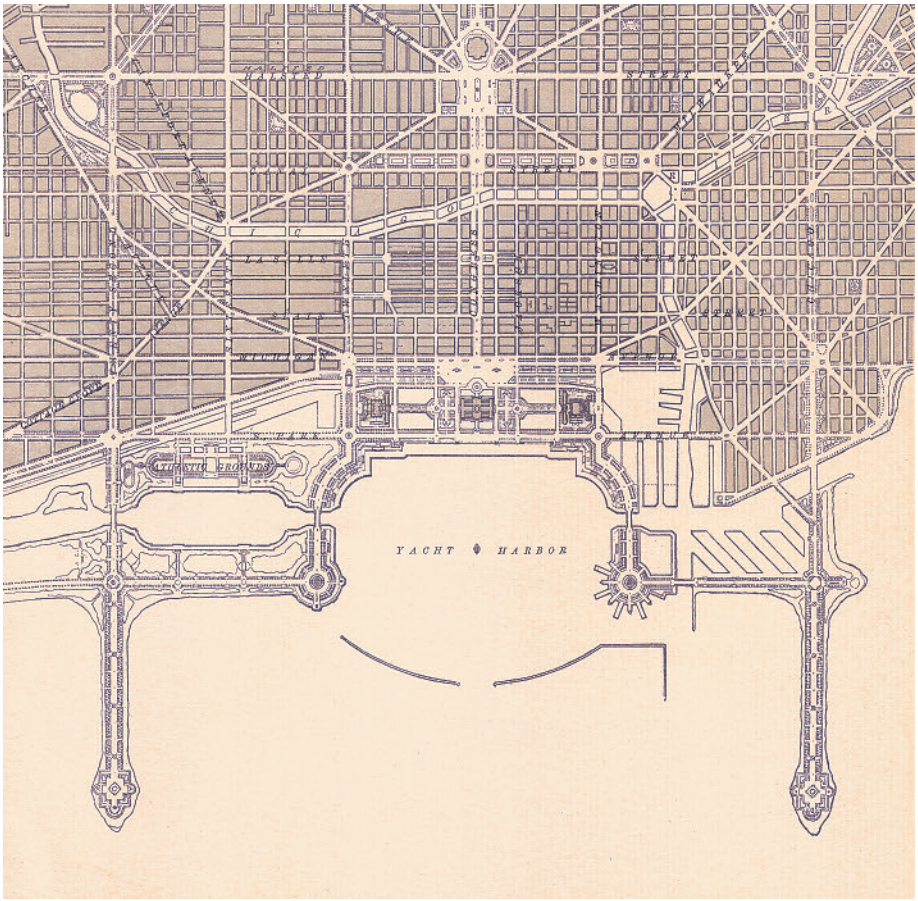
One hundred years after drawing up plans for the nature of Chicago, Daniel Burnham continues to inspire a Green movement.



BURNHAM PLA

Story By Arthur Melville Pearson
Illustrations courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

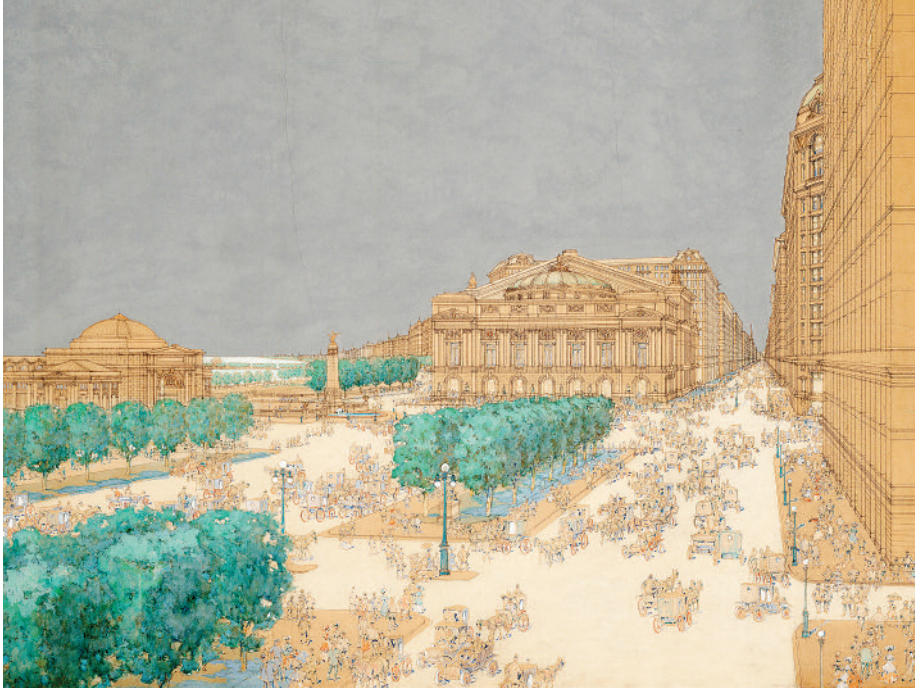
Any list of the most important figures in conservation history is bound to include the likes of John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. But for those living in the Chicago region, architect and urban planner Daniel Burnham deserves his own special place on that list.

