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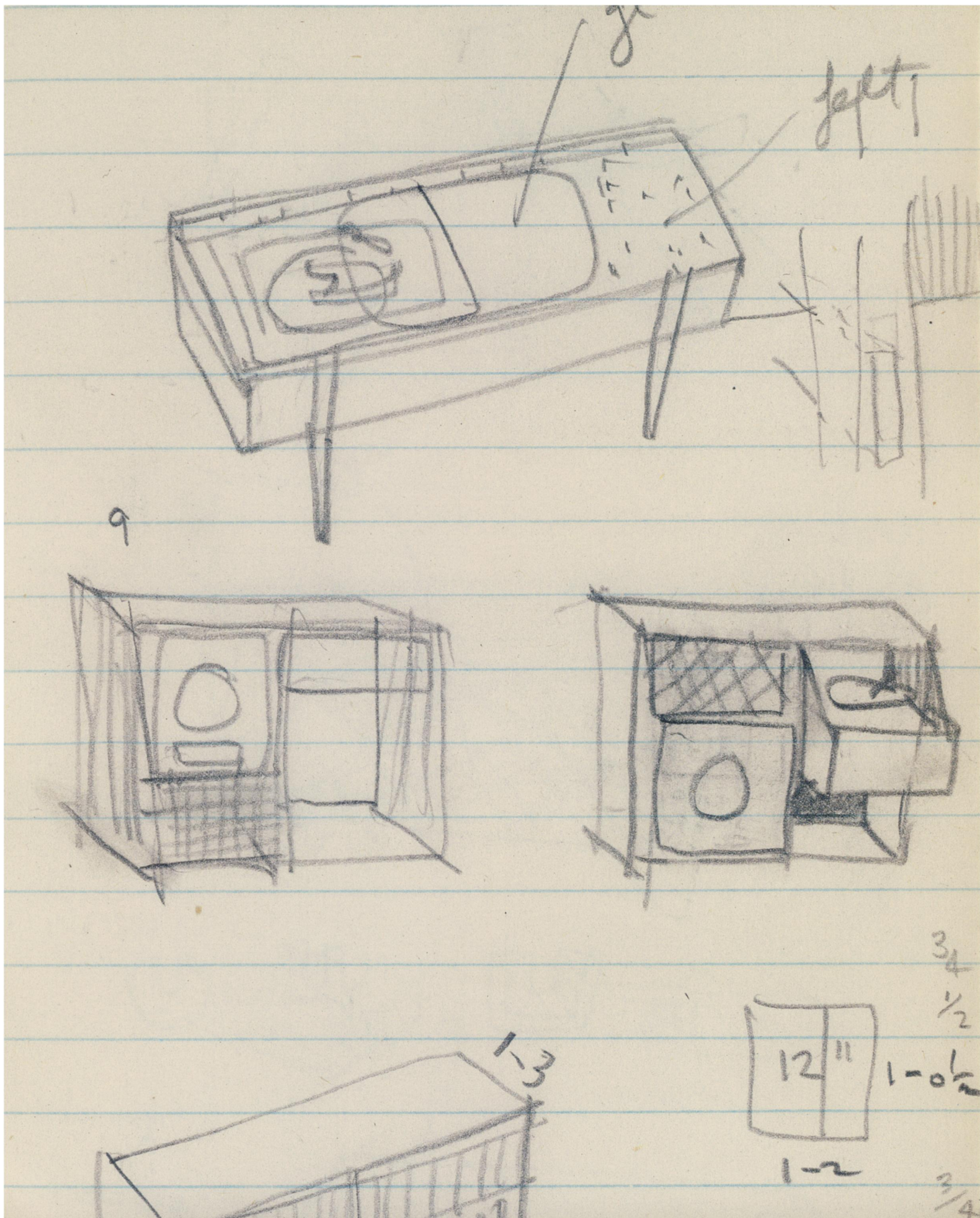
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"THE BEST THING": THE DANIEL H. BURNHAM AND EDWARD H. BENNETT COLLECTIONS AND THE 1909 PLAN OF CHICAGO

CARL SMITH

Writing to his mother in late November 1867, twenty-one-year-old Daniel Burnham declared "I am to be an Architect." A few lines later, he confided with excitement and pride, "I am perfectly in love with my profession. And for the first time in my life I feel perfectly certain that I have found my vocation."¹ The following May, he told her that he would become "the greatest architect in the city or country," adding, "There needs to be but one thing. A determined and persistent effort."² And on another occasion he described his newfound calling in more humble and even spiritual terms. "My profession grows on me more and more," he earnestly explained. "It will open the 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. I am going down early tomorrow morning and try to see if I can't make every line I draw perfect and true."³

