

Research from the field

‘The beautiful and useful laws of God’: Burnham’s Swedenborgianism and the *Plan of Chicago*

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The phrase ‘beautiful and useful laws of God’ comes from a letter the young Daniel H. Burnham wrote to his mother. Knowledge of Burnham’s religious beliefs is profoundly important for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of his intentions and motivations for the 1909 *Plan of Chicago*. This influence is underestimated, in part, because it has no overt, dramatic representation in the plan and is overshadowed by the apparently contradictory but captivating rendered perspectives.

Keywords: Chicago; Daniel Burnham; Swedenborgians; religion

Jules Guerin’s rendered perspectives are among the most published representations of the 1909 *Plan of Chicago*. Too often these images (lush with colour, rich with atmosphere) are thought to be synonymous with the content of the *Plan* itself. This in itself is a mistake, excluding, as it does, all the practical and functional content. In addition, there is another less visual and therefore less visible content, that of a social agenda. This can be found, if one were open to it, in the text of the *Plan of Chicago* and perhaps, by extension, in a handful of the black and white photographs reproduced therein.¹ This other content, however, is explicitly and emphatically evident in the draft of the plan, the manuscript in Daniel H. Burnham’s own hand. And this content can be best understood by looking at Burnham’s Swedenborgian religious beliefs. His social agenda, based on his interpretation of his spiritual duty, underpins the published *Plan of Chicago*, although it can seem to be negated by the luxury of the Guerin images.²

Comprehension of Burnham himself has been further obscured by later architects and historians of modernist bent, who caricatured and took out of context Louis Sullivan’s more rounded depiction of Burnham. All this is a way of asserting that the *Plan of Chicago* has more to reveal.

Burnham is typically (and unfairly) characterised as merely the businessman partner of his architectural firm.³ Sullivan contributes to this when he writes that, from the outset of his career, Burnham strove for big projects in emulation of large business corporations. Not intending any flattery, Sullivan observed that ‘the only architect in Chicago to catch the significance of this movement [toward the large corporation] was Daniel Burnham, for in its tendencies toward bigness, organization, delegation and intense commercialism, he sensed the reciprocal workings of his own mind.’⁴

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Figure 1. Plate CXXVII of the *Plan of Chicago*. Jules Guerin rendering of Grant Park at night. Guerin's renderings are among the most reproduced images of the *Plan*, and thus the presumed content of the *Plan* has been skewed in the direction of beautification.



Figure 2. Plate LXV of the *Plan of Chicago*. Children's wading pool and the field house of Mark White Square (now known as McGuane Park). One of fourteen neighborhood parks authorised by the South Park Commission in 1903, and designed by D.H. Burnham and Co. and the Olmsted Brothers. Each featured a field house – based on the Chicago settlement house – to provide space for educational, recreational, and social programs as well as indoor athletic facilities. Rarely published, the *Plan* photographs of Chicago parks reveal a social concern not often associated with Burnham's work.

But Sullivan also acknowledges another side of Burnham. He wrote:

Louis found Burnham a sentimentalist, a dreamer, a man of fixed determination and strong will – no doubt about that – of large, wholesome, effective presence, a shade pompous, a mystic – a Swedenborgian – a man who readily opened his heart if one were sympathetic.... He liked men of

heart as well as brains. That there was so much loveliness in nature, so much hidden beauty in the human soul, so much of joy and uplifting in the arts that he who shut himself away from these influences and immured himself in sordid things forfeited the better half of life. It was too high a price to pay, he said. He averred that romance need not die out; that there must still be joy to the soul in doing big things in a big personal way, devoid of the sordid.⁵

The Burnham who emerges here is both practical and sentimental, shrewd and spiritual; a doer and dreamer together. Or as a colleague put it, Burnham was a visionary with sound business judgment.⁶

Burnham's role model was Emanuel Swedenborg himself, an eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and mystic. Although little known today, Swedenborg was well known throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, and was sometimes referred to as the Buddha of the north or the Leonardo da Vinci of his era.⁷ Swedenborg's early work was in chemistry and physics, mines and canals. His later investigations were of a more esoteric nature, however, as he sought the nature and location of the soul in the human body. Swedenborg believed that the physical form of the body originated in the soul. This idea – of the internal spiritual origin giving form to the physical – would become an essential theme in Swedenborg's writings. Swedenborg's investigations concerning the soul led to his spiritual awakening and to revelations that convinced him that all existing churches were dead. Swedenborg believed that he delivered a message from God for a new interpretation of scripture. This hermeneutical approach influenced Burnham's interpretation of the world around him and his role in it.

