

The ghost of Chicago's past

Architect's 101-year-old plan offers unique perspective on proposal for city yet to come

by Darryl Holliday
Assistant Metro Editor

ODDS ARE that from the roof of the tallest building in the United States—Chicago's Willis Tower—several structures with the famous architectural mark of Daniel Burnham can be spotted.

The man who co-authored the 1909 "Plan of Chicago"—a plan that figures largely in the development of modern city planning—continues to influence the city of Chicago to this day through the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's "Go to 2040" plan.

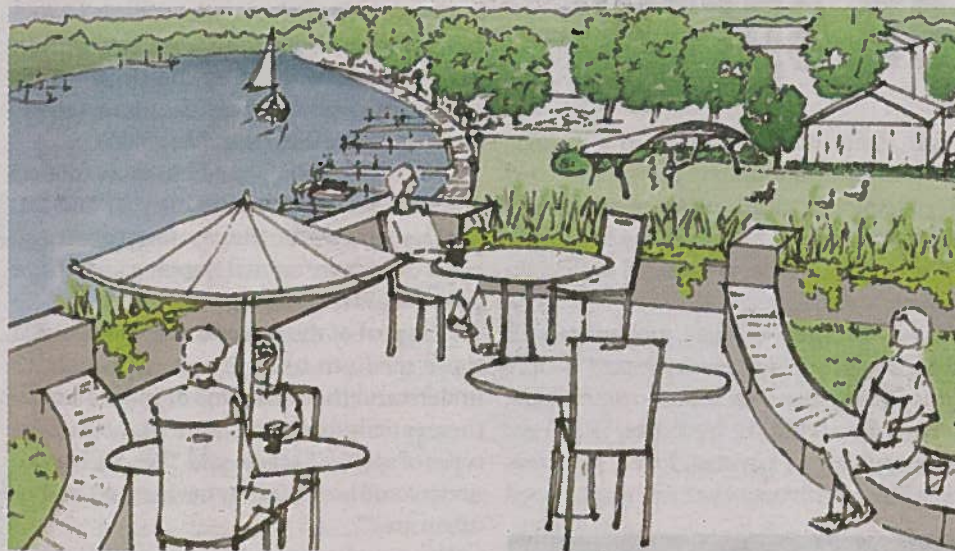
Chicago residents could be the judge of whether all the planning has paid off—possibly over the next 30 years—if the "Go to 2040" project is adopted during the agency's vote in mid-October.

"The plan is really about creating more livable communities and making sure our region continues to be one of the global economic centers across country," said Erin Aleman, senior regional planner of CMAP's plan.

The project, while reflecting issues the city faces today, also contains certain aspects of its 101-year-old predecessor.

Much like "Goto2040", the Plan of Chicago—also known as the Burnham Plan—focused largely on improving residents' quality of life through improvements in open spaces, neighborhood connections and transportation throughout the city.

The "Go to 2040" fulfills a federal



Courtesy of the CHICAGO METROPOLITAN AGENCY FOR PLANNING

requirement to have a regional transportation plan for northeast Illinois. Aleman said it aims to "help enhance communities."

"I think we owe a lot to the Burnham Plan," Aleman said. "It really inspired Chicago to become a nationally competitive city at the time."

Though the city's rise from prairie to Midwestern hub preceded Burnham, his plan helped establish Chicago as a nexus between the agricultural West and the manufacturing East.

"What the plan is all about is not building up Chicago, but in making sure that its future will be great," said Carl Smith, a Daniel Burnham historian and professor at Northwestern University.

Among others, Burnham's focus was on transportation, a focus which CMAP's

plan shares.

"We'd like to bring our transportation up to a world-class system, so it's kind of looking back to Burnham for that," Aleman said.

But CMAP's plan also addresses issues that may not have been as big a problem in 1909, or at least not as readily addressed.

According to Aleman, "Go to 2040" aims to take on a range of issues including green infrastructure, efficiency in government, environmental preservation, local commute times and affordable housing.

Some issues the city faces today are nothing new. Traffic, pollution and inefficiency were problems even in 1909, but whereas the population was close to 2 million at the time, today the number of inhabitants is closer to 3 million. CMAP envisions an additional 2 million people by 2040.

"What I think is good about CMAP is that it thinks about transportation and land use in relation to each other," Smith said. "This whole idea of thinking big about coordinating things is very much in the Burnham tradition."

Burnham is often quoted posthumously as saying "make no little plans."

Similar to this line of thought, the Chicago Plan Commission, made up of various city aldermen and community leaders, was created in 1909 through a recommendation in the Plan of Chicago. To this day, the plan commission, now part of the city's Department of Zoning and Land Use Planning, is charged with reviewing city plans, though its role has changed over the last 100 years.

“The plan is really about creating more livable communities...”

—Erin Aleman

"It's a much smaller body today than it originally was," said Peter Strazzabosco, public information coordinator for the Chicago Department of Planning and Development. "Instead of primarily serving as an advocate of the Burnham Plan, today it's largely a review body that looks at proposed projects in the city."

Burnham was a major force in the creation of modern city planning—though the idea that every city should have a plan though according to Smith, the Plan of Chicago wasn't so much about establishing Chicago as it was about making sure the city could build on its own success.