These personal letters are among the multitude of documents in the Daniel H. Burnham Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago library's Ryerson and Burnham Archives, which, like the library itself, are named for famed architect and planner Burnham (and for Martin A. Ryerson, a founding trustee and patron of the museum). My foray into the vastness of Burnham's papers included this early correspondence but focused mainly on the far end of his career, when he played the lead role in the creation of the Plan of Chicago, more familiarly known as the Burnham Plan. Published three years before the architect's death in 1912, the plan is one of the most influential works in American urban history. It is substantially responsible for many of modern Chicago's signature features—among them the lakefront parks, North Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive, Navy Pier, and the Museum Campus. It is arguably even more important for advancing the planning idea, the belief that responsible urban citizens cannot just permit growth to take its course but must intervene to make their cities more orderly, efficient, healthy, and beautiful.

The Burnham collection was essential to my research for three related projects: a course on the plan taught at

Northwestern University; a multimedia digital essay prepared—in collaboration with the Chicago History Museum, the Newberry Library, and Academic Technologies at Northwestern, as well as the Art Institute—for the electronic version of the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (which went on-line in 2005); and a book titled *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Remaking of the American City* (2006). In all of these, I relied heavily on not one but two of the Art Institute's archival collections, the Burnham papers and those of Edward Bennett, his much younger colleague at D. H. Burnham and Company, who oversaw the day-to-day preparation of the plan.

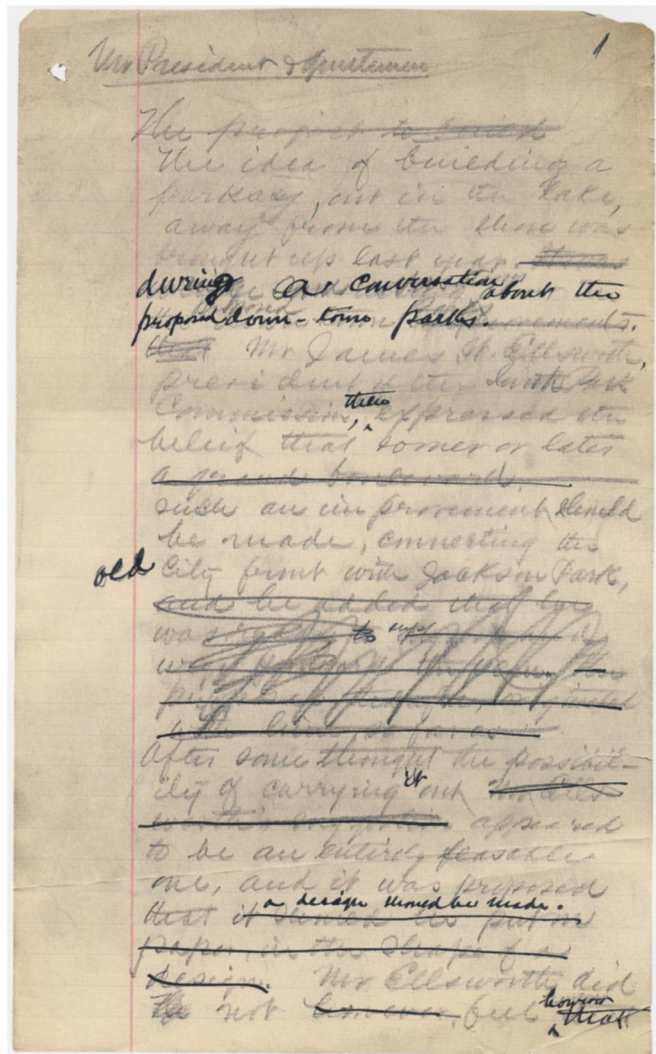


FIGURE 1. In this much-revised handwritten speech to members of the South Park Commission in April 1896, Daniel H. Burnham discussed his plan to build an elegant landscaped parkway along the lakefront. Daniel H. Burnham Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.

OPPOSITE: Detail of Harry Mohr Weese, Notes and sketches for *Unit Case*, 1947 (p. 88, fig. 3).

