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Who was Edward Bennett? And why has he been overshadowed for a century by Daniel Burnham?

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri., 11/20/2009 –9:32 am.

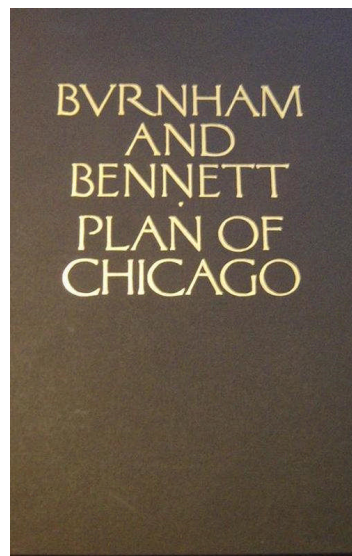
For more than an hour, experts from around the world had been rhapsodizing about Daniel Burnham and the 99-year-old Burnham Plan, the ground-breaking document that shaped today's Chicago and created the modern field of urban planning.

It was July 10, 2008, and the gathering was the plenary session of the 13th biennial conference of the International Planning History Society in the grand ballroom of the Chicago Marriott Downtown.

Then, near the end of the session, David L.A. Gordon, a planning professor at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario in Canada (right), stood up in the midst of the audience and asserted:



“On behalf of the ghost of Edward Bennett, I protest.”



In polite but decisive tones, Gordon made his case for the co-author of the 1909 Plan of Chicago.

“Why should Bennett see so little credit? Why is it ‘The Burnham Plan’?” After all, he said, Bennett designed many of the elements of the Plan that were eventually built, such as Wacker Drive.

“Edward Bennett worked full-time for years on the Plan. Burnham was a part-time coordinator. Bennett supervised the production of the Plan. Edward Bennett

THE BURNHAM BLOG

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

was the consultant to the Chicago Plan Commission for nearly 20 years afterwards.

“Why is this not ‘The Bennett Plan’?”

Yes, why not?

A complex set of reasons

It’s a question that, in the 16 months since Gordon’s public defense of Bennett, has been raised often as Chicago celebrated the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Plan. Some, when referring to the Plan of Chicago, have gone out of their way to describe it the Burnham-Bennett Plan. Others have been rigorous in noting that the Plan was co-authored by the two men.

But many more, while recognizing Bennett’s work, have been comfortable calling it the Burnham Plan. Indeed the organization sponsoring this blog is the Burnham Plan Centennial Committee. And this blog isn’t called the Burnham-Bennett Blog.

There is a complex set of reasons for this, I think.

And Gordon put his finger on one when I interviewed him the day after he spoke out in the Marriott’s grand ballroom:

“Bennett never claimed to be the genius behind the Plan. We know he was extremely cultured. He did watercolors as recreation. He was known as a modest, soft-spoken man.

“He wasn’t the big, bluff, hearty, let’s-go-hunting-in-the-woods guy that Burnham was.”

Looking back a century ago, it’s clear that Burnham was a larger-



than-life figure who got on well with all sorts of men. It was Burnham who oversaw and made a success of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. It was Burnham who, architectural historian Kristen Schaffer notes, "was the head of one of the world's most prominent architectural practices, and was recognized as the pre-eminent urban planner of his generation."

"Uncle Dan"

To the movers and shakers, the designers and planners, of Chicago and beyond, Burnham was "Uncle Dan," a strong, inspirational, re-assuring presence.

As far as we know, the quieter, less charismatic Bennett was never "Uncle Ed."

In 1902, as a new graduate of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Bennett was hired by New York architect George B. Post, but, a year later, he was loaned to Burnham as an aide for taking part in a design competition for new buildings at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

"Thus began a nine-year, mentor-protégé relationship between the two men," wrote architectural historian Joan E. Draper in her 1982 monograph on Bennett. "Bennett was soon to be launched on his career as a city planner under the wing of the architect who gave the new profession much of its luster."

In 1906, Bennett was assisting Burnham in drafting and attempting --- unsuccessfully, it turned out --- to sell a plan for the rebuilding of San Francisco in the aftermath of the terrible earthquake and fire in April of that year.

He was in that city on July 7 when Burnham, newly hired to oversee the creation of the Plan of Chicago, sent him an urgent handwritten note, now in the archives of Lake Forest College: "Don't stay longer than you absolutely need to...We want you here as soon as you can come."

Bennett was just turning 30.

The Plan, wrote Draper, "was a labor of love for Burnham, whose last major planning effort it would be. As for Bennett, who...took charge of the drafting room, it was to launch him on a long career as one of America's foremost planners of the second generation."

"The son of his spirit"

Three years after publication of the Plan, Burnham died during a visit to Europe.

1617 RAILWAY EXCHANGE, CHICAGO
My dear Bennett, July 9th 1906
I will say again
that you absolutely must do
there can be no good fit-
except ^{to} secure the lines
of these things the city will
do now. We want
you here as soon as
you can come.
Yours most
devotedly
D. Burnham

In a letter of condolence, Charles Dyer Norton, a moving force in the Commercial Club of Chicago in the hiring of Burnham and the creation of the Plan, wrote to Bennett, "You are the son of his spirit, the heir to his noblest work."

And, in terms of the technical aspects of the Plan and its implementation, Bennett was the keeper of Burnham's flame.

While Walter Moody oversaw the educational and publicity efforts on behalf of the Plan, Bennett served as the consulting architect to the Chicago Plan Commission from January, 1913 to April, 1930, serving, according to Draper, as "the official upholder of Burnham's vision of the new Chicago."

