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[News Coverage](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[E-News & Social Media](#)

[The Burnham Blog](#)

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Six months of thinking and writing about planning

By Patrick T. Reardon on Tue, 12/01/2009 – 3:40 pm.

I think my favorite moment was when I first saw the photo of Daniel Burnham, sitting in the Railway Exchange Building penthouse, writing....something.

It came fairly early in my six months as the Burnham Blog writer, but it was so delightfully unexpected and so evocative. It had to be an image of him doing his 310-page handwritten draft of the Plan of Chicago, just had to be.

As I noted back in June, discovering a photo of him actually writing the Plan would be the equivalent of stumbling across an image of Carl Sandburg composing his poem “Chicago” in 1916 or of Pablo Picasso painting “Les Femmes d'Alger” in 1907.



Well, is this Burnham writing the Plan? Alas, no one can say.

I talked with a lot of Burnham experts, but the best I was able to determine was that this photo was taken in the place where the main work on the Plan of Chicago was being done.

And it was found in the archives of his writing partner Edward Bennett --- who held onto it all his life. So that makes me think it was an image of the Plan being written. But, again, no one now can say.

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. [\[MORE\]](#)



Uncle Ed?

One of the last postings I did was about Bennett who not only was a co-author of the Plan but, after Burnham's death, oversaw its implementation for nearly two decades as the consulting architect to the Chicago Plan Commission.

Yet, his contribution has often been overlooked. It's called the Burnham Plan, after all, not the Burnham-Bennett Plan.



When Burnham died in 1912 during a visit to Europe, Charles Dyer Norton, a moving force in the Commercial Club of Chicago in the creation of the Plan, wrote a letter of condolence to Bennett. "You are the son of his spirit, the heir to his noblest work," Norton said.



Working with the Chicago Plan Commission, Bennett was "the official upholder of Burnham's vision of the new Chicago," according to his biographer.



Yet he never cast the shadow that his illustrious mentor did.

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."

The impact of one person



Writing about Bennett reminded me of an even more obscure Chicagoan who, as a private citizen, had an immense impact on the city and its people. Yet, he's all but forgotten today.

In 1901, Edward P. Brennan was a 35-year-old bill collector for Lyon & Healy Co. He had no training in urban planning. He had no clout.

Yet, he came back to the city from a vacation in Paw Paw, Mich., with a series of proposals to bring order into Chicago's chaotic numbering system.

For more than 30 years, he pursued his crusade, becoming in the process a thorn in the side of the City Council.



And he succeeded.

During his long fight, he persuaded the Council to

--- rename more than 1,200 streets to eliminate duplication.

--- establish a numbering system that used State and Madison as baselines.

--- use a numbering system that would indicate how far a house address was from the base lines.

--- use odd and even numbers to indicate the side of a street on which a house is located.

--- use street names beginning with the same letter to designate north-south streets within the same mile as an indication of how far west they are of State Street, such as the K streets between Pulaski Road and Cicero Avenue.

It was an amazing performance, and a lesson about the impact that one person can have on making the city and region better.

Beautiful and ephemeral

During the course of the last six months, I had a chance to watch the Burnham Pavilion by Zaha Hadid take shape. It was a rare opportunity to see a work of art come into being.



Yet, for the workers, the job of fitting the 7,000 pieces of the aluminum frame together and covering them with fabric was a tedious, if fairly straight-forward, task.

One day, as I watched, two workers, standing on tall ladders, stretched a section of fabric about three feet wide and 100 feet long along the framing of a panel and clamped it into place. Then, like tailors measuring a dress on the body of a model, they marked where it needed to be tucked in, sewn and otherwise modified.

The heavy fabric --- a sort of marine canvas often used for canopies, awnings and tents --- was then brought down and passed over to other crew members who went to work with scissors and sewing machines.

The result was something beautiful, if ephemeral. Both pavilions were taken down at the beginning of November.

“Our Chicago”

It’s been enjoyable over the past six months to see children learning about Chicago and coming to understand that, in some real way, it is theirs. Indeed, one group of fifth graders from St. Bede the Venerable Catholic school wrote a report in which they described the city as “our Chicago.”

