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A model city?

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri., 08/07/2009 –8:49 am.

For me, there's something disconcerting about Chicago Model City. Something unsettling.

No question, a lot of people think it's crazy cool, people like Mayor Richard M. Daley who has urged Chicagoans to bring their children to see it. "Let's get our young people to think early about urban planning and sustainability for our cities, just as Daniel Burnham did a century ago," the mayor said in a statement.

The [model](#) --- showing the lakefront, the Loop and more than 1,000 sharply detailed buildings at 1/600th their actual size --- really is an amazement.



It's a huge 320-square-foot adult toy, fashioned with a gee-whiz technology called stereolithography. Under that three-dimensional printing process, the location and dimensions of a building are fed into a machine that uses a laser beam to sculpt a scale-model (1 inch = 50 feet) out of acrylic resin. It cost \$1.1 million, much of which was covered by in-kind contributions.

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

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. [\[MORE\]](#)

Replicating 400 city blocks, the model, created by the [Chicago Architecture Foundation](#), is on display, free of charge, in the atrium of the Santa Fe Building at 224 S. Michigan Ave. through Nov. 20. (There's also a [website](#).)



It's a location that's redolent with symbolism.

The Santa Fe is the former Railway Exchange Building where architect Daniel Burnham had his offices and where, in a rooftop 18th floor studio, he led the creation of the 1909 Plan of Chicago, a seminal document in the growth of the city and in the establishment of urban planning as a discipline. Today, the building is the headquarters of the architecture foundation.

Beijing inspiration

The inspiration for Chicago Model City was a similar scale model that Daley and Lynn Osmond, the foundation's president and CEO, saw in Beijing.

"The mayor went to Beijing, he saw the model and he flipped," said Susan Ross, a foundation spokeswoman. "Our president and CEO also went, saw and flipped. [When Daley and Osmond returned to Chicago] it was probably a twinkle in both their eyes."

So why didn't I flip when I saw it?



we're in now...Where's City Hall?"

I probably would have at the age of 10. The 10-year-old me would have found the model fascinating. "Oh, I've been up in that building...Ooo, that's the building

Of course, at some point, it would have gotten frustrating because I would have imagined myself crawling around in the middle of that model, playing with toy soldiers (who wouldn't have fit the scale but, at 10, you don't really worry too much about that). And

crawling around in the middle of the model is not permitted.

Perhaps that's why I felt unsettled looking at the model the other day.

Although nearly half a century older than that 10-year-old me, I'd still like somehow to get into the model in some way. I guess what I'd like to do is to be able to



move sections out of the way so I could put my head down at the level of, say State and Monroe, and look up and down the streets --- to get a giant's perspective of what I've seen throughout my life from the sidewalk.

I was also disconcerted because I wasn't sure what the point of the model is, the goal.

So I asked Ross who told me: "It gives you a bigger perspective of the city and how things fit together. If you're a real estate developer or a hotel developer, you can look at the model and see your site in relation to other things. Another goal is, if you're from St. Louis or San Francisco or wherever, you see it, and it gives you ideas about your own city."

Oddly bland



I suspect that at the bottom of my unease is a sense that I've seen this particular piece of Chicago so many times that, for all its technological pizzazz, the model is oddly bland. For

me, at least.

This hunk of Chicago landscape is the city that guidebooks focus on. It's Tourist Chicago, Postcard Chicago. It's the Sears Tower and the Bean and the Loop. Photos of Chicago from the air almost always capture this perspective.

Sure, it's the heart of Chicago --- the financial, political and social center of the city and the region as well. I understand why architects and architecture-fans drool

over the model. Nowhere else in the city are there so many interestingly designed structures.

Yet, Chicago is more than downtown.

For me, it would have been much cooler to see a 400-block, scale model of the Edgewater neighborhood where I live, or of the Bronzeville community on the South Side, or the Hispanic enclave of Little Village on the Near Southwest Side.

Or a similar-size area of Naperville, or Rolling Meadows, or Steger: “Oh, I’ve eaten a hotdog at that strip

mall...Ooo, that’s the corner where I saw the accident happen....Where’s the McDonald’s?”

Well, it turns out that my hankerings for models of other Chicago-region places is shared by Gregory Dreicer, the vice president of exhibitions and programs at the architecture foundation, as I’ll detail in my next posting.

(Next: A model region)