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Being Daniel Burnham

By Patrick T. Reardon on Thu., 07/16/2009 –8:46 am.

Daniel Burnham V says it's very, very odd being Daniel Burnham during the 100th anniversary celebration of the publication of the Plan of Chicago.

"I'm not a planner," says the 21-year-old Indiana University senior. "I didn't accomplish any of this. But there's this expectation of many people for me to wax poetic about the lakefront."

Not that he's complaining, and not that he doesn't like the lakefront. But, at this moment of Burnham-mania --- at least, in Chicago --- it is weird to have the famous name of the main writer of the 1909 Plan, commonly called the Burnham Plan.

It's weird for me just to be interviewing Daniel Burnham.



Daniel Burnham

Daniel Burnham V

Burnham V is working this summer as an intern at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), a newly formed regional organization that is a direct descendant of his great-great-grandfather's Plan.

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

His job is to oversee CMAP's presence on Facebook and Twitter, and to write a report for in-house use comparing the times and circumstances that led to the 1909 Plan and those influencing the preparation, now underway, of CMAP's own plan, GO TO 2040.

At IU in his hometown of Bloomington, where his parents are horticulturists, Burnham is majoring in religious studies and the philosophy of science, and, through his enjoyment of scuba diving --- his Facebook photo shows him in a scuba mask --- he's also developing an interest in undersea archeology.

"I wanted to be here [in Chicago] when I started finding out all that was going on this summer," Burnham tells me as we sit in the offices of the Chaddick Institute at DePaul University. It's just a few minutes before a Saturday morning tea at which Burnham and other members of his extended family will meet with students and discuss their famous forebear.

Sure, he knows about the earlier Daniel Burnham's fame as an urban planner, but, as someone who's interested in the spiritual side of life, he's drawn to that aspect of his ancestor.

"My impressions are more tied to his Swedenborgian beliefs, his religious life, this mystical-artistic side of him. There's a side of him that's devoted to doing good works for others," Burnham says. Indeed, in his CMAP report, he hopes to delve somewhat into the social programs that were proposed by the first Daniel Burnham in his draft of the Plan but ultimately left out of the document.

As we talk, the tall and thin Burnham comes across as a thoughtful, self-possessed young man with wide curiosity. Last summer, he traveled in India, South Korea and Bhutan, and, a year from now, he's thinking of spending a year or more in Japan teaching English.

He's interested, he says, in "how the East is different from the West based on religious principles." And, lest anyone find strange his interest in both religious studies and the philosophy of science, he notes, "You can classify science as a belief system of its own. There's some amount of dogmatism to science."

As for his own religious beliefs, Burnham says, "I'm a spiritual person. But I don't follow any religion in particular."



Daniel Burnham

Daniel Burnham V

Later, after the interview, Burnham sends me an email with links to some entries he's written on CMAP's own blog. They're particularly interesting because, even though he's not a professional planner and has no expectations of a career in the field, his thoughts resonate with his great-great-grandfather's words.

One titled "The Cooperative Metropolis" is a meditation on the urban experience.

Despite his rural roots, Burnham writes, "I am still giddy at the prospect of spending my weekdays swaying with the breeze inside the 1,451 foot tall pillar of elastic steel and glass better known as the Willis (nee Sears) Tower."

Quoting a section of the Plan rhapsodizing about "the spirit of Chicago [as] our greatest asset," Burnham V comments, "More than the sum of their parts, in Burnham's view, it is the people's prerogative to ensure that good ideas and solid planning come to pass...."

"The city is by nature a cooperative ecosystem, humans working together to achieve something otherwise impossible."