Based on his extensive writings, Swedenborg's followers founded the Church of the New Jerusalem, sometimes called the New Church or the Swedenborgian Church.⁸ The name, the Church of the New Jerusalem, should be noted. The New Jerusalem was the symbolic city described in the Book of Revelation. Swedenborgians identified their church with this heavenly city of the second coming.⁹

Swedenborgianism was the religion of Burnham's childhood. As a young man, Burnham verbalised the connection between his religion and his newly chosen profession in letters to his mother. He described architecture as the 'striving after the beautiful and useful laws God has created to govern his material universe', and he hoped that when 'trying to find them and apply them ... [God] will reveal them and expand my mind and heart towards himself and all mankind'. Burnham believed that his professional calling would 'open [my] mind more and more to the Great Architect of the Universe the more I study it in simplicity of mind and ask Him to help me'.¹⁰

His commitment to his religious beliefs continued throughout his life. Some 40 years after the letters to his mother, we have evidence of this in the words of Burnham's protégé Edward H. Bennett. Bennett was co-author of the *Plan of Chicago* and worked closely with Burnham, in the years leading up to the *Plan*, on the Chicago parks fieldhouses, projects that were dearest to Burnham's heart. Bennett recalled that Burnham believed men were at their best when they channelled some higher force. He noted after a visit to a hospitalised Burnham that '[w]e talked of Swedenborg or rather I listened to him discourse on the subject and came away strengthened in purpose'.¹¹ Bennett described Burnham as 'a blazing human spirit of pure gold ... [who] flooded [my] life with its warmth and inspiring faith for years'.¹²

In order to understand how his beliefs relate to his planning activities, two of Swedenborg's more important concepts must be introduced: uses and correspondence. 'Uses' refers to one's

contribution to community. Uses could be the pursuit of one's work, job or career as long as the focus was not on individual gain.¹³ To be 'in uses' through one's work, one would have to focus on the benefit of this work to the larger community. For Swedenborgians, it was important to 'discharge with fidelity the functions of [one's] employments, and the duties of [one's] office, and to make [oneself] in all things useful to society'.¹⁴ Swedenborg did not discourage success, but success had to be pursued in the right frame of mind, balanced by a sense of duty to community and neighbour.¹⁵ Swedenborg thought that such useful work was a powerful method for personal spiritual growth.¹⁶

Uses was a 'spiritual function', characterised as 'loving kindness in action'. According to Swedenborg, 'God designed the universe as a use and even series within series of uses.' With these two statements – that uses is 'loving kindness in action' and that 'God designed the universe as a use' – we can see that 'uses' links the individual's acts of loving kindness to the essence of God's design.¹⁷ Swedenborg wrote:

The following are good uses: providing the necessities of life for oneself and one's dependents; wanting a great deal for the sake of the nation and the sake of the neighbor ... and wanting a great deal also because the mind can in this way be withdrawn from an idle life, which is a destructive life.¹⁸

And again:

By uses not only the necessities of life are meant ... but also the good of one's country, community and fellow-citizens. Business is such a good when it is the end-love and money is a mediate, subservient love ... [and] when the businessman shuns and is adverse to fraud and bad practices ... [O]therwise when money is the end-love ... this is avarice, which is a root of evils.¹⁹

'Uses', in effect, entailed good works. Swedenborg explained that 'all elements of faith and charity dwell in good work',²⁰ and stated simply and clearly: 'there is no happiness in life apart from activity.'²¹ And Burnham agreed. In a letter to his wife Margaret, he wrote: 'Work is the one thing that tells in this world, isn't it dear? We both know the real good of it, do we not? Without it life would be nothing.'²²

Burnham's city planning work was his 'uses.' He undertook this work (with one exception) without remuneration.²³ Burnham would receive no payment for this three-year effort on the *Plan of Chicago*, for example. He made this contribution as a public service, donating his time. He did it for the good of the community. It was his act of loving kindness, and one linking him to God's design.

