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No Little Plans: The Achievement of Daniel Burnham

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DANIEL H. BURNHAM (fig. 1)¹ was born on September 4, 1846, in Henderson, New York, to parents of established, Anglo-American lineage. Edwin and Elizabeth Burnham were strongly committed to the tenets of Swedenborgianism, one of the many sects then flourishing in upper New York state. In the early 1850s, after a period of repeated business failures, they moved their family to the promising young city of Chicago, where they began to prosper financially, socially, and culturally.

As a teenager, Daniel was already handsome and impressive, but his academic abilities were less solid than his social, managerial, and artistic skills and he was rejected by both Harvard and Yale universities. To prepare him for his college entrance examinations, his parents had sent him to Massachusetts for private tutoring, where he was introduced to architectural history and theory. This new enthusiasm, coupled with his considerable talent for drawing, was sufficient to get Burnham work with the Chicago architecture firm of Loring and Jenney. There, in 1867 and 1868, with the great engineer William Le Baron Jenney (1832–1907), Burnham had his first real exposure to the practice of architecture. Still feeling restless and unfulfilled, however, he left Chicago for two unrewarding years as a silver speculator in Nevada. Still believing that, ultimately, architecture was his calling, he returned to Chicago in 1870, where he worked in a succession of small offices while looking for a better position.

In 1872, following the Great Chicago Fire of the previous year, Burnham secured that better job in the office of Carter, Drake & Wight, which was busily engaged in rebuilding the burned-out city. Peter B. Wight (1838–1925) was a sympathetic and influential mentor, but in 1873, Burnham and John Wellborn Root (1850–1891), a fellow Wight draftsman, decided to open their own office.

FIGURE 1. Daniel H. Burnham, c. 1909. Burnham became a leading figure in the architectural world and played a prominent role in the history of The Art Institute of Chicago. (Photo: *Builder's Journal and Architectural Engineer*, Oct. 6, 1909)



The two young architects sensed the differing but reciprocal qualities of temperament and talent which, when integrated, would form the ideal partnership. Brilliant, quick-witted, and amiable among friends, Root was shy and reserved with strangers and prospective clients. His numerous interests and talents, moreover, served frequently as distractions and excuses for procrastination. Burnham, on the other hand, toughened by his earlier failures, had grown increasingly determined, aggressive, and persuasive, and became the firm's chief administrator, planner, building supervisor, and public envoy. He was also, Root acknowledged, chiefly responsible for the layout of most of the firm's buildings and served as a perceptive critic of the architectural designs, which the two considered Root's special domain.

In 1874, the firm obtained a major residential commission from stockyard magnate John B. Sherman, a fortuitous event in Burnham's professional and personal fortunes since it resulted in his marriage to the client's daughter, Margaret. The acknowledged success of the Sherman design and the vast social connections of the Sherman family led, in the 1870s and 1880s, to important commissions, particularly residences, for Chicago luminaries such as music critic Reginald DeKoven and prominent businessmen such as Edward Ayer (see fig. 2). They also designed and built small public and commercial structures related in scale and ambience to the residential commissions, as well as numerous small train stations throughout the Midwest.

Attracted in their residential designs to the Queen Anne idiom and in their small public buildings to the Romanesque Revival, Burnham and Root took their cues from British architect Richard Norman Shaw (1831–1912) and Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–1886). Like Richardson and his Romanesque style and Shaw and his Queen Anne style, Burnham and Root borrowed selectively from other eras and traditions but seldom allowed other styles to dominate their own developing synthesis. Though they never made sufficient break with the past to signal a real revolution in house design, Burnham and Root's smaller work, in its inexorable trend toward greater simplicity, marked both the end of an older order and, in several late houses, a transition to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and his contemporaries. Yet, as Burnham once confided to Louis Sullivan, he was "not going to stay satisfied with houses; my idea is to work up a big business, to handle big things, deal with big businessmen, and to build up a big organization."² And, indeed, it was the big things that counted most in Burnham's ultimate achievement, the tall buildings for the big businessmen which would come to be called skyscrapers.

