

Daniel H. Burnham: The American City as Bridge between Past and Future

An architect, a planner, a visionary, and a consummate project manager, Daniel H. Burnham arguably influenced American culture more widely and subtly than any other urban designer.

IN 1893, A PIVOTAL EVENT IN American history took place: the Columbian Exposition—more commonly known as the Chicago World's Fair. It marked the transition of the United States from an agrarian country to what would become the 20th century's preeminent technological society. An enormously complex event, it involved the creative efforts of a vast number of remarkable people. But to the extent that it bore the stamp of any single mind, that mind belonged to Daniel H. Burnham.

"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood," is a quote often attributed to Burnham as a distillation of his outlook. As

often happens with quotations, it has been distorted with time.

The original version—with the Library of Congress as its source—better conveys Burnham's philosophy: "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty."

However, this version of the quotation was handed down to us not by Burnham but by his partner Willis Polk, who included the quote in a Christmas card he sent out after Burnham died in 1912. Whether or not the quote is accurate, there can be little doubt that it reflects Burnham's

character. Burnham liked to think big. More to the point (which is not captured by the more popular version of the quote), he believed it was not essential for ambitious undertakings to be implemented in order to be successful—at least not in the short term. What was more important, according to Burnham, was to launch big ideas that would inspire future generations.

Judged by this standard, Burnham was a spectacular success. His legacy today receives considerable attention. Next year sees the centenary of one of his major accomplishments, his 2009 Chicago Plan. Hundreds of events are being planned to honor Burnham's ideas, which will be used as a platform on which to discuss 21st-century-design issues. Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid, principal of Zaha Hadid Architects of London, and Dutch architect Ben van Berkel, cofounder of Amsterdam-based UNStudio, are designing temporary Burnham celebration pavilions in Chicago's Millennium Park. Participants in the festivities will include the American Planning Association (APA), which runs a Daniel Burnham Conference Center in the city and confers an annual Burnham Award for excellence in comprehensive community planning.

Also to mark the centenary, the Chicago-based Ely Chapter of Lambda Alpha International, the honorary society for the advancement of land economics, plans to publish a collection of papers on Burnham's work. Moreover, Burnham has been reintroduced into popular culture by a bestselling nonfiction book about a series of murders at the Columbian Exposition, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, by Erik Larsen (Random House, 2003), film rights to which were acquired last year by Paramount

Pictures, having been previously bought by actor/producer Tom Cruise.

In the closing years of the 19th century, when Burnham was in his fifties, he was what today would be called a superstar. Regarded by many as the greatest American architect of his day, he had a masterful talent for public relations and the projection of his persona far beyond his profession. Born in 1846 in Henderson, New York, he grew up in a Chicago whose residents were conscious of the dynamic energy of their home town. In recognition of its rough and ready spirit of individualism, its capacity to reinvent itself periodically, and its street-smart, can-do entrepreneurs, poet Carl Sandburg later dubbed Chicago "City of the Big Shoulders . . . Hog Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler . . . a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities." (*Chicago Poems*, Henry Holt and Company, 1916.)

What we know of Burnham suggests that he quickly integrated this ethos into his self-image. His streak of independence may have been further encouraged by his family's religion, Swedenborgianism, which taught an ethic of community obligation even while it fell outside the pale of the mainstream churches.

This philosophical combination of social mission and the style of the loner made for a potent mix. Like his peer Louis Sullivan (see "Louis Sullivan and the Birth of the Skyscraper," August, page 158), Burnham saw himself not just as a designer of buildings, but as a creative force destined to play a role in shaping 20th-century America.

The grounds for this intuition were not immediately apparent, since he was unable to satisfy the



entrance requirements of either Yale or Harvard, and it was only after failing to establish himself as a politician (an indication of his early ambition to gain a foothold in general community life and social policy) that he attached himself to William LeBaron Jenney as a trainee draftsman. From there he moved to the Chicago firm of Carter, Drake, and Wight, where he met J.W. Root, who soon became his partner in the firm of Burnham and Root. (After Root died in 1891, the practice was renamed D.H. Burnham and Co.)

Burnham served as the firm's public face and practical business mind, while Root, who had a degree in civil engineering from the University of the City of New York, concerned himself with solving technical design problems, at which he showed great ability. This kind of relationship is common among creative teams and was paralleled by Burnham's famous rival Sullivan, who similarly drew on the great technical ability of his "backroom" partner, Dankmar Adler. The business prospered, assisted by the fact that the wives of both men had rich and well-connected relatives. Lucrative commissions came in to design luxury homes.

Burnham, who cut a fine figure and exuded authority, came across as a born organizer and highly effective communicator. But he was also able to steer Root's brilliance in directions that were shrewdly—and creatively—suited to the changing times. The partnership became a leading influence in the development of the skyscraper, bringing a clean and distinctive aesthetic to the taller structures that were then becoming possible. The firm's Chicago works included the 21-story Masonic Temple Building, built in 1892 and demolished in 1939; half of the 16-story Monadnock Block, built between 1889 and 1891 (the other half was designed by Holabird and Roche); the Rookery (1886); and the Reliance Building (1890). These

and other structures were associated with the Chicago School, an architectural movement known for its pioneering use of steel-frame construction to achieve sleek, modern designs.

