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Planners as poets

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 08/31/2009 –10:28 am.

Ah, stereotypes.

In the popular mind and in the media, plans are often described as dull documents that do little but gather dust on office shelves. And, to be honest, like all stereotypes, it's got more than a grain of truth to it. Lord knows, I've read my share of mind-numbing reports. Well, skimmed them.

Plans end up dull when they're too caught up in the details and fail to communicate the goals, meaning and vision of an idea --- the why of it. (Or maybe because they're plans without a vision.)

That wasn't Daniel Burnham's problem in the Plan of Chicago.

In that bible of modern-day urban design, Burnham wrote authoritatively about such nuts-and-bolts issues as drainage, traffic circulation, noise pollution (although he didn't call it that), freight handling, highway costs and street paving.

But he also could wax poetic.

Consider this quote from a section in which Burnham is arguing for covering the entire Chicago shoreline with parkland. It was all part of a single, long paragraph. I've broken it up to make it easier to read and give emphasis to his language.

“The Lake front by right belongs to the people. It affords their one great unobstructed view, stretching away to the horizon, where water and clouds seem to meet.



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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

“No mountains or high hills enable us to look over broad expanses of the earth’s surface; and perforce we must come even to the margin of the Lake for such a survey of nature.

“These views of a broad expanse are helpful alike to mind and body. They beget calm thoughts and feelings, and afford escape from the petty things of life. Mere breadth of view, however, is not all.

“The Lake is living water, ever in motion, and ever changing in color and in the form of its waves. Across its surface comes the broad pathway of light made by the rising sun; it mirrors the ever-changing forms of the clouds, and it is illumined by the glow of the evening sky.

“Its colors vary with the shadows that play upon it. In its every aspect it is a living thing, delighting man’s eye and refreshing his spirit.

“Not a foot of its shores should be appropriated by individuals to the exclusion of the people. On the contrary, everything possible should be done to enhance its attractiveness and to develop its natural beauties, thus fitting it for the part it has to play in the life of the whole city.

“It should be made so alluring that it will become the fixed habit of the people to seek its restful presence at every opportunity.”

That’s the antithesis of dull.