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The future of Chicago – and looking ahead to the Bicentennial of the Burnham Plan

By Patrick T. Reardon on Sun, 09/13/2009 – 9:37 am.

The title of the exhibit at the Chicago Tourism Center Gallery at 72 E. Randolph St. is “**Big. Bold. Visionary. Chicago Considers the Next Century.**”

And, no question, the 60 proposals in the show are big and bold and visionary. And, in some cases, a bit goofy-seeming.

Like the cartoonish image of a 2109 Chicago in which the city has been transformed into a network of elevated housing pods connected by raised walkways, overlooking a ground-level landscape of parks, forest preserves and urban farms.



CHICAGO EARTH CITY 2109

This idea from EN/GEN CON Landscapes seems more than a little whimsical today, but, a century from now, who can say?

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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

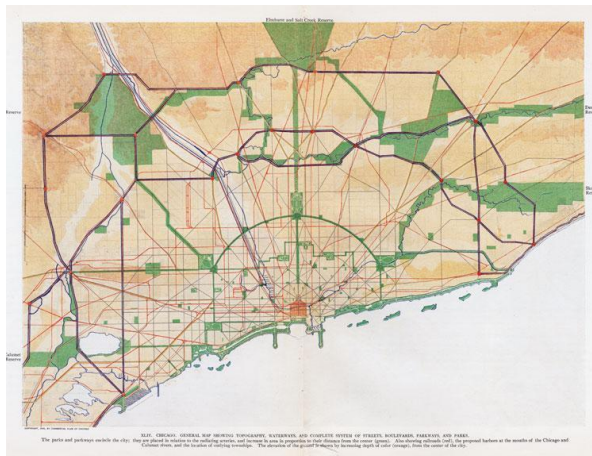
[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

“I tell people to think about the bicentennial of the Burnham Plan,” says Edward Keegan, the architect-writer who was the curator for the exhibit. “This stuff may seem crazy now, but will it seem crazy when the bicentennial is held a hundred years from now?”



A century ago, when Daniel Burnham oversaw the publication of the Plan of Chicago, no one would have expected that air travel would become so routine, or that protecting the environment would become such a major priority for planners.

So it's not surprising that the Plan has no mention of airports. What is surprising is that Burnham, his co-author Edward Bennett and the Commercial Club of Chicago which sponsored the Plan were visionary enough to include proposals for parks along the city's entire lakefront and for an extensive network of forest preserves.



All those forest preserves may have seemed pie-in-the-sky --- or even somewhat goofy --- back in 1909. Today, of course, the 68,000 acres in the Cook County Forest Preserve District, and the thousands of additional acres in the forest preserve districts of the collar counties, are a treasure for the region's eight million people.

The show, which runs through Oct. 4, is filled with eye-popping images, and that's exactly what Keegan wanted.

"The Plan of Chicago is a book of 165 pages, and it's a great policy document," he says. "But, if that was a 165-page book without the Jules Guerin images, we wouldn't be celebrating it 100 years later."

The Guerin watercolors, such as the magisterial satellite-like view of the Chicago region serving as the book's frontispiece, helped to sell the Plan's ideas because they were inspirational. They helped readers see what the planners saw in their mind's eye. They helped politicians, business leaders, schoolchildren and voters understand what could be possible.



A stew of ideas

Unlike the Plan, Keegan's exhibition isn't a coordinated, integrated blueprint for how the Chicago of the future could be better. It's a stew of ideas.

Some, like a proposal for the redevelopment of downtown Joliet, are very much here and now. Others, like one from Ralph Johnson at Perkins+Will, are drastic revisions of the cityscape.

Johnson's ideas are based on an element in the Burnham Plan that never reached fruition. Burnham wanted to turn Congress Street into the central east-west axis of the city. The Eisenhower Expressway became that east-west roadway in a high-speed version that likely would have distressed Burnham. But the shift of the city's center a bit more to the South Side never happened.

"By moving the center of the city from the Loop, Burnham was saying the South Side was equal to the North Side," says Keegan.

Johnson's idea would fulfill Burnham's vision by establishing a monumental park extending east from a new City Hall around Halsted Street (where Burnham wanted to put a new Civic Center) to the lakefront and beyond. The City Hall would have curving walls on which videos and public announcements would be constantly shown, and below the massive park would be a variety of transportation routes and lines.