Many of the materials in these two immense holdings are essential to understanding the Plan of Chicago and the efforts of the two dozen or so men who created it. In addition to Burnham and Bennett, this group consisted almost entirely of members of the Commercial Club, which sponsored the undertaking. Then as now, the club was an exclusive organization of highly successful Chicago businessmen with a distinguished record of civic engagement, and Burnham was himself a member. The Burnham papers contain records of his entire career as a planner, including his supervision of the building of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition; his subsequent campaign to link Grant Park and the former fair site in Jackson Park with a continuous lagoon and landscaped pathways; and his participation in city plans for the District of Columbia, Cleveland, San Francisco, Manila, and Chicago.

Among the papers are the texts—usually typewritten and often with multiple handwritten revisions—of the many speeches Burnham gave in support of his planning proposals (see fig. 1). Accompanying these are personal and professional letters, not to mention several folders containing his draft of the Plan of Chicago, written in pencil, that was the basis of the final text. The latter was issued as an extraordinarily handsome book on July 4, 1909, its pages graced with breathtaking pastel drawings by Jules Guerin, whom Burnham hired in the knowledge that enticing illustrations would be indispensable to converting the public to the ideas presented in the text. The Art Institute owns most of Guerin's drawings and the work of other illustrators featured in the volume. The publication was in fact launched with an exhibition of these drawings that Burnham and Bennett arranged at the Art Institute, whose president at the time was Charles Hutchinson, also a member of the Commercial Club.

The Bennett papers contain much nuts-and-bolts information about how the plan was prepared, including the minutes and other records of the general committee and subcommittees in charge of different areas, such as the lakefront and railroads; fundraising appeals and patron lists; and communications of all kinds among the planners and to and from experts, journalists, organizations, and politicians (see figs. 2, 4). The Bennett papers also contain the texts of more speeches, publications the committees produced,

and news clippings. In addition, this collection holds many publications, records, and glass slides relating to the work of the Chicago Plan Commission. This semipublic organization, appointed late in 1909 by Chicago Mayor Fred Busse, consisted of 328 prominent individuals but for all practical purposes was run by a much smaller executive committee made up largely of Commercial Club members, central among them businessman Charles Wacker, who served tirelessly as chair of the commission. For the next twenty years, this group was notably effective in convincing taxpayers as well as public officials to support the implementation of the plan's proposals.

The Burnham and Bennett papers are always informative and often revelatory. The plan, while widely praised in its time and since, has been characterized as a top-down

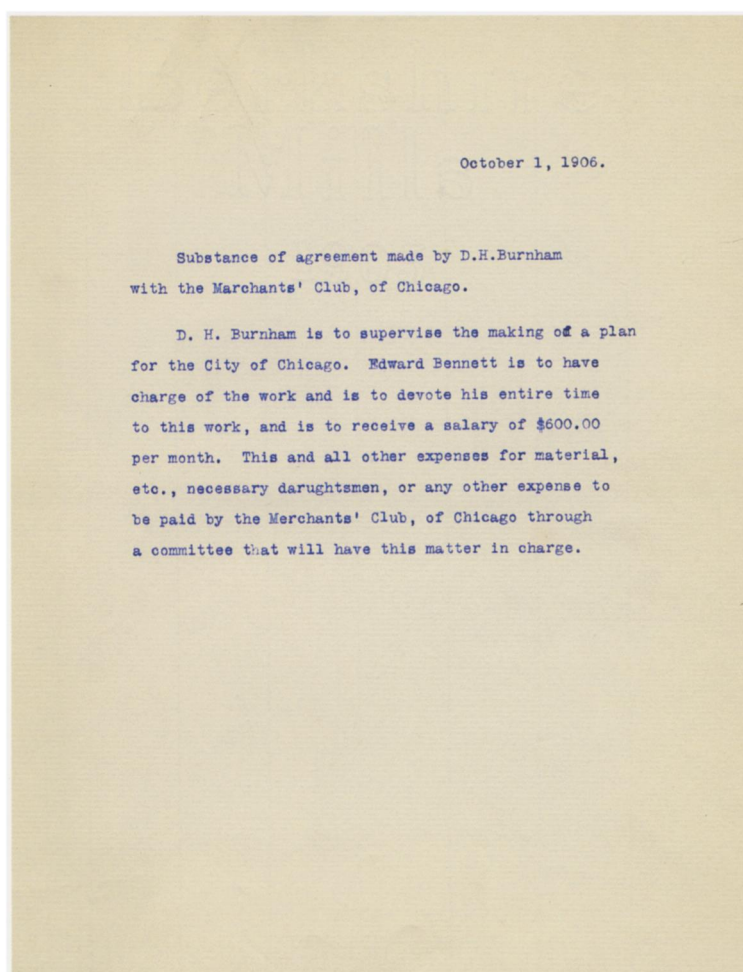


FIGURE 2. By the terms of this simple document, dated October 1, 1906, Burnham agreed to "supervise the making of a plan for the City of Chicago." Edward H. Bennett Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.



