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A model region

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 08/10/2009 –8:57 am.

Second of two

For Gregory Dreicer, Chicago Model City is too small.

That's saying something since it's a huge, 320-square-foot, computer-created, three-dimensional scale model of about 400 city blocks in and around the Loop.

And also because Dreicer, the vice president of exhibitions and programs for the Chicago Architecture Foundation, oversaw its creation.



The exhibit, completed as part of the celebration of the centennial of the Plan of Chicago, contains replicas of more than 1,000 buildings at 1/600th their size (one inch = 50 feet).

It's on display through Nov. 20, free of charge, in the atrium of the Santa Fe Building at 224 S. Michigan Ave. where the Plan's principal writer Daniel Burnham had his offices and where the architecture foundation is headquartered. There's also a [website](#).

Dreicer, who came to the foundation two and a half years ago from New York, is excited about the whiz-bang technology called stereolithography that uses a computer-directed laser beam to carve buildings for the model out of acrylic resin.

"You can 'print out' a new building anytime you want. You can 'print' a more detailed copy of a building. You can 'print' it at any size you want," he says. "You can keep up-to-date.

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

“This model is a work in progress.”

"The Chicago region"

But, when Dreicer thinks about the future of the model, he's thinking far beyond tinkering with the mammoth exhibit as it's now configured. He's thinking about an exhibit that's much larger.

“The Chicago region is what we're about,” he says. “You can't separate the Loop from the region.”

So that's what an expanded model will try to capture. Well, not the whole region, obviously. At the 1 inch/50 feet scale, you'd end up with a model that would cover nine square miles.

Instead, the foundation's exhibit in the future will include models --- at the same or different scales --- of city neighborhoods and Chicago suburbs.

"So much to choose from"

“Off the top of my head,” Dreicer says, “Aurora-Naperville would be something we'd think about. [Together, those two form] one of the biggest cities in Illinois. And the region around O'Hare.

“In the city, we'd want to show very different areas, maybe Rogers Park, probably the South Side. We'd want to show industrial areas, residential areas.

“There's so much to choose from, it would be tough to do.”

The neighborhood and suburban models, like the present model of the Loop, will be supplemented by displays that discuss planning issues of the past, present and future.

"A lasting legacy"

The goal, Dreicer says, “is getting people to understand who's making decisions that shape Chicago, and all cities; what they want to do; and what the consequences are, intended and unintended. It can be used as a planning tool. It can be entertainment. It's teaching.”

For example, a suburban model is likely to address “big sustainability issues --- why people are building, what they're allowed to build, and why.”

“The [expanded] model is going to be the interpretive centerpiece of our new center,” he says. “It could be here [at the Santa Fe Building] or somewhere else.”

Planning for an expanded exhibit is still in the early stages, but adding scale models showing other parts of the region could happen as early as two years from now.

“I see this model as the main legacy of the Burnham Centennial that’ll be out there for years and years,” Dreicer says. “It’s a lasting legacy.”