To feel ownership of the city is a great lesson for children.

So is learning that they can --- and, really, should --- think of ways in which their city and region can be better.

That was the idea behind the letters that more than 2,200 third-graders wrote to Mayor Richard M. Daley this year. I spoke to one of the letter writers in May, a bright-eyed nine-year-old named Andjurette.



In her letter, she asked Daley to create parks in the many vacant lots in her West Garfield Park neighborhood. And, like Daniel Burnham a century ago, she knew the power of the visual, so she drew a picture of a new park, showing a tree, a slide and a swing set on a broad sweep of grass and wrote, "This is how Chicago can look."

Plans gone awry

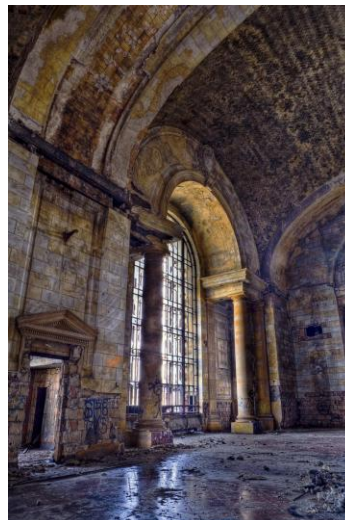
The blog gave me a ringside seat to other artistic responses to the idea of planning.

In "The Edge of Intent," an exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, photographers used the Burnham celebration as a moment for meditating on how utopian plans often go awry.

The idea of Utopia is based on perfection...and hubris. That's why the word "utopian" has such a negative connotation. Any attempt to create a Utopia, any effort to build a heaven on earth, is doomed to failure. And the contrast between the heavenly vision and the nuts-and-bolts reality is jarring.

As I noted back in June, the architects and builders of the Michigan Central Train Station in Detroit saw it as a temple of commerce and transportation. But, in 1988, three quarters of a century after it opened, it was closed, and now stands abandoned.

Yet, as photographs by Eric Smith made clear, the empty shell has become a favorite haunt of graffiti artists who have laid their 21st century color commentary over the architectural art of nearly 100 years earlier.



Smith used various computer techniques to give his photos a lushness and sumptuousness --- and other-worldliness. They left me feeling disconcerted, and that seemed to be Smith's goal.

In the end, these photos weren't so much depicting a train station that's been vandalized, or graffiti art on an unusual canvas, but rather a new thing, the intersection of what was planned and what just happened.

A nation holding its breath

Meanwhile, the artists participating in "El Proximo Centenario" ("The Next Century") at the National Museum of Mexican Art looked ahead --- and came away ambivalent, even quizzical.

For me, the most intriguing work was "Chicago" by Antonio Martinez. He glued a roadmap of the city and suburbs to his canvas, and superimposed, in black outline, two fists, one facing up and one facing down.



Was this about power or strength, triumph or rebellion? No way to know.

I found the tentativeness of this work and the others fascinating. It was as if, asked to look over the next 100 years, the seven artists found their vision obscured by clouds.

I was struck by what these works were saying about the mood of the Chicago region at this moment --- and probably of the nation as well.

If an art exhibit had been mounted in the 1950s, after the U.S. had climbed out of the Depression and won World War II, there would have been a strong note of elation and optimism. In the 1960s, the art would have reflected civil unrest, either from the point of view of the haves or have-nots.

A century ago, the watercolor illustrations from the Burnham Plan were on display in the Art Institute, and they reflected the bold can-do spirit of civic leaders.