FIGURE 3. Not all the response to the Burnham Plan was favorable. This cartoon from the November 1914 *North-west Side Monthly Bulletin* dismisses the proposed bridge over Michigan Avenue as a plot by downtown interests. Edward H. Bennett Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.

imposition of the views of a powerful commercial elite. This criticism is to a considerable extent verified by the documents in the Art Institute archives, which reveal that the planners did not distinguish their priorities from those of the city as a whole, and that in their ability to command the attention of politicians, other leaders, and the general population these individuals enjoyed an influence that has no equivalent among citizens' organizations today. The planners certainly encountered opposition, however. For example, several documents in the Bennett collection deal with convincing skeptical property holders along North Michigan Avenue that widening the street (at the time it abruptly narrowed above Randolph Street) and building a bridge across the river in order to create a grand,

continuous boulevard would raise the value of their land (see fig. 3). The collection provides a far larger body of evidence of the planners' elaborate and largely failed attempt to persuade executives of competing railroads to cooperate in rationalizing their Chicago freight and passenger service.

But the collections also reveal how serious and high intentioned the planners were in their desire to improve the city that had rewarded them so generously. The expanse of materials attests to the sheer magnitude and complexity of the task of redesigning a fractious urban commercial colossus of some two hundred square miles and two million people. The planners' willingness to hold hundreds of meetings and confront countless variables while still concentrating on their larger goals—and managing their own businesses—was most impressive. The documents also reveal how much the indefatigable Burnham set the tone from the time he was hired in 1906. Offering his eloquence, expertise, will, vision, and countless hours of his time pro bono, Burnham was indispensable to the entire enterprise. When considering whether to accept the offer to lead the way, he consulted Franklin MacVeagh, a Chicago banker who served President William Howard Taft as Secretary of the Treasury. MacVeagh said that he was “extremely glad” to hear this news and that he “heartily approved.” “You are the man,” MacVeagh assured Burnham, “and that, as you well know, I have all the while perfectly understood.” As for the members of the Commercial Club, he added, “What we all wish

is to get you at work—and to accomplish *the thing*.²⁴

Among the many rewards of immersion in these papers is the deep understanding they give us of Burnham's charismatic personality. The early correspondence conveys the combination of relief, triumph, and idealism with which he began his life's work. Later letters to his wife from the exposition-in-progress in Jackson Park, where he camped out in a cabin in order to be on site around the clock, reveal, on the one hand, his passionate love for her. “I will be on the look out for you my dear girl,” he promised, “You must expect to give yourself up when you come.”²⁵ On the other, they capture his almost superhuman determination to get the job done. “The intensity of the last month is very great indeed,” Burnham wrote, continuing:

You can little imagine it. I am surprised at my own calmness under it all. We are testing the men about us in fine shape. The strain on them shows who is made of good metal and who is not. I can tell you that very few come right up to the mark under these conditions, but there are some who can be depended on. The rest have to be pounded every day, and they are the ones who make me tired.⁶

Burnham summoned a similar tough-mindedness in order to push the plan to completion and garner support for its implementation. Of local politicians, many of whom he carefully courted, he bluntly told the Commercial Club membership, "The public authorities do not do their duty and they must be made to." While traveling in Europe in late 1908, Burnham sent pointed instructions to Bennett about confronting opposition to the Michigan Avenue proposal. "If the property owners are captured by the argument as it is, then well and good & our object is accomplished; if they are not, then the real estate [i.e., property value] argument must be used, raw," Burnham counseled in a letter he wrote by hand on hotel stationery. "For they are, as they have frankly said, fighting for their pockets, and nothing but proof that this scheme will pay them very directly will have any weight with them."⁸ His correspondence also indicates the extent to which Burnham, for all the booster bravado of his speeches, was genuinely concerned that without some fundamental structural improvements the prospects of his beloved Chicago would be diminished. In 1897, he wrote to his father-in-law and close confidante John Sherman, one of the founders of the Union Stock Yard, that "the best welfare of the City demands that the town should immediately put on a charming dress and thus stop our people from running away, and bring rich people here, rather than have them go elsewhere to spend their money."⁹