Burnham may be best known for his supervision and layout of the 1893 Columbian Exhibition and his admonition to "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood." Taking his own words to heart, in 1906 he accepted a commission from the Merchant's Club, which soon thereafter merged with the Commercial Club of Chicago, to craft a bold new development vision for Chicago and its surrounding area. The result was the Plan of Chicago, which was published 100 years ago, in 1909.

Popularly known as the Burnham Plan—in spite of having been co-authored by Burnham's chief assistant, Edward Bennett—it focused on several major areas, including: improvement of the Lake Michigan lakefront, creation of a system of highways outside the city, improvement of freight and passenger railway systems, systematic arrangement of streets, and development of a civic center of cultural institutions and government. Because of the Commercial Club of Chicago's active promotion of the plan, a number of its recommendations were implemented; some as the plan outlined, some only partially or in altered form. Among the more glamorous achievements were the formalization of Grant Park; the establishment of a museum campus, anchored by the Field Museum; the construction of Municipal Pier No. 2, now known as Navy Pier; and the raising of Island No. 1, or Northerly Island.

As wonderful as these legacies are, what did the Plan of Chicago have to do with conservation? Echoing a recommendation issued by the Special Park Commission in 1904, Burnham also recommended the acquisition of an outer park system, which led to the establishment of the region's "emerald necklace" of forest preserves. Noting the vast, forested areas in close proximity to such major European cities as London, Paris and Berlin, Burnham called it a "sane proposition" to provide Chicago and its suburbs with 60,000 acres of wooded territory.

The Plan of Chicago presented "the City as a Complete Organism in which All its Functions are Related One to Another in such a Manner that it will Become a Unit." The proposed design of Michigan Avenue (right), looking towards the south. Plate 118, Plan of Chicago.



Burnham's recognition that "Human nature demands such simple and wholesome pleasures as come from roaming the woods" was instrumental in popularizing the idea of preserving the region's forested lands for their natural values rather than for development as manicured parks. To be sure, his plan also called for plenty of neighborhood and city parks linked by a system of tree-lined boulevards. However, "wild forests," as he called them, provided something no conventional park ever could: "All of us should often run away from the works of men's hands and back into the wilds, where mind and body are restored to a normal condition, and we are enabled to take up the burden of life in our crowded streets and endless stretches of buildings with renewed vigor and hopefulness."

Burnham also reinforced the idea that the "Time to secure the lands necessary for such a (forest preserve) system is now, while as yet the prices are moderate and the natural scenery is comparatively unspoiled."

Four years before the publication of the plan, the Illinois Legislature had passed the "Forest Preserve Act of 1905." In addition to the fact that it called for the establishment of boulevards through several of the more scenic rural areas of Cook County, it lacked sufficient details regarding land acquisition, development and governance, and was never signed into law.

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After a second forest preserve act was ruled unconstitutional in 1911, a third law passed in 1913. Shorn of any mention of boulevards, it authorized the establishment of a Forest Preserve District "To acquire...and hold lands...containing one or more natural forests or lands connecting such forests or parts thereof, for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect, and preserve the natural forests and said lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public."

