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Burnham as a symbol

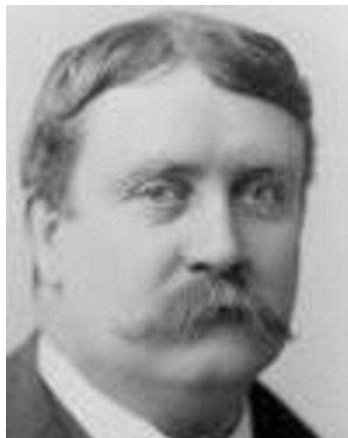
By Patrick T. Reardon on Thu., 08/20/2009 –7:47 am.

Sure, in writing the Plan of Chicago, Daniel Burnham helped shaped the growth of the city. But, over the past century, he's also served as a potent civic symbol.

"How many times have you heard people say, 'Make no little plans,' on subjects that had nothing to do with Burnham?" asks James Grossman, vice president for research and education at the Newberry Library and co-author of "[The Encyclopedia of Chicago](#)."

"Make no little plans; they ha
stir men's blood and probab
ll not be realized. Make big w

Burnham, he says, "is important in two ways. One is in writing the Burnham Plan --- the way in which he has shaped this city, just as Robert Moses shaped New York City. The second way is as an icon."



Chicago's self-image, at least in one manifestation, is captured in the "I Will" motto. We see ourselves as a rough-and-ready city that won't take "no" for an answer.

"When a city develops a self-image, it has to dip into its history to find the right personalities," says

Grossman. "Successful public relations people look for symbols."

Burnham, with his stirring quote and sweeping Plan, is one.

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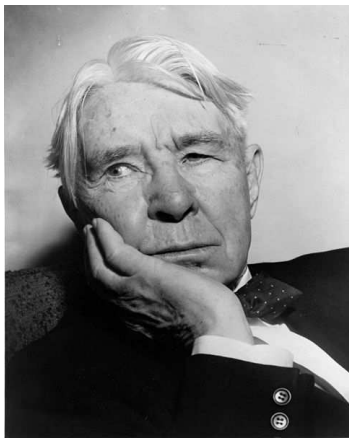
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ABOUT THIS BLOG

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 is Carl Sandburg, the author of the poem “Chicago” which asserted the city as a youthful, unstoppable power: “Hog Butcher for the World, / Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, / Player with Railroads and the Nation’s Freight Handler; / Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big

Shoulders.”

“New York didn’t need a Sandburg. New York’s importance is self-evident,” Grossman says.

But Chicago did.

The “spirit” of Chicago

Other potent elements of the city’s “I Will” image are the quick rebuilding that took place after the Great Fire of 1871 and the influential World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893.

Burnham played on this reputation when he wrote in the Plan:

“This same spirit which carried out the Exposition in such a manner as to make it a lasting credit to the city is still the soul of Chicago, vital and dominant; and even now, although many new men are at the front, it still controls and is doing a greater work than it was in 1893.”

This spirit, he writes “finds the men; it makes the occasion; it attracts the sincere and unselfish; it vitalizes the organization, and impels it to reach heights not believed possible of attainment...

“This spirit – the spirit of Chicago – is our greatest asset. It is not merely civic pride: it is rather the constant, steady determination to bring about the very best conditions of city life for all the people, with full knowledge that what we as a people decide to do in the public interest we can and surely will bring to pass.”



Other cities

Of course, Grossman notes, many cities have shown grit and determination --- Los Angeles in creating a megalopolis in a location without a local source of fresh water; Las Vegas in blossoming in the desert; New Orleans in holding back the Mississippi River (at least, until Katrina) while building a city as many as 20 feet below sea level.

“Other cities have shown great will,” he says. “But other cities are not as good as Chicago at milking it.

“We’re great at milking it.”