Although Burnham and Root emulated Jenney's demonstration of the steel-frame, weight-bearing concept of the mid-1880s, and although they built numerous steel-framed buildings in the late 1880s and 1890s, their most famous skyscrapers, ironically, were three wall-bearing structures, all built in Chicago for the developers Peter and Shepherd Brooks. The ten-story Montauk Building of 1881–82 (fig. 3) was virtually without traditional historical references, adumbrating, in its stern obeisance to "functionalism," much of the ethic and aesthetic of the subsequent modern movement. (The Montauk was demolished to make way in 1903 for the First National Bank Building of D. H. Burnham and Company.) The Rookery building of 1886–87 (fig. 4) was a more consciously elaborate structure, with Root's lush ornament highlighting the Ro-

FIGURE 2. View of the Edward E. Ayer house, 1885–86, in Chicago, one of Daniel Burnham's early residential commissions. Though he was a successful designer of homes, Burnham resolved that he was not going to "stay satisfied with houses."



manesque styling. Its logical internal plan, attributed to Burnham, with four connecting wings surrounding a light court, would long serve as a model for skyscraper layout. The dark, stark Monadnock Building of 1890–91 (fig. 5) eschewed ornament even more explicitly than the Montauk. Despite the anachronism, demanded by the client, of its elegantly flared wall-bearing structure, the Monadnock would become another favorite monument of modernism.

Following Root's sudden death in 1891, the office, reconstituted as D. H. Burnham and Company, widened its stylistic parameters to include buildings of the re-emerging Beaux-Arts Neoclassical persuasion. Until his death in 1895, Charles B. Atwood (1849–1895) replaced Root as the firm's major designer. After that, design responsibilities were assigned to several architects, chief among whom was Peirce Anderson (1870–1924). The Reliance Building in Chicago (fig. 6), commissioned in 1890 but not completed until 1895, was more the result of Burnham's collaboration with Atwood than of Root's preliminary studies. Carrying the possibilities of the steel skeleton several steps beyond that of any existing structure, Burnham and Atwood produced a breathtaking glass tower of fourteen stories. The slim shaft contained no light court. Obviously resting on the Chicago frame, the building's facade was a tightly stretched skin of glass and terracotta that confined and articulated the crisp, shallow bays. Over two-thirds of the street-front wall surface was glass—a radically prophetic ratio that heralded the glass architecture of the twentieth century.

Eschewing the crystalline image of the Reliance Building for a sturdier monumentality, the firm created the beautifully proportioned and richly ornamented Flatiron Building in New York (1902), which towers above Broadway like a great triangular rock. The Railway Exchange Building (1903–04; fig. 7) and the Butler Brothers Warehouse (1913), both in Chicago, carried forward the ordered functionalism of the Chicago School tradition.

On the other side of the Burnham repertory were templelike, Beaux-Arts libraries, museums, and railroad stations. Union Station (fig. 8) in Washington, D.C. (1903–07), epitomizes this ceremonial mode, which came to be known as "Burnham Baroque." A fitting "vestibule" to the nation's capital, the station was one of the largest projects Burnham's office ever handled and constituted his most successful essay in the Neoclassical mode. Omitting the usual high, arched train sheds at the rear, the building contains two primary elements: the central train, or midway, concourse leading onto the open train platforms; and the elaborate main waiting room (fig. 9) or passenger concourse at the front. Rising high above the arched entrance porch, the vast barrel vault of the main waiting-room ceiling is explicitly expressed as the building's dominant exterior feature.

Much of Union Station's success and significance lay in its deference to Burnham's Washington plan. As such, it was an integral component of the City Beautiful movement—the dominant trend and motivating force in American urban design from the 1880s to the 1920s. The City Beautiful was an ambitious and, at that time, naive and contradictory effort to achieve for American cities something approaching a "cultural parity" with the great urban centers of an older and grander European civilization. Not surprisingly, the American movement used those cities as models for its own remodeling efforts. Burnham was the movement's acknowledged father and leader.

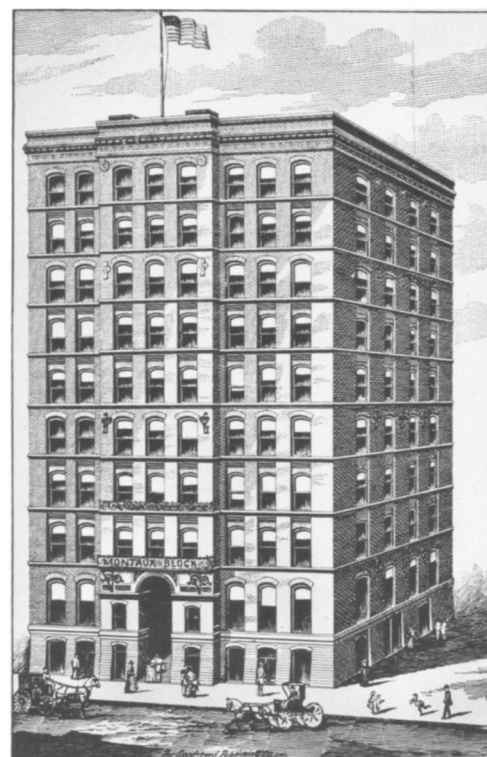


FIGURE 3. Burnham and Root. Montauk Block, 64 West Monroe Street, Chicago, 1881–82 (demolished). One of their most famous "skycrapers," the Montauk Building contained many elements that characterized the later modern movement in architecture.