'Correspondence' is an understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and the natural realms. Swedenborg believed that the divine structure of heaven had been unveiled to him through his communication with angels. The heavenly realm thus revealed was concentrically organised around a luminous centre. In addition, he believed that the structure or configuration of our natural (or physical or material) world corresponded to that of heavenly. Swedenborg wrote: 'The whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world ... It must be understood that the natural world springs from and has permanent existence from the spiritual world.'²⁴ Thus, his theories of correspondence linked our natural world to that of the spiritual in a causal way: 'Everything outward and visible has an inward and spiritual cause.'²⁵

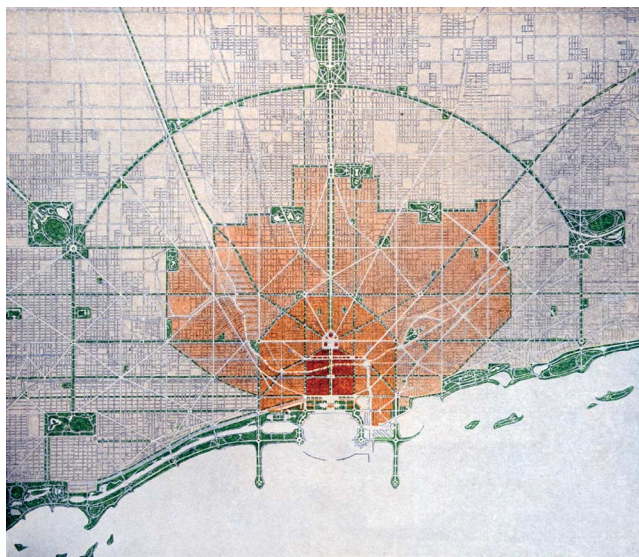


Figure 4. Plate CIII of the *Plan of Chicago*. The coloration emphasizes the concentric rings of streets, boulevards and parkways around the heart of the city. This concentricity was similar to that of the spiritual or heavenly realm described by Emanuel Swedenborg.

Swedenborgians endeavoured to make this physical world more in accordance with that of the spiritual. In the spiritual world, the state of mind of the inhabitants influences the character of their surroundings. In the natural world, the reverse is true. If the surroundings exhibit spiritual order and manifest divine goodness, this environment will influence this world's inhabitants for the better. When people live according to heavenly doctrine, and the natural world more closely resembles the spiritual one, then and only then will the holy city, the New Jerusalem, come down to earth.³³ Through both uses and correspondence, Burnham strove to make this happen. Burnham's city planning work was his uses, his service to the community and his city planning designs were an inscription in the natural world with designs of heavenly correspondence. City planning was Burnham's act of loving kindness that linked him to God's design.³⁴

Burnham's Swedenborgian beliefs concerning public service, public betterment and the remaking of the world into a more spiritual place are evident in his manuscript draft of the *Plan of Chicago*.³⁵ Completed by 1908, Burnham's draft of roughly 300 pages of notes, outlines and text contained much of what would be published and a good deal more. The draft revealed an expansive social programme, one that was omitted from the final published version. Burnham's vision of an improved Chicago included services that have yet to be adequately provided in American cities.

The first half of the draft contains almost all the major elements to be found in the published *Plan* and in approximately that order. Some of the draft's paragraphs are repeated almost verbatim in the published *Plan*.³⁶ In the second half of the draft,³⁷ Burnham discusses issues that do not find full expression in the published document, as well as topics that have no representation at all: power plants and public utilities; manufacturing and business districts; schools, hospitals and orphanages; cemeteries, pollution and the security of municipal utility

investments. Some items from this section of the draft do find their way into the text of the published version as small asides. For instance, in the draft, public utilities receive a dozen pages of consideration, but only one line in the published *Plan*.³⁸

Notable among the city services that Burnham proposed in the draft is child care for working mothers. He identified this as urgently important and says that: 'It has intimately to do with the self respect of great numbers of women, women who are willing to and do work, and who cannot do it and take care of young children at the same time.'³⁹ In the draft, Burnham also concerned himself with the redesign of police stations so that 'the policeman can do nothing to any prisoner while hidden from view'. Here he argued that 'it would be beneficial to good police service, to open up the stations to observation' because when 'hidden from public gaze [the police] do not exercise the same control over themselves as when their actions can be seen'.⁴⁰ By exposing all to public view, both the citizens and the authorities would be at their best in Burnham's city.