In that role, he was involved in nearly all of the city's Plan-related projects, such as the widening or opening of 57 streets as well as the construction of 38 bridges and 17 viaducts. His firm helped enlist city officials in carrying out plans for Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive by developing detailed drawings of the proposals. Bennett and his firm designed Buckingham Fountain and the landscaping of Grant Park. And he oversaw the staff that drafted Chicago's first zoning ordinance.

Meanwhile, Bennett developed a national reputation as a city planner, executing plans for cities ranging from Buffalo to Elgin, from Highland Park to Detroit, from Palm Beach to St. Paul.

Yet, he remained, until the end of his career, in the shadow of his great mentor.

With good cause.

As even his defenders acknowledge, he wasn't a visionary like Burnham. He was "a thoroughly competent professional who kept up with changes wrought by other men," wrote Draper.

At the 2008 conference at the Chicago Marriott Downtown, Gordon presented a paper that he wrote with Mary Woolever, art and architecture archivist at the Art Institute of Chicago, arguing that more attention should be paid to Bennett.

Yet, even in that report, the two scholars acknowledged that “there is no mystery around his low profile as an architect. Although he was educated at the world’s leading architecture school and worked in a major American firm, Bennett left remarkably few buildings.” They also noted that Bennett “appears to be ignored in early planning history because he was neither a heroic architect like Burnham, nor a politically engaged planner like [Frederick Law] Olmsted Jr.”

Branded

Even if Bennett had had a different personality and tried to get more credit for the Plan of Chicago, I suspect he wouldn’t have been successful.

In March, 1907, less than a year after Burnham and Bennett began drafting on the Plan with a large staff, the Chicago Daily Tribune published a status report on the work --- which, in the headline and the text, referred to the document as the “Burnham Plan.”

So, two years before the Plan saw the light of day, it had already been branded with the Burnham name. Of course, once Burnham died, his name carried an even greater weight.

Beyond all of this, there’s one other clue, I think, in explaining Bennett’s second-class status in regard to the Plan --- the rich cache of Bennett’s personal memorabilia that was donated last fall by his grandson Edward Bennett III to Lake Forest College, including a photo of the two Edward Bennetts together (below).



Bennett's photos of Burnham

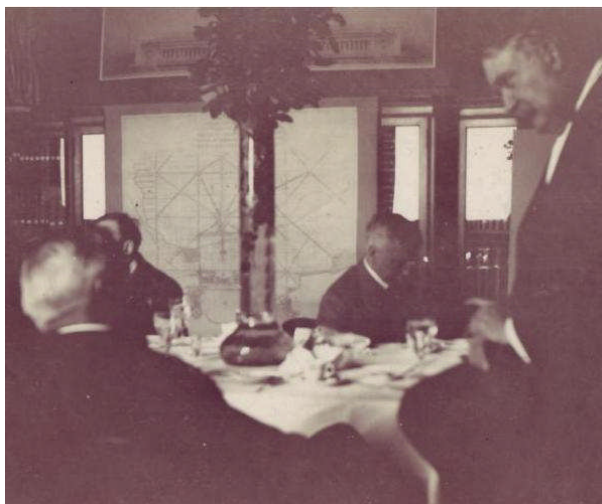
These are documents and, mainly, photographs that Bennett had retained from his years of working on the Plan with Burnham and afterward. And the photos are particularly revealing.

The era in which the Plan was produced was one that prized formal photographs for important activities --- but not candid ones. Yet, Bennett's archives include some rare and tellingly informal images, most apparently taken by Bennett.

One shows a 1910 luncheon in Burnham's office, honoring Norton, the chairman of the Commercial Club's plan committee, who had just been named chief of staff to President William Howard Taft. Burnham is below the chandelier, next to the man whose face is obscured by smoke.



Another photo from the same luncheon shows Burnham working the room, meeting and greeting and schmoozing with the powerful men in attendance.





There are photos of the Plan staff members in their penthouse headquarters at the top of the Railway Exchange Building (now the Santa Fe Building), including some of Bennett.

But the jewel of those penthouse images shows Burnham amid all the design work writing something.

Was it his handwritten draft of the Plan? No one can say --- although I'm sure Bennett knew. And, because Bennett saved this photo with his papers, my suspicion is that that's exactly what it was.

Either way, it's a revealing look at Burnham in the place where --- and during the time when --- the Plan was being drafted. It's Burnham at work. And a priceless glimpse into his private-professional life.

Bennett revered Burnham

What all these photos say to me is that Bennett revered Burnham.

His career, after all, was the product of Burnham's decision to work with him. After the publication of the Plan, Burnham steered all other requests for new city plans to his younger colleague. Bennett's job with the Chicago Plan Commission started a few months after Burnham died.

Even his co-authorship of the Plan was Burnham's idea. Gordon and Woolever wrote that Burnham "insisted that Bennett should be given status as co-author of the work. This was no mere promotion of a valued associate, since Bennett had been the lead designer on almost every aspect of the project."

To me, the most telling photo in the archives is one that Bennett took on a hill overlooking San Francisco, obviously sometime in the first half of 1906.

This was exactly the sort of lofty perch that would have helped Burnham envision the city he was hoping to plan. It was the sort of bird's eye view that Burnham, in his imagination, used to conceive his proposals for Chicago and that Bennett and artist Jules Guerin used to illustrate the Plan.

In the center of the shot is Burnham himself, smoking a cigarette, it appears, and looking down, as if lost in thought.



A memory



Here is Burnham in his element, and I think that's why the photo was important to Bennett. Here was the man who was so important to his life in a moment they shared at the top of a hill in a city that wasn't their home.

My guess is that, for Bennett, this image captured a memory that he savored --- a memory of a moment in his life and in the life of the man who taught him much and gave him much and was, I think, his hero.

Bennett owed a great deal to Burnham.

And I suspect that, given his great respect for his mentor and co-author on the Plan of Chicago, Bennett himself called that document "the Burnham Plan."