



Chicago, city without limits

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In the history of American urban planning, Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago stands alone not only in its innate elegance but also in its astonishing ambition. With near hubris it counseled that the people of Chicago "must ever recognize the fact that their city is without bounds or limits," and that they themselves are "a population capable of indefinite expansion."

More astonishing, much of it was implemented. Today's Chicago is a living monument to the plan—which called for replacing the chaos, filth and congestion of industrial turn-of-the-20th-century Chicago with a formal downtown of skyscrapers, an accessible 20-mile public park along Lake Michigan, and a necklace of parks and handsome boulevards uniting neighborhoods. Linkages and flow were said to be crucial to producing an integrated city. The Loop's skyscrapers, for example, were to be bordered by a redesigned Grant Park that would connect downtown to a rejuvenated inner harbor, with breakwater causeways extending far into the lake. At the southern border of the park, neoclassical buildings holding museums and public institutions would be built—witness the Shedd Aquarium and the Field Museum, which stand parallel to the (already existing) Art Institute of Chicago on the park's northern border.

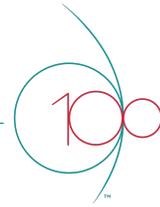
Because Chicago's transportation infrastructure was so congested—the railroads, harbor and streets were a disorganized mess—the plan analyzed the city within a 60-mile radius, proposing boulevards connecting the center to the outlying suburbs and the suburbs to one another. While the full street system was not built, the proposal for a double-level boulevard to handle commercial and regular traffic was realized in Wacker Drive—still a wonder to visitors from congested cities. The plan urged that the Chicago River be straightened, as indeed it was, to produce more efficient water-borne commerce and -transportation.

Most striking in retrospect may be the plan's unabashed aspirational qualities. Compiled by architects Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett and driven forward by a group of businessmen who tied their own commercial interests to the common interest, the plan announced the importance of creating a City Beautiful out of the chaotic "center of industry and traffic," called upon Chicago's civic character to realize its construction, and—in anticipation of success—applauded Chicagoans as people able and willing to act in the public interest.

The "spirit of Chicago," proclaimed the plan, "is our greatest asset." It is 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."

Chicago might seem an unlikely target for such an extravagant assertion of civic duty, given its reputation at the time as raucous, coarse, industrial—even foreign. (Some 36% of its two million residents in the early 1900s were immigrants, and 43% had at least one foreign-born parent.)

Yet the plan saw Chicago's geographic advantages clearly. "The domain over which Chicago holds primacy," it said, "is larger than Austria-Hungary, or Germany, or France; three thousand miles of navigable waters form a portion of its boundaries; the rivers flowing into the Great Lakes, the Mississippi, and the Ohio, give access to every part of the interior; the level prairies invite the railroad and the canal



builder; the large proportion of arable land makes possible the support of an enormous population; and the abundance and range of the products of earth and forest furnish the materials for traffic.”

The plan advises: “The city which brings about the best conditions of life becomes the most prosperous.” London’s citizens, it warns, who rejected the 1666 plan proposed by the great Christopher Wren, put their own “perverse self-interests” first and cost the city “millions upon millions in money to repair in part the errors which might have been avoided so easily, besides years of inconvenience and loss due to congestion of -traffic.”

UCLA historian Thomas Hines, a biographer of Burnham, argues that “throughout his life Burnham had always had democratic instincts and sympathies for people not of his social class. And those are the people the plan was mostly for. Yes, it promoted business, commercial competition, urban spaces, and the arts. But much of this was for people who could not afford to travel to New York or Paris. The idea was to produce beautiful public spaces and lakefront access for everyone together.”

Chicago is in the midst of celebrating what Burnham accomplished. As downtown developer (and native New Yorker) Martin Stern summarizes, “Burnham convinced Chicago that it could do anything and do it beautifully. Chicagoans have been taught to appreciate beauty—and architectural beauty in particular. There will always be a political will here to make sure the city does what it needs to do to be a world-class city. That’s what we’re celebrating when we spend a year commemorating the plan.”

And what a year it is. The city is seemingly devoted to Burnham. Every major institution seems to have an exhibit, lecture series or set of tours. The online archive is extensive. The Burnham Pavilions, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects of London and UNStudio of Amsterdam, opened in Millennium Park on Friday. The architects drew ideas from the plan to “produce avant-garde pavilions that contextualize Burnham’s vision and provide a 21st-century model for urban architecture.”

The plan’s actual 100th birthday will be celebrated on July 4—the day of release in 1909 chosen to symbolize “the liberation of Chicago from the chaotic growth of the past,” says Chicago

Tribune architectural critic Blair Kamin. As Chicago looks forward to the uncertain times ahead, it can be confident that its 100-year-old plan will again prove to be a sure but supple guide.
—Ms. Vitullo-Martin is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

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