FIGURE 4. Burnham and Root. Rookery, 209 South LaSalle Street, Chicago, 1886–87. Considered the largest office building in Chicago at the time it was built, the Rookery was also acclaimed for its innovative central light court.

FIGURE 5. Burnham and Root. Monadnock Building, 53 West Jackson Street, Chicago, 1890–91. (Photo: Chicago Architectural Photographing Co., courtesy of David Phillips)

FIGURE 6. D. H. Burnham and Co. Reliance Building, 32 North State Street, Chicago, 1895. (Photo: J. W. Taylor)



However important the work of Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) and his contemporaries in earlier park and landscape architecture, the single most important catalyst in the launching of the City Beautiful was the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition. The White City, as the group of Neoclassical structures executed on Chicago's south side was called, became a microcosm of the City Beautiful movement on pragmatic, aesthetic, and ideological levels. In addition to the splendor of the spectacle, with its formal Court of Honor (fig. 10) and its allegiance to varieties of Neoclassical architecture, the builders of this temporary city groped with many of the real problems of cities—from the efficacy of streets, sidewalks, waterfronts, and bridges to the problems of transportation, sustenance, and sewage. Whereas the relatively informal lagoon area to the north reflected the picturesque aesthetic that had characterized Olmsted's work, the court to the south formed the seminal image of the City Beautiful mentality. It was also prophetic that Burnham, the operator supreme, should choreograph the whole enterprise.

Meeting in Chicago for several crucial planning sessions in early 1891, the board of architects, chaired by New York architect Richard Morris Hunt (1827–1895), had agreed on the need for a formal court, determined the size and the exact location of buildings, the court, canals, and lagoons, and established a maximum cornice line for the buildings of the court. These general criteria led, with seeming inevitability, to a consensus in favor of Renaissance, Baroque, and other Neoclassical stylistic motifs. Several of the architects, including Hunt and Charles McKim (1847–1909), had trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and had garnered their penchant for classicism there. All were acquainted with the formal, ordered, and axially oriented imperatives generally associated with Beaux-Arts aesthetics—a point of view that would dominate most City Beautiful architecture. And, in 1893, the results seemed remarkable. In the same



FIGURE 7. D. H. Burnham and Co. Railway Exchange Building (now Santa Fe Center), 224 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 1903–04. Burnham, the first American architect to organize his office on corporate principles, had his offices here. (Photo: Detroit Publishing Co.)



018835. RAILWAY EXCHANGE BUILDING-CHICAGO, ILL.

year that historian Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the “end” of the American frontier at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, one of the Fair’s numerous professional congresses, American architects and urban planners received from the White City a suggestive vision of things to come—new frontiers of twentieth-century urbanism.

Over the next two decades, Burnham and his colleagues took the aesthetic and pragmatic lessons of the White City to the real cities of Washington, D.C., Cleveland, San Francisco, and Manila in the newly Americanized Philippines. Such critics as Sullivan decried the results and lamented the blow dealt the modern movement by the Neoclassical “contagion.” Yet, both then and later, Burnham and the City Beautiful had their champions and defenders.

Burnham’s and Edward H. Bennett’s (1874–1954) 1909 *Plan of Chicago* (see p. 122, pl. 5) achieved, of all plans of the period, the most significant integration of aesthetic and pragmatic strands. The substantive proposals encompassed the development of the whole Chicago area within a sixty-mile radius of the city’s center, including a system of radial and concentric boulevards connecting the center with its outlying suburbs and linking the suburbs one with another. The plan also proposed numerous changes in the width, function, and general appearance of individual streets throughout the city. One of the most prescient recommendations was the call for what came to be the modern world’s first double-level boulevard, one level for commercial traffic, the other for regular traffic. The Chicago River was to be straightened and enhanced for more efficient water transportation and river-borne commerce. The stations and tracks of the numerous connecting rail lines would also be relocated and consolidated into one or more union stations. A useful and beautiful park system would run twenty miles along Lake Michigan and throughout the city in an

FIGURE 8. D. H. Burnham and Co. Union Station, Washington, D. C., 1903–07. Union Station was an integral part of Burnham’s plan for Washington. One of the largest projects ever done by Burnham’s firm, Union Station was called the “vestibule to the nation’s capital.”





integral park network. The plan's elegant, formal culmination in downtown Grant Park would be eastwardly inflected toward the new inner harbor development with breakwater causeways stretching far into the lake. Beaux-Arts aesthetics would pervade the landscaping and public buildings. Although the proposed civic center (see p. 123, pl. 6) was never completed, a remarkable percentage of Burnham and Bennett's proposals was later realized. The Chicago Plan was Burnham's "largest" achievement.

