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“Our Chicago

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 09/30/2009 –10:45 am.

First of two

This is a year for plans --- this 100th anniversary of the publication of the Plan of Chicago.

And among the many documents that have resulted is a modest, 19-page report titled “The Burnham Plan Neighborhood Project: Lakeview --- Put together by the children of St. Bede the Venerable School.”

St. Bede, located in the Southwest Side community of Ashburn, was one of 76 Catholic elementary schools in Chicago that took part in a neighborhood-to-neighborhood program for fifth-graders, sponsored by the Big Shoulders Fund.

Each school was assigned a part of the city --- not its own --- to research and, in many cases, to visit. (St. Bede was given Lakeview on the North Side lakefront.) Each school’s fifth-graders then wrote a report.

“No little plans”

The goal was to inspire the children to make bold plans and dream great visions. And the St. Bede report is an indication that the effort wasn’t simply an exercise in make-believe.

About midway through the report, the children wrote: “We are making no little plans for the future of our Chicago, the Chicago of Daniel Burnham, the Chicago of early settlers of Lakeview, the Chicago of our present-day White Sox and Cubs fans, and the Chicago of our future children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren.”

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

The children were the ones who italicized the word “our” in “our Chicago.” And that’s telling.

When it comes to the Plan of Chicago, Daniel Burnham usually gets the credit. It’s called the Burnham Plan, after all.

Yet, in producing the report, he was assisted by dozens of other planners, architects and other idea people, particularly his often-overlooked co-writer Edward Bennett.

And the Plan would have been stillborn upon publication if a series of Chicago mayors hadn’t signed on in support, as well as scores of City Council members, including such leaders of the infamously corrupt Gray Wolves faction as First Ward Aldermen Mike “Hinky Dink” Kenna and “Bathhouse” John Coughlin.

Ownership of the city

Even then, all of Burnham’s lofty visions would have come to naught if the everyday Chicagoan hadn’t taken ownership of them and voted again and again --- 86 times in fact --- to approve higher taxes to pay for those dreams.

That’s why it’s telling that the children of St. Bede wrote about “our Chicago.”

We live in a disjointed world. It’s easy to feel powerless and at the mercy of little-understood forces beyond our control.

In writing about “our Chicago,” the St. Bede fifth-graders are taking ownership of the city --- and responsibility for it.

That’s the sort of thinking that’s essential to planning. And citizenship.

Next: Seeing visions