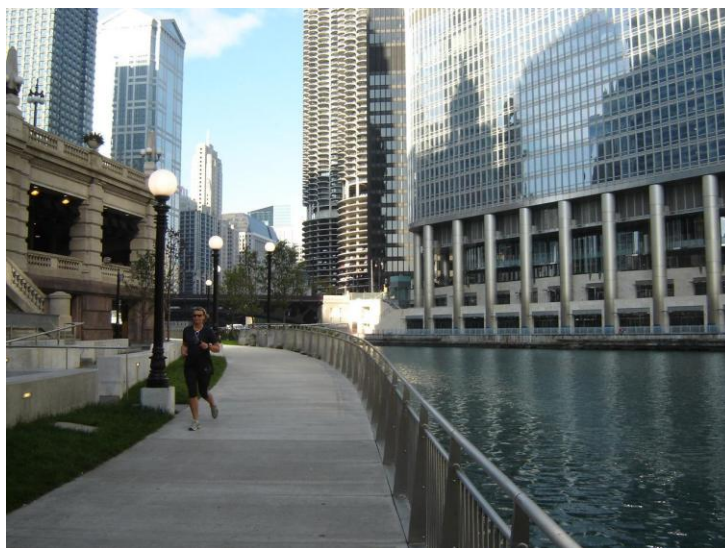
Here, in “The Next Century,” the artists seemed to be capturing a moment in which the nation was holding its breath, not exactly out of fear but not with a great sense of security either. These works seemed to come from a no-man’s land. And perhaps that’s where we’re all living at the moment.

Green legacy

Doing the blog has also provided me with a ringside seat to the efforts of people today to make the future better.

Across the region, the Centennial --- and my blog --- highlighted 21 projects that represented continuations of the environmental legacy of the Burnham Plan.

They included the creation of new parks along abandoned elevated railroad right-of-ways and the protection of rare black oak savannas. Important links in the region’s extensive trail system, and improved access to the 500 miles of water trails throughout the seven counties. And a plan for completing Burnham’s vision of parkland along Chicago’s entire Lake Michigan shoreline.



One Sunday morning, my wife and I strolled along the south bank of the Chicago River to see the new extension of the riverwalk.

Like many of the “green legacy” projects, the riverwalk is a vision that is being created one piece at a time over many years.

It was good, in 2009, to look at these projects and realize how much has already been done. And recognize how much more needs to be accomplished.

Turning point

Perhaps the greatest privilege of writing the blog has been to be at a turning point in the region's history.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is preparing the first-ever comprehensive plan for the region. During 2009, the organization enlisted ideas from thousands of residents throughout the seven counties.



That plan, called GO TO 2040, will be rolled out next year, and is scheduled to be adopted by the CMAP board in the fall.

Because CMAP has the power to determine which transportation projects in the state receive federal funding, it is the first planning body in the seven counties with financial clout. That clout means it can reward projects that are part of broader proposals which meet plan's goals of a mix of housing, concern for the environment, increased use of public transportation and a greater concentration of people in established communities.

GO TO 2040 could be the blueprint for a different region in the future. But this is Illinois, and politics here have a way of warping ideas and ideals.

Either way, the way the region deals with the plan will be a key moment --- and a key decision --- in its history.

In June, I asked Randy Blankenhorn, CMAP's executive director, about the sweeping changes the plan might bring and comparisons that are being made with the Burnham Plan.



"That's a scary thing," he said. "We don't pretend to be Daniel Burnham. However, we do want to live in that spirit. We do want to be bold. We do want to think about how this can truly make a

difference, and we do hope that this is a significant changing plan.

“This plan is called GO-TO-2040, but I refer to it as a plan for the 21st century because that’s what I think it is.

“It scares us a little. The expectations are incredibly high. But I think that’s what people want. They want a new way of thinking. They want to think about their region in a different way.”

New Burnhams

The great fun of the past six months has been to look at the past and the present and the future.

It’s been fun to learn more about the amazing job that Burnham and his colleagues did in creating and implementing the Plan of Chicago --- and seeing their impact as I walk through the city and drive through the region that were shaped by that Plan.

It’s been fun to see the excitement of people from all walks of life and of all ages as they think about our region and envision ways in which it can be better.

And it’s been fun to look ahead and realize that all of us today have a chance, like Burnham a century ago, to make things better.

We can be new Burnhams.

What a thought!

Next: The Chicago region as envisioned by CMAP