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Plain talk for Daniel Burnham...again

By Patrick T. Reardon on Thu., 07/09/2009 –8:12 pm.

Daniel Burnham is back selling the Plan of Chicago --- on stage at the Lookingglass Theatre.

As part of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Plan, Lookingglass ensemble member John Musial has adapted for the stage a lantern-slide lecture by Burnham, called “A Plain Talk on the Plan for the Future Development of Chicago.”

A century after the presentation was first given, it’s possible to hear Burnham (Lookingglass member Raymond Fox) go to bat one more time for the Plan he co-wrote with his aide Edward H. Bennett, a document often called simply the Burnham Plan.



Raymond Fox as Daniel Burnham

“It’s very much in his voice. It feels like he wrote it. There’s a lot of character in the voice,” says Musial.

“Why do we need at plan at all?...Because we the people do not get enough out of our lives, and not nearly as much as we could if things here in Chicago were different.” --- from “A Plain Talk” by Daniel Burnham

The performance of “Our Future Metropolis,” directed by Musial, will be presented four times on the Lookingglass stage at the Water Tower Water Works at 821 N. Michigan Ave. on Monday, July 13; Tuesday, July 14; Monday, July 20; and Tuesday, July 21. Starting time is 7:30 p.m., except on July 14 when it is 6:30 p.m.

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

What's fascinating about Burnham's text --- which is also online at a School of the Art Institute of Chicago site --- is the perspective that a hundred years give.



John Musial

“It’s this platonic city, the city that could be,” Musial says of the metropolis that Burnham describes in the lecture. “We’re living in the city as it actually is.”

The speech was given sometime in the second half of 1909 after publication of the Plan on July 4. In it, Burnham promotes aspects of the Plan that were eventually implemented in one form or another, such as the extensive string of

lakefront parks and the lush collection of forest preserves ringing the city.

“Twelve or fifteen miles out you see these big green stretches on this map. They are intended to be large wild wood spaces, to be kept just as any natural woods are; a place you may go on your Sundays and holidays and enjoy the flowers, birds and shade of the trees just as if you owned them, as indeed you will.” --- from “A Plain Talk”

Musial says that, until he read the speech, he hadn’t been aware of the metropolitan-wide impact of the Plan through its proposals for regional highways and forest preserves.

“I grew up in the western suburbs, and we always had the forest preserves around us,” he says. “It was interesting to see where the idea came from, and to see that it was a connected system.”

The talk, though, as given by Burnham, also makes clear that there were many things in the Plan that never saw the light of day, such as the Civic Center complex at Halsted and Congress Streets and the star-like configuration of diagonal streets radiating out from that location.

Musial, who has a master’s degree in architecture from the University of Illinois at Chicago and works at the architecture firm of Mark Miller Architects & Builders, says the lecture shows that Burnham wanted “to address issues of poverty and how the Plan should be for everyone.”

Indeed, it appears that Burnham's audience was a gathering of average citizens, rather than the city's elite, because he mentions at one point that improved urban order will benefit "us, the common people." He also argues that neighborhood parks help the poor become better citizens by providing an alternative to the overcrowded conditions in turn-of-the-century Chicago.

"And here on these [park] spaces your children shall be brought up, not in secret places, wherein bad habits and evil thoughts are formed, but in fresh, bright, open conditions that will naturally lead to clean life, love of helping each other, and good citizenship." --- from "A Plain Talk"

The lecture, Musial says, shows Burnham as someone who could communicate across class lines. "Burnham was an organizer of men," he says. "He was comfortable talking with the high culture elite. But he also would be on a building site talking to bricklayers."

Nonetheless, Musial notes that, at bottom, "Our Future Metropolis" isn't about Burnham.

"It's the Plan that's interesting. There isn't a narrative arc. This is more a slice of history."