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### Living inside the Burnham Plan

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 06/08/2009 –7:04 am.

The Plan of Chicago – known as the Burnham Plan for its main author Daniel Burnham – was published a century ago.

So what? Why should anyone care?

Here's why:

Whether you realize it or not, you live inside the Burnham Plan. All of us do – Chicagoans, suburbanites, even those on the farthest edges of development.



This region of ours where we work, play, shop, drive and make our home is, in many ways, the result of the Plan's ideas. It was formed by that 1909 document.

When you listen to music at a Grant Park concert, you're in the Plan. When you shop on Michigan Avenue, you're in the Plan.

How often do you take out-of-town visitors for fun and fresh air at Navy Pier? Each time you do, you're taking them into one of the Plan's many recommendations.

Ever drive down Roosevelt Road? Or Western Avenue? Or Ashland Avenue? Those streets and many others in the city are able to handle so much traffic each day because, in the 1920s and 1930s, they were widened --- as the Plan had recommended.

The Plan's impact, however, hasn't been limited to Chicago.

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

If you've ever had a picnic or gone for a nature walk or played softball or golf in a Cook County Forest Preserve, you can thank the Plan.

The idea of a Forest Preserve District had been kicking around for years, but the Plan gave them focus and impetus. And, in 1914, Cook County residents voted to establish the district. Two years later, the first land was purchased.

Today, the district has 68,000 acres, nearly all of it in the suburbs.

And consider the map facing page 40 in the Plan. It's titled "General Diagram of Exterior Highways Encircling and Radiating from the City."

This map looks a lot like the present-day highway-expressway-tollway system that we drive today. It's almost as if Burnham and his colleagues were looking at today's highway map when drawing up their own.

Make no mistake. The Plan wasn't a hard-and-fast schematic that civic leaders and voters slavishly followed. It was a vision that took into account many, many, many factors — from lakefront parks to the meandering Chicago River, from a double-decker Wacker Drive to a new island off the shoreline at Twelfth Street.

Some of its ideas never saw the light of day. Most of those that became reality weren't exactly as they were pictured in the Plan.

The key thing was that — because of the Plan and because of the commitment of citizens and leaders to its vision — change didn't just happen. Decisions weren't made on the fly or in reaction to some sudden event. They were thought about. They were given reasoned consideration. They were discussed and weighed and analyzed.

And not just by officialdom.

Citizens like you thought about the Plan's ideas — and acted on them. Historian Carl Smith reports that, between 1912 and 1931, Chicagoans approved 86 Plan-related bond issues, costing a total of \$234 million. That's the equivalent of about \$3 billion today.

So that's important to recognize as well. It's not just Burnham's Plan that we're living in today.

It's the Plan of hundreds of thousands of average citizens  
as well.