At the shoreline, the park would continue east out over the water to an airport in the lake --- really IN the lake. The runways, taxiways and terminals would all be 60-feet below the Lake Michigan water level and would be bordered by what would in effect be dams on which new forests of trees would grow.



The 1971 airport in the lake idea

For Chicagoans of a certain age, this will bring to mind the plan that Mayor Richard J. Daley, the father of the city's present chief executive, floated back in 1971. It died a quick death. But Keegan says Johnson's idea of submerging the working parts of the airport is a much different concept.

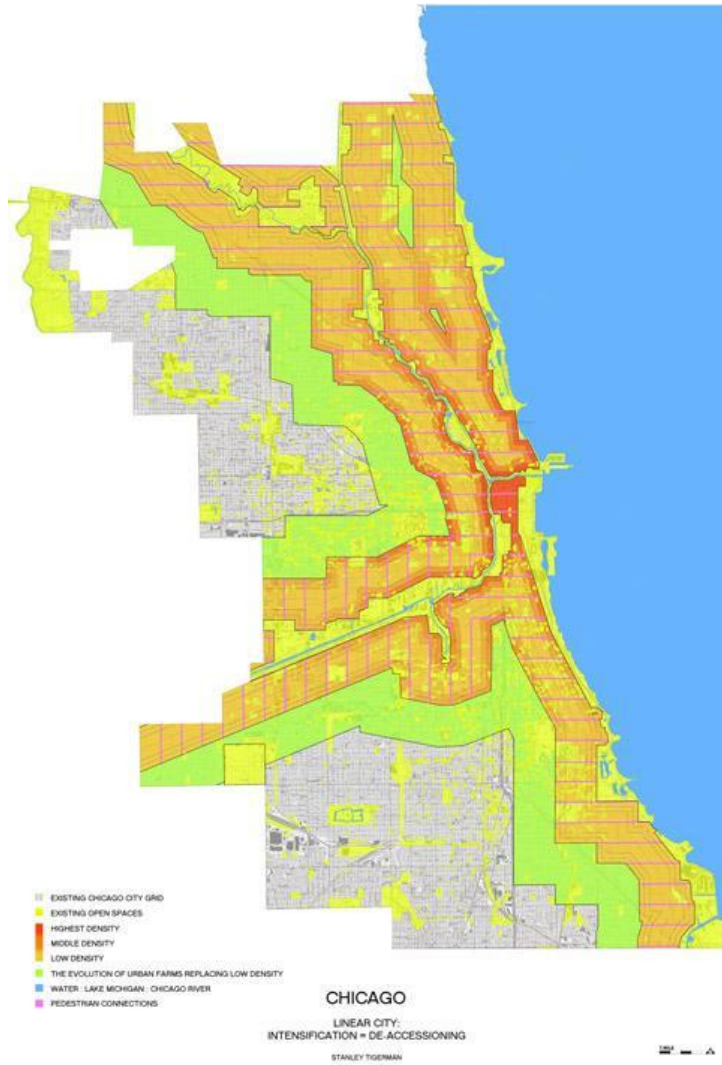
"When you look at the lake, all you're going to see is trees," he says. "Yes, you'll see planes coming down and taking off, but not the airport."

Is that airport in Chicago's future? Don't hold your breath. But maybe some part of Johnson's idea, like that grand park from Halsted to the lake, will catch the fancy of future planners.

Or maybe it will be the skyscraper proposed by Adrian Smith and Gordon Gill that would harvest the wind to run turbines to provide energy to the tower.



Or Stanley Tigerman's idea for focusing high-density development along the lake, the Chicago River and other waterways.



Or Keith Campbell's plan for a new pier that would parallel Navy Pier (like the second pier that the Burnham Plan had proposed) and bisect Northerly Island.



Boldly simple

Or maybe the planners will be entranced by a proposal from Linda Searl, the chairwoman of the Chicago Plan Commission, that could be implemented now with little fuss or bother.



She suggests setting up temporary structures in a vacant lot, such as one at 70th Street and Stony Island Avenue, to provide day care programs, meeting spaces, convenience stores and a mini-police station.

During a three-year stay, these structures would provide needed services to nearby residents but also help to jump start the rejuvenation of the community. Then they would be moved to another vacant lot in another neighborhood.

Simple. Modest. Surprising.

Boldness comes in a lot of forms.