In an important sense, though, the Columbian Exposition overshadows all of Burnham's individual works, including his Chicago Plan that is today the centerpiece of his fame. Burnham's appointment as the Exposition's director of works was a unique opportunity for an architect. Few, if any, urban designers ever secured a comparable opportunity to mold a project of such size and wide-ranging importance to general American culture. Burnham's contribution to it represented all that was distinctive about his career and psychology.

Although the firm of Burnham and Root was hired as the lead designer for the Exposition, Root died of pneumonia that year, and Burnham was given the task of supervising the design of the fair alone. The death of his valued partner and friend was undoubtedly a personal as well as professional blow, but it also affected Burnham in two decisive and significantly positive ways. First, it placed solely on his shoulders an enormous responsibility, whereas previously he had been a team player. Second, it enabled Burnham to move away from the design approach that had until then characterized his firm's output. Burnham was truly striking out on his own. It was a turning point in an already successful life.

The Columbian Exhibition, named after Christopher Columbus, was a far-reaching event for an America that was at that time in great cultural and economic ferment. The event was a counterpart of London's Great Exhibition of 1851, which had an immense impact on the British national psyche. Just as Britain's fair had been instrumental in making Victorians see themselves as a technological society moving from an agrarian past into a new age of

scientific marvels, the 1893 Chicago World's Fair made innovation a conscious theme of U.S. culture as the country approached the beginning of a new century. It was the most widespread media event of its time—outside of news about presidential politics. It divided the long aftermath of the Civil War from the onrush of an era of automobiles, mass production, modern advertising, aircraft, and motion pictures.

Burnham responded to this challenge by adopting a design approach that combined both the old and the new, looking to the past and future in equal proportion. With design input by landscape planner Frederick Law Olmsted, the Exposition took shape as a showpiece of the beaux arts style. Espoused by Paris's *École des Beaux Arts*, this style was already influential in the United States, but its enshrinement on a monumental scale in the Chicago World's Fair, under Burnham's direction, gave it a massive popularity that pervaded American design over the first quarter of the 20th century. Beaux arts looked to Europe's heritage for its models: to classical Rome, Greece, and the motifs of the baroque, renaissance, and Gothic periods. More eclectic in its references than the Greek revival that had been popular among American architects in the early 19th century, it treated Europe's architectural heritage as an inventory for modern designers to raid at will.

The Chicago World's Fair was built as a spectacular city within a city, exceeding 600 acres (243 ha) and incorporating waterways and some 150 to 200 new buildings, most of them temporary but looking remarkably finished and trumpeting the skills of some of the leading architects of the day. Because of its ample street lighting and use of white stucco, the fair's hub was called "the White City," which, eventually, the entire fair was called.

More than an architectural project, the fair was a summation of the young country's entrepre-

neurial spirit and technological optimism as it showcased 20th-century technology. To visit the fair was to catch a breathtaking glimpse of America's tomorrow.

From the instant that President Grover Cleveland pressed the button that turned on the fair's 100,000 electric lights, the public was treated to an extravaganza of amazing novelties: numerous new products that were to become household names, including ones that endure today; the first modern amusement park, with the first Ferris wheel; the U.S. Post Office's first commemorative stamps.

The fair also became a national stage on which the drama of the new technology was played out. There was the contest over who was to be in charge of the event's electrification—Thomas Edison or Nikola Tesla; and there was the competition between two corporations whose impact would loom large in the new century—General Electric and Westinghouse.

The construction of the Exposition was a study in large-scale urban management. Like a general directing a great military campaign, Burnham contended with crisis after crisis and the oversight of an army of professionals who included some of America's most creative—and difficult—personalities.

Burnham was in his element in bringing all this together. Subsequently, on the strength of his experience with the fair, he was commissioned to design a comprehensive plan for the city of Chicago. The fair thus was a key influence on Burnham's plan. Some criticized Burnham for his return to the beaux arts style in his plan. Sullivan even maintained that by making this style dominate the Exposition, Burnham had retarded the creative growth of American architecture. But the fair provided the context for Burnham's choice.

In a rapidly changing urban landscape that would inevitably embrace

many new forms, both infrastructural and cultural, Burnham saw a retrospective architecture as a valid instrument of continuity. For him, the kind of metropolis that Americans would inhabit in the 20th century and beyond would have to be designed to provide a cultural bridge between the familiar elements of yesterday and the innovations of tomorrow.

This vision transcends architecture and moves into the realm of urban planning, which is why Burnham's later works, like Washington, D.C.'s Union Station (1907) and New York City's Flatiron Building (1902), can be properly appreciated only by taking into account their designer's subtle sense of context.

In overseeing the Columbian Exposition, Burnham considered the advanced infrastructure and social and economic purposes of the fair as sufficiently futuristic to justify retrospective references in the design of individual buildings. If viewers looked at one structure alone, they saw the past; but if they stood back and looked at the building amid its futuristic surroundings, the building blended in to become part of this futuristic "city," while also enhancing it with a touch of history.

It is, therefore, as a seminal figure in planning, rather than as an architect, that Burnham should be evaluated. As a visionary planner and consummate project manager, he arguably influenced American culture more widely and subtly than any other urban designer. **UL**

N. J. SLABBERT is U.S. representative of the Belgium-based Truman Group, which focuses on geopolitical and economic analysis for business and government leaders.