While we are aware of Burnham's creation of the grand civic centre, he also wrote about the provision of public toilets. He saw it a matter essential to basic human dignity.⁴¹ None of this appears in the published *Plan*. In the draft, when writing about the Lakefront Parks, Burnham called for free bathhouses and for restaurants with a variety of prices so that all classes could afford refreshments.⁴² He specified mass transit service to the recreational piers so that 'at very little cost', the piers will be 'within the reach of even the poorest men and their families'.⁴³ This direct and compassionate statement in the draft was reduced, in the published *Plan*, to: 'provision is made for transit lines reaching to the ends of the piers, so as to make these places parks of decided value.'⁴⁴ Thus, even when the topic of equality in public access to the lake front was addressed in the final version, the overt empathetic social content had been emptied out.

Frank Sewall, a Swedenborgian minister and friend, wrote in Burnham's obituary about a trip he took to Chicago. When guiding his visiting friend around the city, Burnham showed the most pleasure when Sewall expressed his appreciation of 'the finely conceived district playgrounds and assembly halls and of every provision which had for its aim the pleasure and the good of the whole citizenship without any possible distinction between rich and poor'. Sewall wrote that Burnham kept this point 'ever uppermost' in all his work. Sewall saw in their Swedenborgian Church's 'conception of Charity ... as the love of the neighbor' the inspiration for Burnham's professional life and work. Sewall believed that Burnham conceived his 'art as a function of true charity in the civic sense'.⁴⁵

This understanding of Burnham's religious beliefs and the social content of the draft encourages us to look more closely at the *Plan*, to read it more carefully and not be seduced by the renderings. In this way, we can appreciate the text by in a more balanced relationship with the images. It allows us to counter the functionalist-based responses of some earlier planning histories and the style-obsessed critiques of earlier architectural histories. It allows whatever social concern that still resides in the text to be read with enough strength to counter the overwhelming and dominant visual material, especially those seductive rendered perspectives.

Burnham's view of the city is a remarkably holistic one, a complete integration not only of the physical aspects of the city, but of social services as well. He understood that both were requisite for the dignity of human life in the city. In addition, what has previously been critiqued as empty beaux-arts formalism can now be interpreted as an imprint of cosmological significance. It was a sacralising of space, a way of bringing spiritual order to the socio-economic

free-for-all of early twentieth-century Chicago. It went beyond function, surpassing the immediate and transitory in its desire for permanence and meaning through religion and the inherited western tradition. This is not to say that Burnham was not interested in satisfying function, but neither was this the source nor the end of his intent. In the overall good design of the city, he saw the material expression of the spiritual. For Burnham, the *Plan of Chicago* was both the plan of heaven and the map to get there.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. I am referring to the photographs of the field houses and pools of Mark White Square, and Sherman and Hamilton Parks in Chicago. Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, *Plan of Chicago* (Chicago: The Commercial Club, 1909), 59–60, plates LXV–LXVIII.
2. The *Plan of Chicago* was co-authored by Edward H. Bennett and edited by Charles Moore. However, it was to Burnham that the business community had come to develop a plan; and the notes, outlines and first drafts (here referred to as the manuscript or draft of the plan) were written by Burnham. That is not to say that the contributions of Bennett were unappreciated or insubstantial. It is to say that the overall vision and responsibility were Burnham's. As to why the scope and content of the published version differ so profoundly from that of the draft, one can only speculate that the sponsors of the *Plan* (first the Merchants Club, later joined by the Commercial Club) were unwilling to endorse such a radical social agenda.
3. I dispute this characterisation in my book *Daniel H. Burnham* (New York: Rizzoli International, 2003), especially 13–18.
4. Louis H. Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Dover, [1924]1956), 314.
5. Sullivan, 286. 'In this work, Sullivan refers to himself in the third person, hence "Louis found Burnham..."'
6. William E. Parsons, "Burnham as a Pioneer in City Planning," *The Architectural Record* XXXVIII (July 1915) 14.
7. Coleridge, Carlyle and Blake, Emerson and Thoreau, Balzac and Barrett Browning, and Goethe and Kant were all readers of Swedenborg. His ideas influenced American artists Hiram Powers and George Innes, and American architects John Root and Louis Sullivan, as well as Burnham.
8. For information on Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and his teachings, I have relied heavily on a number of sources: Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, trans. George F. Dole (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1979); Swedenborg, *The Path of Life*, comp. John C. Ager (Philadelphia J.B. Lippincott, 1913); Sig Synnestvedt, ed., *The Essential Swedenborg* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1977); Brian Kingslake, *Swedenborg Explores the Spiritual Dimension* (London: Seminar Books, 1981); George Trobridge, *Swedenborg: Life and Teaching*, rev. Richard H. Tafel, Sr. and Richard H. Tafel, Jr. (New York: The Swedenborg Foundation [1907]1992).
9. William Ross Woofenden, comp., 'Glossary of Swedenborgian Terms', in *Emanuel Swedenborg: A Continuing Vision*, ed. Robin Larsen (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1988), 515.
10. Burnham to his mother, Elizabeth Burnham, 24 November 1867 and 1 December 1867, Burnham Papers, Art Institute of Chicago (AIC). Burnham also wrote that he had chosen the profession of architecture in part because there he was not surrounded by the 'evil and deceit' he had been in trade. Swedenborgianism came into the Burnham family through Elizabeth Keith Weeks Burnham, Daniel's mother. Hugh Burnham, his brother, chose to live in the Swedenborgian community at Glenview,

