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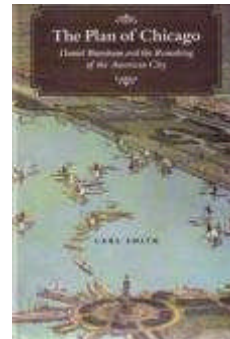
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A “restless pride” in the city

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 09/28/2009 –7:18 am.

For eight years, the One Book, One Chicago program has been a major cultural institution in the city. Now, at least this time around, it’s also a planning exercise.

This fall’s book is “The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City” by Northwestern University historian Carl Smith. It was chosen as part of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Plan but, even more, as a spur to Chicagoans of all backgrounds to get involved in thinking about and creating the city’s future.



“When we started talking about this, what was intriguing to all of us was the idea of using this as a springboard,” says Chicago Public Library Commissioner Mary Dempsey.

“It’s not just looking backward. It’s looking backward to spring forward.”

Smith’s book on the plan that Burnham wrote with co-author Edward Bennett is the first work of Chicago history to be included in the One Book, One Chicago program. It’s also the first to include forward-looking questions in the study guide prepared for discussion groups throughout the library system. (Dozens of those groups are meeting during October.)

For instance, one question starts with a Burnham quote about the need for the city to envision the future and plan for it. Then, participants are asked, “How might the city look far enough ahead at the present time?”

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

Another asks, “What new plans do you think [Burnham] would propose [today]?”

The lesson of the Great Chicago Fire

Sitting in her 10th floor office in the Harold Washington Library Center at 400 S. State St., Dempsey gestures eastward toward Grant Park and the city’s lakefront. “So many people don’t know how much of this is landfill,” she says. “They don’t know that Jackson Park wasn’t always here, or Lake Shore Drive.”

So, part of the reason for discussing Smith’s book is to alert Chicagoans that the city has evolved over time, often guided by blueprints like the Burnham Plan.

“I’ve always been fascinated by the city as a city which has rebuilt itself and reinvented itself in a series of ways throughout its history,” Dempsey says. “I always say that one of the best things to happen to this city was the Chicago Fire.”

That 1871 conflagration destroyed about a third of Chicago, including all of the central business district. But, in rebuilding the burned-out area, Chicagoans learned a lesson in facing big challenges, no matter how daunting.

“To empower people”

It was the message of the Smith book --- that planning can have a big impact, and that every citizen can play a role in planning --- that Dempsey wanted today’s generation of Chicagoans to hear.

“The Smith book,” she says, “is allowing us to be the place where so many people from so many walks of life can look at the city we love --- can look at its imperfections and how we got to where we are today.

“And it allows us to empower people, to show them that the city is not set in stone. It’s constantly evolving. We’re using this to say the city doesn’t have to be the way it’s been.”

The 17 books chosen in the One Book, One Chicago program have ranged from Raymond Chandler’s detective novel “The Long Goodbye” to Elie Wiesel’s Holocaust memoir “Night,” from Tom Wolfe’s NASA history “The Right Stuff” to James Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical novel of life as a black American “Go Tell It on the Mountain.”

“The role of One Book, One Chicago is to stretch people,” says Dempsey. In this case, it’s not just a new literary genre that’s being considered, but also the role of a citizen.

The Burnham Plan has been criticized over the past century as a top-down exercise in planning, and it’s true that it was a fairly small, highly educated group of generally well-to-do men who put it together. But its proposals wouldn’t have gone anywhere if most city residents hadn’t gotten on board, endorsing those ideas at the voting booth.

“Between 1912 and 1931,” writes Smith, “Chicagoans approved some eighty-six Plan-related bond issues covering seventeen different projects with a combined cost of \$234 million.”

A century after the Burnham Plan’s publication, it would be foolhardy to ignore the impact of public opinion in developing a plan for the future. In fact, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) went out of its way this summer to solicit planning ideas from residents throughout the Chicago region.

Those ideas, gathered in public meetings, at kiosks and online, will be incorporated into CMAP’s GO TO 2040 plan, set to be drafted next spring and finalized in the fall of 2010. The goal is to integrate transportation, land-use, environment and other major issues into the first-ever comprehensive plan for the region.

“A restless pride”

Dempsey’s goal is to help city residents understand that they can --- and should --- play a role in improving their communities and their city.

“My greatest measure of success,” she says, “would be for people of every economic background and every level of education to come out of this with a restless pride --- a pride in the city in which we live, and a restlessness to make sure it gets better.

“They don’t have to accept the status quo in their neighborhoods. They can speak up and say, ‘I want to be a part of the planning process,’ and that planning process should be about improving the quality of life.

“I want them to come away with an awareness that you can be a part of this process.”