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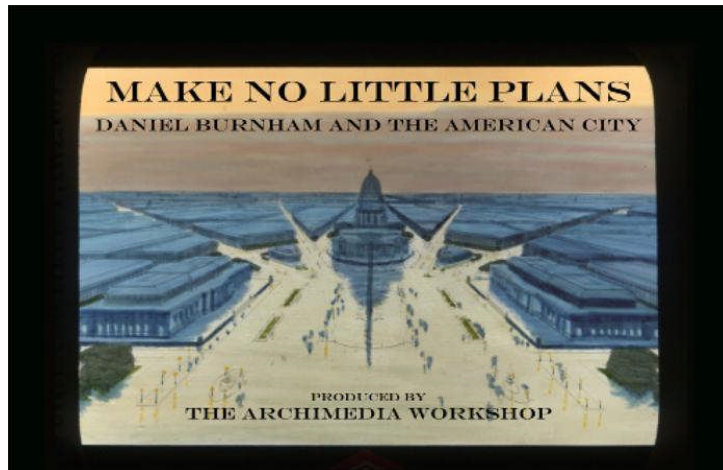
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The story of a “useful” life – the planner as believer

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 09/02/2009 –11:22 am.

Judith McBrien’s documentary on Daniel Burnham --- which premieres Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park --- looks at much more than Burnham’s role in the creation of the Plan of Chicago.

It focuses on his long career as an architect and city designer in Chicago and across the world, and on the impact his Swedenborgian faith had on that career.



Indeed, I came away from watching a test screening of the film “Make No Little Plans: Daniel Burnham and the American City” with the sense that, for Burnham, architecture was an expression of a practical spirituality --- or a spiritual pragmatism.

“One of the tenets of Swedenborgianism is to be useful,” McBrien told me during an interview before the screening. “His parents were leaders in the church. He was steeped in this belief of being useful, and of God as a positive force in the universe.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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“Useful” is a word that occurs often in the early part of the movie. For instance, a letter from Burnham’s mother is read and shown in which she applauds his decision to go into architecture because, she writes, it is “a useful occupation.”

Later, his father sends a letter to an architectural firm, saying that Burnham will “make himself useful” if he’s hired.

From his boyhood, Burnham was “a natural leader,” McBrien told me. “He was able to bring diverse people together to achieve a common goal that an individual could not do alone. He had the confidence that inspired a lot of people to follow him. Where that came from, who knows?”

My guess is that source of Burnham’s confidence and leadership was his religious faith.

If you believe that your role is to be useful and do good -- to make the world a better place --- you’re able to throw yourself into the task of bringing order and beauty to the cityscape. You’re not just doing your own work. You’re doing God’s work.

Of course, the film makes clear that Burnham was also a man of great ambition and drive --- and organizational skill. As the construction director and organizer of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, he oversaw nearly 20,000 workers. As the leader of the three-year effort to produce the Plan of Chicago, he synthesized scores of ideas from myriad planners into a single integrated document.

Burnham the architect

McBrien, who wrote, produced and directed “Make No Little Plans,” has spent the last 15 years making films about Chicago architecture. And, to some extent, this documentary, like the 2003 book by historian Kristen Schaffer “Daniel Burnham: Visionary Architect and Planner” (Rizzoli), is aimed at rehabilitating Burnham’s reputation as an architect.

For many years, Burnham was praised as a city planner but dismissed as a building designer. The perception as that he was Mr. Outside, a business-type who won commissions and kept clients happy but



left the design work to others, such as his partner John Wellborn Root.

Yet, McBrien's film gives Burnham full credit for the hundreds of buildings that his firms designed over the decades, such as The Rookery in Chicago and Union Station in Washington, D.C.

In the movie, Russell Lewis, executive vice president and chief historian at the Chicago History Museum, describes the creative team of Burnham and Root as a late 19th century version of Beatle songwriters John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

Meanwhile, Schaffer notes that Burnham was deeply involved in his firms' projects, overseeing details "like the conductor of a symphony or the director of a film."

"The people he inspired"

"Make No Little Plans" examines the impact that Burnham's plans had on such cities as Cleveland, Manila and Washington, D.C. But it was his work on the Plan of Chicago that capped his career.

"It's a pioneering document," historian Carl Smith says in the film. "There's nothing in the country as comprehensive as that and as gorgeous as that." The lavishly illustrated book, filled with watercolors by Jules Guerin, was part of an unprecedented public relations effort that helped sell the Plan over the next 20-plus years.

Burnham, says Smith, was "the indispensable person" in making the Plan reality.

In our interview, McBrien noted that Burnham died just three years after the Plan was published, but his influence continued.



"It wasn't just Burnham [who made the Plan a success]," she said. "It was the people he inspired. It was [Edward] Bennett and [Charles] Wacker and the Commercial Club leaders who fought to enact the ideas of the Plan.

"Burnham was gone, but it's a tribute to Burnham's inspiration that a lot of people bought into these ideas and they spent their professional lives to implement parts of the Plan."

In addition to Wednesday's showing, "Make No Little Plans" will be screened at 6 p.m. on Sept. 15 at the Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State St.; at 6:30 p.m. on Oct. 1 at the Sulzer Regional Library at 4455 N. Lincoln Ave.; and at 6:30 p.m. on Oct. 7 at the Woodson Regional Library at 9525 S. Halsted St.