- Illinois. Kirstin Burnham, *Guided Footsteps* (self-published, 2009) 51, 53–4. Burnham chose to live in Evanston on Lake Michigan where he conducted home services on Sundays. Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago: Architect and Planner* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 265.
11. Diary entry for Wednesday, 26 February 1908. Bennett Diaries, AIC. Burnham was in the Presbyterian Hospital at the time.
12. Edward H. Bennett recollection, 1–2. Bennett Papers, AIC.
13. Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, chap. 39, para. 361.
14. Synnestvedt, *The Essential Swedenborg*, 52. Burnham's wife Margaret had a small card with 'Rules for Life' on it, 'From the manuscript of Emanuel Swedenborg': (1) Often to read and meditate on the Word of God; (2) to submit everything to the will of *Divine Providence*; (3) to observe in everything a propriety of behaviour, and to keep the conscience clear; and (4) to discharge with fidelity the functions of my employments, and the duties of my office, and to make myself in all things useful to society. Burnham Papers, AIC. My thanks to Judith Paine McBrien for sending me a copy of this.
15. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Providence*, trans. William Frederic Wunsch (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1986), para. 11. Also see Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom*, trans. George F. Dole (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1985) para. 214–5, 297, 230.
16. Wilson Van Dusen, *Usefulness: A Way of Personal and Spiritual Growth* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, n.d.), 1. Van Dusen's small pamphlet is an excellent introduction to the topic of uses.
17. Van Dusen, *Usefulness*, 2, 4 and 5.
18. Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, para. 361.
19. Swedenborg, *Divine Providence*, para. 11.
20. Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom*, para. 214.
21. Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, para. 403.
22. Burnham to his wife Margaret, n.d., fragment. Burnham Papers, AIC.
23. Burnham had wanted to donate his time to the Cleveland Group Plan Commission, but as John Carrère and Arnold Brunner could not, he did not. It was the only compensation he accepted for his planning work. He donated his time to the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia for the Senate Park Commission as well as to the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco.
24. Swedenborg, *Path of Life*, 124.
25. Trobridge, *Swedenborg: Life and Teaching*, 83.
26. Swedenborg, *Path of Life*, 27, 39–40, 125–6; Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, chap. 14, §116–7.
27. It is to the intermediate world of spirits, between heaven and hell, that one first goes upon death. Kingslake, *Spiritual Dimension*, 39–41; Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, chap. 5, paras. 29–33. But it is not quite as simple as I have made it sound here. Swedenborg also explains three heavens in another configuration, describing them as the head, the body and the extremities of a person. We could, possibly, relate this to the civic, commercial and cultural centres in the *Plan of Chicago*, but there is no space to explore that here.
28. Burnham and Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, plate XCVII, 'Theoretical Diagram of the Streets of Paris'.
29. Burnham and Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, 89.
30. Burnham and Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, plate CIII, 'Chicago. Plan of the City, showing the General System of Boulevards and Parks Existing and Proposed'. In both the draft and the *Plan*, Burnham carefully describes the routes that delimit the concentric circles, and in the draft he names three of them: 'Great Arc', 'Great Park Boulevard' and 'Grand Inner Circuit'. Both the draft and the published *Plan* describe this last as having 'very great ultimate importance'. A fourth and innermost circuit, however, is not named in either document but described in the text and clearly outlined in plate CIII. Burnham and Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, 95–6; Burnham, Manuscript Draft of the Plan of Chicago, 51–9, Burnham Papers, AIC. See also Irving D. Fisher, 'An Iconology of City Planning – The Plan of Chicago', in *Swedenborg and His Influence*, ed. Erland J. Brock and E. Bruce Glenn (Bryn Athyn, PA: The Academy of the New Church, 1988), 449–64; also published in Robin Larsen, ed., *Emanuel Swedenborg: A Continuing Vision* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1988), 245–262. I am indebted to Fisher's lead in postulating this relationship, but I disagree with his conclusions. Fisher posits his own three circuits, his outermost corresponding to the Grand Inner Circuit of Burnham's, which to my mind are much too small considering the scale at which Burnham liked to

