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Q&A with Jerry Adelman: The green legacy of Daniel Burnham

By Patrick T. Reardon on Tue., 08/24/2009 –10:00 am.

First of three

Daniel Burnham wouldn't have called himself an environmentalist. The word wasn't in common usage in 1909.

But he saw Nature as something intrinsic to the human spirit. For him, Lake Michigan was a transcendent experience. For him, parks and forests were places where human beings could go --- indeed, needed to go -- - to find refreshment, beauty and tranquility.

And he had an understanding that the wildness of Nature was more than an aesthetic experience. Nature, he knew, had an impact on commerce, if only through the improved quality of life of workers which he saw translating into improved efficiency in the factory, office or warehouse.

So, in spirit, he was an environmentalist.

And that's the aspect of Burnham that is being honored in the [20 Green Legacy Projects](#) this year during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Plan of Chicago, which Burnham wrote with Edward H. Bennett.

"We often take for granted that we have our lakefront, that we have our forest preserves, and we have this [regional] trail system --- that all of these were sort of always here, but these were conscious decisions that



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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

Many of those decisions were made by Burnham when he included lakefront improvements and establishment of the Cook County Forest Preserve District in the Plan of Chicago. And they were made by the civic leaders who, over the next two decades, carried out those and other improvements in the Plan.



And they were made by generations of Chicagoans who approved 86 bond issues to pay for those improvements.

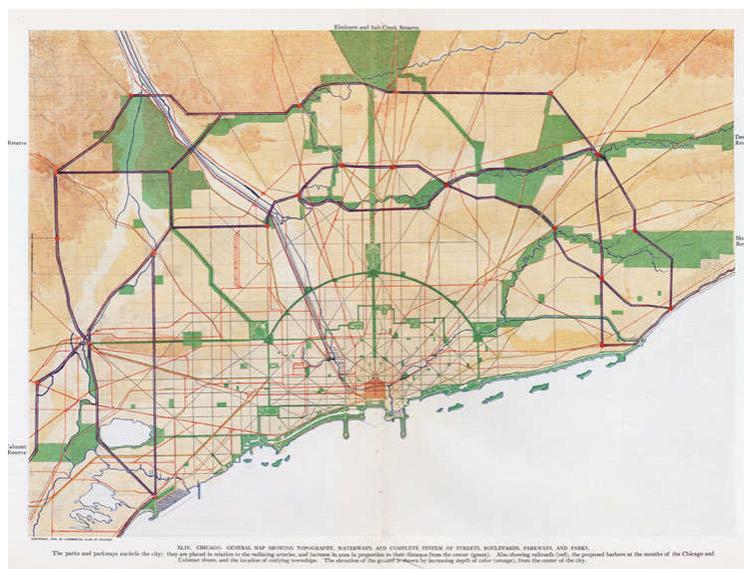
“Policy does matter, and planning does matter. And it can lead to things,” says Adelman.

Last year, when those preparing for the Burnham Plan Centennial met, Burnham’s green legacy was discussed, and, Adelman said, the question was: “Shouldn’t we be resurrecting some of that history to inspire people to think in a big scale and look at inter-connections in the landscape today?”

The result: A decision to focus on and highlight a score of “green” projects throughout the Chicago region as a way of celebrating Burnham this year.

These projects --- all of which link Nature and the built environment, all of which reach out of the gray concrete of modern construction to the green of growing things --- “embody the spirit of the Burnham Plan,” said Adelman.

Many have been in the works for a long time, and are reaching an important milestone this year. Others are just being launched, or nearing completion.



The Last Four Miles initiative by the Friends of the Park is an effort to complete Burnham's vision for parks along Chicago's entire 30-mile lakefront. Today, only four miles of shoreline are in private hands or otherwise off limits to the public.

"A lot of these things take a lot of time, especially when you're talking about linear things like trails or lakefronts or waterfronts," he said. "It's not one big decision. It doesn't happen overnight."

During a recent interview, Adelman talked about these Green Legacy Projects, the role of his organization in overseeing the program and the "green" future of the Chicago metropolitan region:

Question: Your goal has been to use the Burnham Plan Centennial as a way to promote "green" stuff that was already going on?