Burnham was very interested in cultural philanthropy and was a staunch supporter and board member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and The Art Institute of Chicago. He was one of the founders and lifelong benefactors of the American Academy in Rome. Of all the honors conferred upon him, the one he valued most was his appointment in 1910 by President William H. Taft as the first chairman of the National Commission on Fine Arts.

When Burnham died in 1912, his reputation was international. President Taft thought him "one of the foremost architects of the world," but one who had more than merely professional skill. He had, Taft thought, a "breadth of views

FIGURE 9. D. H. Burnham and Co. View of Union Station waiting room. This elaborate, barrel-vaulted room is the building's dominant feature.



FIGURE 10. View of the Court of Honor, World's Columbian Exposition, 1893. Burnham was Director of the Works for the Exposition, which inaugurated his renowned career in large-scale planning.

as to the artistic subject that permitted him to lead in every movement for the education of the public in art, of the development of art in every branch of our busy life without pay.”³³ Architect Cass Gilbert (1859–1934) praised Burnham’s artistic contributions but believed that he “would have been successful in any walk of life, for the qualities which make for success were his to an unusual degree . . . Easily a leader, his leadership gave prestige to every project that he undertook.”³⁴ Former British Ambassador James Bryce remembered Burnham from his years in America and recalled an “impression of the power and range of his mind and ideas” and thought he would “be reckoned in his way and sphere of art one of the most remarkable men of the generation. . . .”³⁵ Even his professional detractors found much in him to like. Frank Lloyd Wright stated bluntly that Burnham “was not a creative architect, but he was a great man”—high praise in view of Wright’s firm belief that there were few creative architects in 1912 other than himself and Louis Sullivan. Still, Wright knew that Burnham “made masterful use of the methods and men of his time” and that he was an “enthusiastic promoter of great construction enterprises, . . . [and] his powerful personality was supreme.”³⁶

In his *Autobiography of an Idea* of 1922, Louis Sullivan recalled briefly his first impressions of Burnham: “. . . a dreamer, a man of fixed determination and strong will . . . of large wholesome, effective presence, a shade pompous . . . a man who readily opened his heart if one were sympathetic.” Sullivan saw other occasional virtues in the make-up of his rival, but his feelings toward Burnham were, at best, ambivalent. Usually he was more damning: he “watched through the years the growing of Daniel Hudson Burnham into a colossal merchandiser,” whose “megalomania concerning the largest, the tallest, the most costly and sensational moved on in its sure orbit, as he painfully learned to use the jargon of big business.” In a world of “bigness, organization, delegation, and intense commercialism,” Sullivan thought, Burnham “sensed the reciprocal workings of his own mind.” Sullivan’s critique of Burnham contained much truth and insight. Prompted, however, by his own state of poverty and neglect, the general tone was one of bitterness and contempt.⁷

Still, in many ways, Burnham was as great as he knew himself to be, as important as contemporaries believed. In four different areas, above all others, Burnham made original and distinguished contributions: first, in the development of the skyscraper form, in the perfection of tall, office-building “systems,” especially in matters of layout and internal arrangement; second, in the creation of the large, modern architectural office, a “system,” again, of hierarchical departments of specialists working together; third, in his early encouragement of the “comprehensive” planning concept, the “master” plan embracing entire urban and geographical regions, a concept that evolved from his early planning fragments to its fullest approximation in the Chicago Plan, an idea allied with the larger progressive movement, a concept indeed with a very mixed legacy, but one that still owes much of its genesis to his work; and, fourth, his achievements as a cultural entrepreneur, an architectural philanthropist who, in a capitalist democracy, organized and encouraged the public as well as the private arts, who promoted in a large and magnanimous way the more accessible public institutions to replace or to complement the less accessible private ones. Burnham’s own description of himself was, finally, a modest one: “I am perhaps a little quicker to run and open the valve,” he said. “That is about it—a door opener. . . .”⁸ He failed to note that the doors he opened were often jammed until he confronted them and that those who entered them, though often finer specialists than himself, might never have entered at all without his help. He declined to mention the energy released by his opening of the doors and the illumination of new and fertile ideas beyond.

“Make big plans,” his credo commanded, “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 every growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us.”⁹ Most of Burnham’s plans and projects were very big indeed, and, in something of a reversal of his own prophecies, have frequently “staggered” succeeding generations. Even Burnham’s failures were instructive, providing large, tangible, and sometimes daring models from which others could draw inspiration or depart and move in new directions. His “big” architecture and “no little” plans were indeed components of a large and fruitful life.