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Burnham not alone in urban planning

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Everyone's heard about **Daniel Burnham**. The late, great architect and urban planner is much in the news this year, the centennial of his 1909 Plan of Chicago.

But what about Matthew Rockwell? Or Robert Kingery? Have you ever heard of Elizabeth Wood? Or Ferd (Don't call him Fred) Kramer?

Big-picture planning for the Chicago region didn't end with Burnham's death in 1912. Other high-minded folks went on to lay plans, convene conventions, commission commissions. But these latter-day leaders of crusades to preserve open space, improve transportation or promote housing integration have gone largely unremembered.

That may be the best thing about a just-published book, "Beyond Burnham: An Illustrated History of Planning for the Chicago Region." Authors Joseph Schwieterman and Alan Mammoser trace the fits and starts of regional planning since 1909, giving overdue credit to the brave souls who dared swim against the prevailing tides of profit and parochialism.

Which brings me to the book's other major plus: brutal honesty. "Beyond Burnham" all but admits that regional planning since Burnham has been, with a few key exceptions, a lost cause. When **World War II** ended and pent-up demand for housing burst upon the land, those who favored a more orderly pattern of development — one that would have preserved open space and clustered new homes and stores closer to commuter rail corridors — were easily brushed aside.

Of course they were. Then as now, state laws effectively pit all municipalities against one another in a beggar-thy-neighbor race for tax dollars. Win the race and a town gets shopping malls and office parks so as to keep taxes low for existing

residents. Lose and it just gets the traffic. Developers buy or option unincorporated farmland along the metro frontier and the bidding over annexation begins. If Aurora asked too much, or provided too little, maybe **Naperville** wouldn't be so picky. Then it was Hampshire versus Pingree Grove, Oswego versus Plainfield.

Public opinion has been a hard sell. People understand property rights. Not so much urban planning concepts. Anti-Chicago paranoia is also a factor. Young families escaping cramped city apartments for suburbia's half-acre lots didn't have to be warned twice that **Mayor Richard Daley** (father or son) was/is jealous and looking to expand Chicago's reach.

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Today's raucous "town hall" meetings on health-care reform may seem unprecedented . . . until one reads about public hearings in the 1960s where reps of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission got told a thing or two by Adeline Dropka and the Save Our Suburbs coalition.

But while unplanned sprawl generally ruled the day, Schwieterman and Mammoser also chronicle the small victories that make our region a better place to live.

They tell of a young civil engineer named Robert Kingery who first envisioned – and over three decades guided construction of – our region's basic network of highways and expressways. They tell of Elizabeth Wood, the first director of what would become the **Metropolitan Planning Council**, and real estate mogul Ferd Kramer, its president, and their push for integrated housing. They tell of Matthew Rockwell, a planner's planner who, as a young Army officer in 1943, laid out the first runway at what would become **O'Hare International Airport**; but who, as NIPC's bow-tied director during the '60s and '70s, couldn't sell the agency's "finger plan" to steer growth along rail corridors as opposed to omni-directional sprawl.

There's also a trove of regional trivia in "Beyond Burnham." Who knew that the first suburbs to cash in on federal transportation funds were conservative Winnetka and **Glencoe**? They clouted \$1.5 million in 1938 to lower the North Western (now Metra/Union Pacific) railway tracks and eliminate 10 grade crossings.

So what's next for regional planning?

"Beyond Burnham" applauds the 2005 creation by the state legislature of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning that combines NIPC's land use expertise with state transportation planning.

Trouble is, CMAP's powers are no greater than the alphabet agencies that preceded it.

Just as encouraging, perhaps, was the recent appointment of Paula Wolff, senior executive of the civic group Chicago Metropolis 2020, to chair the state's tollway system. Such a blending of Burnhamlike idealism with practical political power has been rare over the last 100 years. But there's always the next 100.

John McCarron teaches, writes, consults on urban affairs.

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Someday someone will see what I see; that 'Block 37' was clearly meant by Burnham and his contemporaries to be part of what is now Daley Plaza.

liebsone (08/24/2009, 8:50 AM)

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