Answer: Correct. We weren't looking to invent things from whole cloth. We tried to be fairly realistic.

We started doing this, I don't know, maybe a year ago. We wanted some concrete things that illustrated vision and principles, not necessarily the complete laundry list of everything that's possible. We did want to see things that could actually achieve results, versus just a vision.

Sure, we know the Last Four Miles is a vision, but [the Friends of the Parks report] takes it beyond "Oh, we should save these last four miles," and says, "Here are some engineering concepts and some budgets, and we've done some community outreach," so it is really a plan, conceptual still, but with a bit more detail than two lines on a map, fill-in the blanks.

That's one end of the spectrum, launching a plan. All the way to the other end is where you're actually finishing a project.

The green legacy designation was a way to package all of this and stimulate a lot of creative thinking and get people charged up.

Question: Why is Openlands taking the lead?

Answer: We at Openlands aren't taking over these projects. We are just showcasing them.

Openlands was formed in 1963 as a regional land conservation group, one of the first in the country to focus on a large metropolitan area. Before that, the focus of efforts to preserve and conserve open space was on rural landscapes or wilderness, but not big cities and suburbs where, it was thought, there was nothing worth saving.

There's only one organization I know of that's older. So Openlands was a pioneer in looking at the regional landscape that a metropolitan area has.

We do policy advocacy work and get involved in on-the-ground projects, including direct acquisition and preservation of land, and we look at that full web of green from small-scale community gardens and green spaces in inner-city neighborhoods all the way out to the 19,000 acre Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, the former Joliet Arsenal. We look at recreational lands. We look at ecologically rich landscape areas. At the web that ties our region together --- trails, greenways and so forth. Everything.

So it seemed appropriate for us as a regional land conservation group with a metropolitan focus to be an umbrella to reach out to our colleagues --- government agencies and other not-for-profits --- to identify projects that, during this anniversary year, could be showcased.

Question: What sort of categories did you look at?

Answer: For example, the regional trail system. That was something that was not part of the Burnham Plan. He looked at connectedness, but not hiking and biking trails. But that's something the Chicago region has been a real leader in.



In the early 90s, Openlands partnered with the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission [NIPC] to develop the first metropolitan greenways plan in the country. We partnered with the Paddling Council and NIPC to do the first metropolitan water trails plan in the country.

Other large cities had looked at isolated trails for kayaking, canoeing, non-motorized uses, but no one looked comprehensively at all the rivers and streams, and waterfronts to design a system.



As you know, we have so many layers of local government, and there aren't many opportunities to bring together all these players to think holistically about resources that cut through these jurisdictions. There is a sort of Tower of Babel, especially as it relates to land-use, because the state has delegated the final say in most instances to municipalities. So even county plans are over-turned right and left.

Kane County, as an example, has a very good land-use plan where the western part of the county has been designated largely as agricultural while it acknowledges that the eastern part is going to be more developed. It really thinks about their natural resource base and good land-use and is a comprehensive vision for the county.

Well, municipalities overturn it all the time.

You couple that with our tax system where we're so dependent on real estate taxes. Then you've got these annexation wars going on between communities because they're all looking for the cash-rich, big, new shopping centers --- the cash cows. It just fuels sprawl patterns of development.

CMAP [the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning] is beginning to deal with this in its new GO TO 2040 plan, but it's really never been dealt with before. The loser, often, was open space because rivers, streams, habitats and natural areas often cut through multiple jurisdictions and rarely was there the over-arching vision and framework for making good regional decisions.

When Openlands partnered with NIPC and with the Paddling Council to do those comprehensive plans, we found people weren't opposed to it, but getting people

to the table and envisioning what could be there was difficult. There was little incentive to develop a regional green infrastructure --- the water trails, for example, where you have to put in canoe launches and think about signage --- because they weren't talking to each other. These plans are really visionary in many ways and in the spirit of Burnham.

Not that they've been forgotten. There's been slow, incremental progress made. The water trail plan is an example. It's now been a little over 10 years old, and it's about 90 percent complete. It's been this slow piece-by-piece process.

So the regional trail system was a major focus in the green legacy projects. The rivers and streams were a major focus. And the Lake Michigan shoreline, the Last Four Miles initiative.

Next: The past and future of Burnham's green legacy