



Journal of the American Institute of Planners

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpa19>

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Published online: 18 Dec 2007.

To cite this article: Robert L. Wrigley Jr. (1960) The Plan of Chicago: Its Fiftieth Anniversary, Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 26:1, 31-38, DOI: [10.1080/01944366008978379](https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366008978379)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01944366008978379>

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ROBERT L. WRIGLEY, JR.

The Plan of Chicago: Its Fiftieth Anniversary

Fifty years ago the first comprehensive plan for a great American city was published. The plan was prepared chiefly by Daniel H. Burnham, who was encouraged and backed financially by the Commercial Club—a group of Chicago's business elite. Far-seeing yet practical, the Plan of Chicago, to use Burnham's famous words, "had magic to stir men's blood." Given to the city as a gift and adopted almost immediately as the official General Plan of Chicago, it effectively guided public improvements for many years. The preparation of this plan, the outstanding effort to win citizen support, and the impressive list of accomplishments based on the plan, surely constitute one of the brightest chapters in American planning history.

IN THE SPRING of 1893 the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago's Jackson Park. In this "White City" of almost 700 acres, Chicagoans and millions of visitors, accustomed to urban ugliness, saw for the first time a splendid example of civic design and beauty in the classic pattern and on a grand scale, and they liked it. Indeed, it marked the beginning in this country of orderly arrangement of extensive buildings and grounds. Throughout the nation people began to wonder why cities couldn't be as orderly and beautiful as the Columbian Exposition and nowhere was this matter discussed more than in Chicago. The first suggestion was to preserve the exposition site and make it permanently attractive. Then the possibility of extending a park north from the fair grounds seven miles to Grant Park by filling in part of the lake front was debated. The famous architect and leading spirit of the fair, Daniel H. Burnham, working with the South Park Commission, completed plans for such a park in 1896.

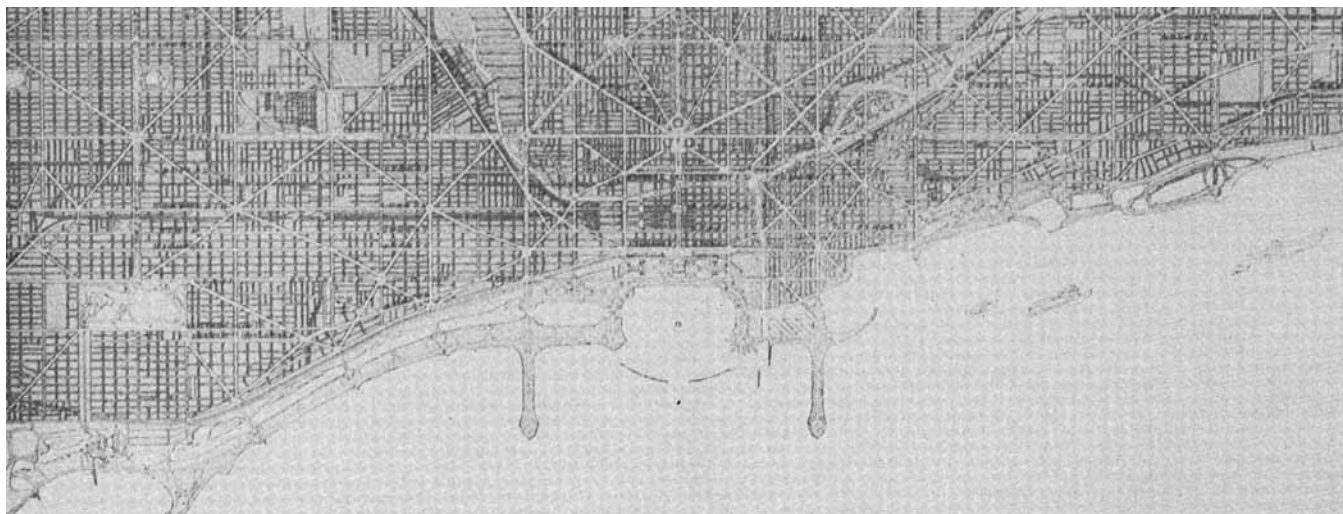
The author appreciates the assistance of Miss Helen Whitehead of the Chicago Plan Commission, who furnished needed information and photographs.

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The 1893 World's Fair and the Chicago Plan

That the first comprehensive plan for the orderly development of a great American city should come out of Chicago seems rather surprising. Having grown enormously during the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a center of transportation, commerce, and manufacturing, Chicago was typically a city of rugged individualism. Its pattern of development over the lake plain included a mixture of land uses unparalleled in any urban area. The earmarks of rapid expansion without guidance were found everywhere, and vast slums extended outward from the core area. Like most American cities, especially great industrial centers, Chicago could hardly boast of civic improvements and beautification although it did have a number of distinguished cultural institutions and the beginning of a splendid park system. But the problem of city betterment received a great deal of thought and reevaluation during the last decade of the century.