Above all, the collections attest to Burnham's devotion to the city. "I am for the improvement, heart and soul," he told Sherman.¹⁰ In his eloquent and inspiring speeches, he proclaimed that if Chicagoans were only foresighted and courageous enough to adopt the recommendations he offered, their gritty town would not only equal but surpass the splendor and glory of ancient Athens and modern Paris, the two examples Burnham cited again and again as setting the standard for grand urban design. Compromise was unacceptable. The minutes for a meeting held in 1908 indicate that some members raised the idea of approving an alternative to what was called the "ideal" plan for Michigan Avenue. The minutes then read: "Mr. Burnham objected

<i>Wages</i>	
Ed Bennett - 1 year	7200
2 1/2 Class helpers	2500
" " "	2500
" " "	300
Stenographer	600
Editor	500
	<u>13600</u>
<i>Materials</i>	
Typewriter	60
Maps & documents	250
Paper & pencils etc	500
Blue prints etc	
Large models & photos	750
Postage & telegrams	250
	<u>1810</u>
Outside drawings	2500
Travelling expenses etc	500
Rents	1500
Report	5000
	<u>\$24910</u>

FIGURE 4. In Daniel Burnham's first estimate of costs, the largest items were Edward Bennett's salary (Burnham himself took no fee), drawings, and the preparation of the report. The final total was about three times higher. Edward H. Bennett Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.

very much to having anything but the best thing, holding that it is better to wait for years and have the best than taking something unfit and having to do the whole thing over again."¹¹

3. Karl Wirsum, telephone conversation with Thea Liberty Nichols, fall 2008.

Emerson, "Hybrid Histories in Contemporary Artist Books: Codex Espangliensis and Doska Pocheta," pp. 60–62.

1. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Critical Commentary," in Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, and Felicia Rice, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol* (Moving Parts Press, 1998), n.pag.
2. Philip Krayna, "History, Unfolded," *Print* 53, 1 (Jan./Feb. 1999), p. 92.
3. Enrique Chagoya, "Critical Commentary," in Gómez-Peña, Chagoya, and Rice (note 1), n.pag.
4. Ilya Zemtsov, *Encyclopedia of Soviet Life* (Transaction Publishers, 1991), p. 32.

Hill, "Useful Publications: Catalogues Raisonnés," pp. 62–64.

1. See, for example, Adolf Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Des Meisters Gemälde in 643 Abbildungen* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1909); and, for the most recent reductivist approach, *Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project: A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, 4 vols. (M. Nijhoff, 1982–2005).
2. See for example the in-process work on Dante Gabriel Rossetti at www.rossettiarchive.org.

Smith, "'The Best Thing': The Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett Collections and the 1909 Plan of Chicago," pp. 67–70.

1. Daniel H. Burnham to Elizabeth Burnham, Nov. 24, 1867. Daniel H. Burnham Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.
2. Daniel H. Burnham to Elizabeth Burnham, May 11, 1868. Daniel H. Burnham Collection.
3. Daniel H. Burnham to Elizabeth Burnham, n.d. Daniel H. Burnham Collection.
4. Franklin MacVeagh to Daniel H. Burnham, June 24, 1906. Edward H. Bennett Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.
5. Daniel H. Burnham to Margaret Burnham, Apr. 20, 1893. Daniel H. Burnham Collection.
6. Ibid.
7. Daniel H. Burnham, Speech to the Commercial Club, Jan. 30, 1904. Daniel H. Burnham Collection.
8. Daniel H. Burnham to Edward H. Bennett, Dec. 5, 1908. Edward H. Bennett Collection.
9. Daniel H. Burnham to John Sherman, Apr. 7, 1897. Daniel H. Burnham Collection.
10. Ibid.
11. Minutes, Commercial Club General Committee on the Plan of Chicago, Sept. 21, 1908. Edward H. Bennett Collection.

Woolever, "The Harold Allen Collection of Egyptomania," pp. 71–73.