- work. Given that Burnham provides us with this clear image, I see no reason to reject it. (But, one must be careful with such interpretation not to be too literal. For instance, I do not think that Burnham meant to insinuate that anyone outside the Great Arc was living in hell.)
31. Bennett is describing something he had seen Burnham do while visiting Burnham's lifelong friend, the Swedenborgian minister Joseph Worcester. Bennett, 'Statement on Daniel H. Burnham', n.d., Bennett Papers, AIC; also reproduced in Charles Moore, *Daniel H. Burnham, Architect, Planner of Cities* (New York: DaCapo Press [1921]1968), II, 170; Hines, *Burnham of Chicago*, 326. Bennett Diaries, 5 March 1908, Bennett Papers, AIC. Burnham also had discerned evidence of correspondence in the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, interpreting the Court of Honour in terms of the Book of Revelation. For example, he identifies the four beasts of Verse 6 with 'the four great buildings, the Manufactures, the Agricultural, the Machinery and the Electricity'. Burnham, 'Sermon', n.d., typescript, Burnham Papers, AIC.
 32. Bennett's signature over Burnham's name, letter to Carrie G. McKnight, 2 November 1907, Bennett Papers, AIC.
 33. Swedenborg, *Path Of Life*, 125–6; Kingslake, *Spiritual Dimension*, 39.
 34. Burnham, by making himself useful, by living a life of good works and continuous service, could contribute to this accordance. Synnestvedt, *The Essential Swedenborg*, 52.
 35. For more on the draft, see my 'Fabric of City Life: The Social Agenda in Burnham's Draft of the Plan of Chicago', introduction to the facsimile reprint of the *Plan of Chicago* by Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, ed. Charles Moore (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, [1909]1993); and my 'Daniel H. Burnham: Urban Ideals and the Plan of Chicago' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1993).
 36. The issues of convenience and beauty that are most prominent in the published *Plan* are found in the first half of the draft, with the exception of the discussion of the railroads, which is contained in the second half of the draft.
 37. The second half of the draft is not so extensively developed, again with the exception of railroads, which has extensive but messy sections on transportation, freight and passenger districts.
 38. Draft 199–211, 'Work Under the Streets', Burnham Papers, AIC; Burnham and Bennett, *Plan of Chicago*, 68, chap. VI, 'Streets within the City'.
 39. Draft 172–4, Burnham Papers, AIC.
 40. Draft 163–5, Burnham Papers, AIC.
 41. Draft 169–71, Burnham Papers, AIC.
 42. Draft 141, 'Harbor in front of the Downtown District' section, Burnham Papers, AIC.
 43. Draft 140, Burnham Papers, AIC.
 44. Draft 139–40, Burnham Papers, AIC; *Plan* 111.
 45. Frank Sewall, 'Daniel Hudson Burnham, A.M., LL.D.', *New-Church Messenger* (3 July 1912), 12–3.

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