social Media

The Burnham Blog

Get Involved

Contact Us

### Learning a sense of place in the second grade

by Patrick T. Reardon on Wed, 11/25/2009 - 9:43am.



I don't know about you, but, for me, second grade was a key moment in my life.

I was seven, and I remember, one day, I looked around at the world, and I understood it. It all made sense.

What I mean, I think, is that I understood that my family and I were part of a neighborhood. That neighborhood was part of a city. That city was part of a country which was part of the Earth. Which was part of the Universe.

Everything fitted together. My guess is that, before this insight, I'd been taking in all of this information about the world in which I lived, but I hadn't been able to see the full picture. Suddenly, the picture was in focus.

Maybe that's why I was so enchanted with the work of the second-grade students from Ingrid Swenson's art class at the Louisa May Alcott School in the Lincoln Park neighborhood.

Swenson had been talking with the children about maps,

architecture, buildings and perspective.

#### “Something that pops out”

So she gave them an assignment to create a city skyline, but to make it layered the way the actual skyline is, with some

## 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.

→ Register or Login to comment

### SUBSCRIBE VIA RSS



Use our RSS feed to track new blog posts.

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

buildings in front, others in the middle and still others in the back.

The children got out their colorful construction paper and did just that. And the results were....like the real thing.

One girl's creation had a low row of pink paper buildings in the front. Behind those was another slightly taller row of green buildings --- or maybe they were hills. And behind those were very tall orange buildings with lots and lots of carefully drawn windows.

Three yellow futuristic structures --- influenced by the "Star Wars" movies, Swenson thinks --- were in the front of one boy's work. Then there was a row of orange buildings. And in the back were green hills, one of which was topped by a single tree.

The layering of the buildings gave each of the creations a three-dimensional feel --- and it captured that aspect of perspective in a delightfully clear way that even a guy who hasn't been in second grade for a long time could see and understand.

"They love the idea of something that pops out," Swenson said. And that's what each of these city scenes does.

"If you push them to be innovative, they really just explode," she said.

### **"The way these look"**

Alcott is one of 32 Chicago public schools with demonstration programs under the Bold Plans Big Dreams education initiative of the Burnham Plan Centennial. The goal of the initiative is to help children learn more about their city and about their own role as residents in helping to make it better.

In addition to overseeing the creation of a Chicago-oriented curriculum unit for third- and eighth-graders for use throughout the system as well as other resources, the Centennial has provided Alcott and the rest of the demonstration schools with new books, maps and videos and a grant for developing creative approaches to learning about the city.

Some of the results were on display at the Harold Washington Library Center in the Loop during the recent Chicago Humanities Festival. That's where I saw the work of Swenson's second-graders.

"Everybody loves the way these look," Swenson (right) said.

She's taking a Chicago-oriented tack in all her art classes this year.



This semester, kindergarteners are learning what an architect is. Fourth-graders are studying the 1909 Burnham Plan, officially the Plan of Chicago. Sixth-graders are drawing cities in perspective. Eighth-graders are looking at the influence of a single man, Daniel Burnham, on the city. Next semester, she'll have similar lessons for the odd-numbered grades.

## **“A sense of place”**

The layered skylines by the second-graders will soon be followed by another creative assignment. “Eventually, everybody’s going to make their own three-dimensional building,” Swenson said.

“I love architecture,” she said. “If you love something, it’s really interesting to talk about it.

“I’ve always loved maps, and I’ve loved structures. I love drawing things that have straight lines. I wanted to be an architect.”

Why? What is it about architecture that she loves? What is it about architecture that she’s trying to teach her students?

“It’s a sense of place,” Swenson said.

And that’s what her second-graders will bring away from their work to create a layered skyline and construct in 3-D their own building.

They’ll never look at the city in quite the same way again, or at any of its buildings.

The world will make more sense for them because they will have a better sense of how it works and how it fits together.

And have a better sense of where they are.

And who they are.