1. Harold Allen, "My Egypt," *Exposure* 16 (Mar. 1978), p. 17.
2. Allen was also able to take a class with noted photographer Gyorgy Kepes at the School of Design in Chicago. Harold Allen, interview by Carol Tormollan, 1994, oral history transcript, Art Institute of Chicago Archives, p. 102.
3. Ibid., p. 528.
4. Allen taught at the school from 1948 to 1960 and again from 1966 until his retirement in 1977.
5. Allen (note 2), p. 649.
6. See, for example, Harold Allen, "Egyptian Influences in Wedgwood Design" (lecture, Seventh Wedgwood International Seminar, 1962). Ryerson and Burnham Libraries.
7. For more on the latter characteristic, see Allen (note 2), p. 692.
8. Ibid., p. 342.
9. Ibid., p. 867.
10. These exhibitions and publications include Richard G. Carrott, *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning, 1808–1858* (University of California Press, 1978); and Jean-Marcel Humbert, *Rêve d'Égypte: l'architecture égyptisante vue par trois photographes; photographies de Harold Allen, François-Xavier Bouchart, Mark Ruwedel* (Mona Bismarck Foundation, 1998).

Parks, "'Universal Designers': Collections from the New Bauhaus and the Institute of Design," pp. 73–78.

1. Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, "Educating the Eye: Photography and the Founding Generation at the Institute of Design, 1937–46," in *Taken By Design: Photographs from the Institute of Design, 1937–1971*, eds. David Travis and Elizabeth Siegel, exh. cat. (Art Institute of Chicago/University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 21.
2. Ibid., p. 19.
3. For "universal designers," a term borrowed from Moholy, see Charles Traub and John Grimes, *The New Vision: Forty Years of Photography at the Institute of Design* (Aperture, 1982), p. 7. For "elementarist art," see László Moholy-Nagy, "A Call to Elementarist Art," in *De Stijl* 4, 10 (1922).
4. Traub and Grimes (note 3).
5. Hattula Moholy-Nagy, "László Moholy-Nagy: An Appreciation," in Travis and Siegel (note 1), p. 15.
6. Quotes from an untitled ID brochure, 1952/54. Ludwig Karl Hilberseimer Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.
7. Ibid.
8. *The New Bauhaus/American School of Design* brochure (1938). Arthur Siegel Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.
9. *More Business: The Voice of Letterpress Printing and Engraving* 3, 11 (Nov. 1938), p. 3. Institute of Design Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.
10. Ibid., p. 7.
11. School of Design catalogue/brochure, 1939–40 school year, p. 1. Ryerson and Burnham Archives.
12. Gyorgy Kepes to Paul Theobald, Sept. 19, 1943. Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Paul Theobald and Company Records.
13. Pussy Paepcke to Arthur Siegel, Sept. 22, 1969. Arthur Siegel Collection.
14. Ibid.
15. László Moholy-Nagy to Chanute Field Army Commanding Officer, Jan. 14, 1946. Arthur Siegel Collection.
16. Keith F. Davis, "'To Open an Individual Way': Photography at the Institute of Design, 1946–61," in Travis and Siegel (note 1), p. 71.
17. Traub and Grimes (note 3), p. 34.
18. Arthur Siegel, untitled typescript, n.d. Arthur Siegel Collection.
19. Arthur Siegel, notes from "New Vision of Photography" seminar, c. 1946. Arthur Siegel Collection.
20. Arthur Siegel, course outline for "Photo History," spring 1949. Arthur Siegel Collection.
21. Serge Chermayeff, IIT Inaugural address, Feb. 4, 1947. Arthur Siegel Collection.
22. Davis (note 16), p. 80.
23. Serge Chermayeff to Arthur Siegel, June 23, 1947. Arthur Siegel Collection.
24. "Faculty Points to be Presented to Chermayeff," Sept. 15, 1947. Arthur Siegel Collection.
25. Traub and Grimes (note 3), p. 45.
26. Davis (note 16), pp. 80, 83.
27. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy to Barbara Siegel, Nov. 3, 1949. Arthur Siegel Collection.
28. Engelbrecht (note 1), pp. 27, 33.
29. Traub and Grimes (note 3), p. 14.
30. Institute of Design of Illinois Institute of Technology catalogue/brochure, fall 1957. Ludwig Karl Hilberseimer Collection.
31. Krannert Art Museum, *The New Spirit in American Photography*, exh. cat. (University of Illinois, 1985), p. 8.
32. Traub and Grimes (note 3), p. 7.

Hanson, "HALIC: Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection," pp. 79–81.

1. For more on the architectural planning of the exposition, see David Garrard Lowe, *Lost Chicago* (Watson-Guptill, 2000), p. 150.
2. For more on the First Chicago School, see *ibid.*, pp. 119–27.
3. For a detailed description of the Golden Doorway, see Hubert Howe Bancroft,