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What would Daniel Burnham do? Forgetaboutit!

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 07/20/2009 –7:52 am.

For me, the most striking thing about the Lookingglass Theatre's re-creation of Daniel Burnham's 1909 lantern-slide lecture called "A Plain Talk on the Plan for the Future Development of Chicago" is how much of what Burnham saw as important never got done.

The presentation, which opened last week and concludes with performances at 7:30 p.m. on Monday and Tuesday, features Lookingglass member Raymond Fox as Burnham.

In the talk, taken almost verbatim from a typescript in the Burnham archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, Burnham outlines the Plan's ideas for a Grant Park crowded with cultural buildings. Never done, thanks to Montgomery Ward's legal efforts to keep that land "forever, open, free and clear."



He details proposals for new diagonal streets to make crossing the city faster. Except for some extensions of Ogden Avenue (later truncated), this wasn't done either, and that's probably a good thing. Burnham couldn't foresee how much the increased use of cars would clog up these angle streets to a much greater extent than on those following the street grid.

And he trumpets a monumentally massive domed Civic Center building at Halsted Street and what is now the Eisenhower Expressway. Not only would this have wiped Jane Addams's Hull House settlement complex, assisting thousands of poor immigrants, off the city's map, but it would have shifted development away from the Loop, weakening the central business district.

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

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It was a plan. And, as a plan, it was a collection of a lot of ideas, some of which caught the fancy of voters and civic leaders and some of which were ignored for one reason or another.

A hagiographic glow

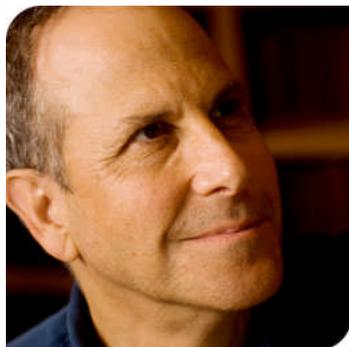
I found the Lookingglass performance a nice tonic in this summer of Burnham. With all the hoopla over the man and the 100th anniversary of his Plan, there's a hagiographic glow that's begun to surround Burnham. He's become an urban saint, unable to do wrong, unable to err.

"A Plain Talk" was a reminder that the great man was as human as the rest of us.

Another reminder was the article in Friday's Reader by architecture critic Lynn Becker, "An Odd Way to Honor Burnham," which gave some perspective on Burnham's failings as a planner.

Burnham, for all of the hosannas, isn't the be-all and end-all of urban planning.

That was Carl Smith's message when, during a panel discussion after the first performance of "A Plain Talk" on July 13, he was asked by an audience member: "What would Burnham do about the 2016 Olympics?"



Smith, a Northwestern University professor of literature and history, is one of the busiest men in Chicago this summer. That's because he's the author of the 2006 book "The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the

American City," a thoroughly researched, well-written examination of the Plan and its impact on Chicago. It's the selection for the city's One Book, One Chicago program this fall.

Don't worry about what Burnham would do, Smith told the questioner.

"What do you think should be done?"

"Your best judgment"

Later, Smith and I talked about the tendency, over the past century, to invoke Burnham's name and his dictum "Make no little plans" to buttress virtually any development idea --- or any idea.

The temptation is even stronger this year, the 100th anniversary of the Plan that Burnham wrote with Edward Bennett --- “What would Daniel Burnham do?”

That was then, and this is now,” Smith says. “You have to learn from the past, but you don’t have to be imprisoned by the past. You decide on your best judgment. It’s a different city in a different time. You use him as an inspiration and not as an all-purpose seer.”

Burnham’s Burnham



That was how Burnham worked. If you look at the Plan, you can see he had his own Burnham, his own model of a great planner --- Baron Georges-Eugenie Haussmann.

Working on behalf of Napoleon III, Haussmann transformed Paris between 1852 and 1870 by creating wide boulevards that sliced through that city’s rabbit warren of streets and neighborhoods and by imposing strict regulations on development.

“As if by intuition, he grasped the entire problem,” the Plan says of Haussmann. “Taking counsel neither of expediency nor of compromise, he ever sought the true and proper solution. To him Paris appeared as a highly organized unit, and he strove to create ideal conditions throughout the city.”

So Haussmann was Burnham’s inspiration. But the Chicagoan didn’t attempt to follow the Parisian slavishly.

When Burnham looked at Haussmann’s work, Smith says, “he was thinking about what would work in Chicago in 1909, and that included the fact that this was a city in a democracy, not in a French empire.”

Have your say

Today’s heir to Burnham’s legacy is the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) which is in the midst of developing a comprehensive plan for the region, called GO TO 2040. It’s an organization that, for the first time, has official standing and financial clout to set transportation and development policy throughout northeastern Illinois.

The agency’s softball team is called WWDBD, short for “What Would Daniel Burnham Do?” It’s facetious, of course. If anyone knows how important it is not to be

imprisoned by the ideas and approaches of Burnham, it's CMAP.

One example of how different their approaches are:

Burnham worked with a small group of business leaders, planners and draughtsmen to create his Plan --- and then presented it to the public.

CMAP, by contrast, is actively recruiting anyone and everyone in the seven-county metropolitan region to contribute ideas and opinions for its GO TO 2040 plan. In fact, all you have to do is head to CMAP's "Have Your Say" website...and have your say.

Well, what do you think?