In 1916, after the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that the 1913 forest preserve district law was constitutional, the district acquired its first 500 acres. Within a few short years, it had expanded its holdings to nearly 22,000 acres. Today, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County owns more than 67,000 acres, which amounts to about 11 percent of the total area of the county.

Among the district's holdings are sites first identified by the Special Park Commission and reiterated in the Burnham Plan: Skokie Lagoons, Thatcher

The plan included an updated street and boulevard network and a proposed forest reserve system. Plate 86, Plan of Chicago.

Bird's-eye view of Grant Park, depicting the façade of the city, proposed harbor and the lagoons of the proposed park on the south shore. Plate 127, Plan of Chicago.

Woods and Palos Forest Preserve to name a few. The plan also looked beyond Cook County to the "rising wooded land of DuPage County." In 1917, the newly formed Forest Preserve District of DuPage County acquired its first 79 acres, and today holds nearly 25,000 acres. Subsequent forest preserve or conservation districts in Kane, Will, Lake and McHenry counties have preserved 170,000 acres—nearly three times as many as called for in the Plan of Chicago.

The Burnham Plan has inspired countless other planning efforts, of which the protection of natural lands and related open space has been a key component. To date, public and private interests within Chicago Wilderness—a region extending from southeast Wisconsin, through northeast Illinois and across northern Indiana into southwest Michigan—have worked together to preserve a grand total of 360,000 acres of natural lands and waters.

Given the Burnham Plan's significance for the region, a corps of prominent civic and business leaders have come together to organize the Burnham Plan Centennial. Throughout all of 2009, the committee—with key support from Metropolis 2020 and the Chicago Community Trust—is planning a range of exhibitions, workshops, lectures, films, symposia and related events. With an overall theme of "Bold Plans. Big Dreams," the aim of the year-long celebration is three-fold: To inspire and educate young and old about the legacies of the Burnham Plan, encourage actions that advance realization of the plan and initiate bold plans for the next half century.

Among the celebration's most ambitious initiatives is its promotion of more than 20 Green Legacy Projects. In the spirit of the Burnham Plan, Green Legacy Projects seek to protect the Lake Michigan shoreline, develop regional trails and greenways, and pursue large-scale open space reserves of regional, if not national, significance.

"Then, as now," according to the celebration's Web site, www.burnhamplan100.org, "the charge is to protect open space before opportunities are lost."

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Lakeshore Preserve

Among the Green Legacy Projects being undertaken is the Openlands Lakeshore Preserve. For more than a century, Fort Sheridan occupied 714 acres of Lake Michigan shoreline in northern Illinois. In 1994, the base was closed and 2 miles of shoreline were transferred to conservation interests: the Lake County Forest Preserve District and Openlands, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing open space in northeastern Illinois.

Legislation was passed in 1995 to transfer at no cost 259 acres from the Army to LCFPD, with the actual transfer occurring between 1999 and 2001. In 2004, legislation was passed allowing the Navy to transfer land it owned at Fort Sheridan to Openlands, and agreement was reached in August of 2005 on the terms of the transfer. Bartlett Ravine and a mile of shoreline and bluffs were transferred early in 2006. Two other ravines and 100 feet along the top of the bluffs will be transferred to Openlands this year.

With less than half of Illinois' 60 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline protected, the addition of the Openlands Lakeshore Preserve marks a significant achievement. "One of the last remaining ravine/bluff ecosystems in the Chicago region," the 77-acre preserve is home to five state-listed threatened and endangered plant species, and is an important bird refuge, especially for millions of migrating birds as they semi-annually pass through the Lake Michigan flyway.

Beginning in 2008, Openlands initiated efforts to stem erosion of the bluffs and steeply graded ravines. As habitat restoration continues, the organization also plans to establish a naturalized buffer area with an interpretive trail leading to scenic overlooks. For more information, go to either www.burnhamplan100.uchicago.edu/events/id/48 or www.openlands.org/policy.asp?pgid=342.

View looking north on the south branch of the Chicago River, showing the suggested arrangement of streets and ways for teaming and reception of freight by boat, at different levels. Plate 107, Plan of Chicago.