Various individuals and groups, especially the Commercial Club and the Merchants' Club, whose members were leaders of the business community, had been closely associated with the fair and were keenly interested in the lake-front park. They kept the idea of municipal improvement alive, eventually raising the possibility of preparing a comprehensive plan for the entire city.



Overview of the Major Proposals of the Plan of Chicago

(From *Plan of Chicago*, copyright, 1908, by Commercial Club of Chicago.)

The Plan of Chicago

Between 1901 and 1905 the need for a General Plan was discussed in both clubs, with Franklin MacVeagh, Frederic A. Delano, Charles D. Norton, Edward B. Butler, and other club members pressing for some positive action. Finally in June 1906 the Merchants' Club invited Mr. Burnham, who was one of the club members, to prepare a plan for Chicago. In the following year the Merchants' Club and the Commercial Club merged under the name of the latter, so the plan was completed and eventually published, in June 1909, by the Commercial Club, whose plan committee was headed by Charles D. Norton as chairman and Charles H. Wacker as vice-chairman.¹ As for interest and support by club members, Wacker later reported that "no time was spared, no money was stinted and the best talent was secured."

Specifically the plan and its subsequent history is a landmark in city planning because:

- Its conception and preparation was initiated and paid for by private individuals.
- It was the first comprehensive plan for a great American city.
- It was a brilliantly conceived and executed plan with proposals covering area beyond the central city.
- The gift of this plan to the City of Chicago brought about the organization of the planning commission.
- For over a decade the Chicago Plan Commission was financed largely by those individuals who initiated and paid for the plan.
- The educational program aimed at winning citizen support for the plan and effectuating its recommenda-

tions was the most successful in the history of the American planning movement.

- The record of accomplishments based on the plan has long been the envy of city officials and planners.
- The *Plan of Chicago* had a significant impact on city development far and wide. As Robert A. Walker stated in 1940, the plan

... established a pattern for American city planning. Its influence is manifest in the grand perspective sketched in every important planning report of the last thirty years... and the public works program undertaken in conformity with the recommendations of the plan has stimulated innumerable favorable comments in the literature of the field.²

Daniel H. Burnham and the Chicago Plan

It was appropriate that Daniel H. Burnham should prepare the Plan of Chicago, commonly called "The Burnham Plan." As one of the nation's foremost architects and a Chicagoan, he had taken a leading role in the World's Columbian Exposition, serving as Director of Works. He had also planned the lake-front park and participated in other civic improvements. He was one of the two original members appointed in 1901 to serve on the Commission for the Improvement of the District of Columbia, better known as the McMillan Commission. Moreover, in 1905-06 he prepared plans for Manila and San Francisco, thereby enhancing his reputation as a city planner.

A man of great vision and courage, Burnham followed his own admonishment to planners everywhere—"make no little plans." With the aid of his associate, Edward H. Bennett, with the all-out backing

¹ D. H. Burnham and E. H. Bennett, *Plan of Chicago* (Chicago: The Commercial Club, 1909).

² *The Planning Function in Urban Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941).

of the Commercial Club, which financed the project to the tune of \$85,000, and with the assistance of numerous public and business officials, the work as finally completed was imaginative, far-reaching in its proposals, and outstanding in its physical presentation.

It was indeed a "big plan," a labor of love which Burnham, who freely gave his own time for a project that took thirty months to complete, later looked back on as the "supreme effort" of his life.³ The notable



Daniel H. Burnham

volume with beautiful illustrations and splendid text edited by Charles Moore, who had prepared the McMillan report for Congress, had an air of confidence and quality that has never been surpassed in planning literature. Compared to earlier plans, which were restricted largely to planning civic centers, parks, and thoroughfares, the Plan of Chicago was a significant step forward. Walker observes:

In it one finds appreciation of the broad objectives of planning found in few of the many plans which preceded or immediately followed it... despite a predominant architectural emphasis, the Chicago Plan expressed an appreciation of the objectives of planning which put it well in the vanguard of the trend toward comprehensiveness.⁴

The plan also was a long-range proposal; Mayor Fred Busse, in his message recommending it to the City Council, said "the... plan does not contemplate the remodeling of Chicago in a year or a decade. It is a suggestion of a plan for the far future, as a suggestion of something to grow to."⁵

Concern for development beyond the central city was expressed in the plan as follows:

In every town a public-improvement commission should be formed to bring about the most orderly conditions within the town itself, and especially to act in cooperation with similar bodies in neighboring towns so as to secure harmonious, connected and continuous improvements.⁶

Burnham's Plan of Chicago touched on many urban problems. Major recommendations were:

- Create a system of regional highways extending up

to sixty miles outside the city. In this respect the plan had a metropolitan approach.

- Develop a systematic arrangement of streets and avenues within the city, especially diagonal boulevards to facilitate the flow of traffic to and from the central business district. Many of the existing streets were proposed for widening.

- Improve railway terminals by consolidating facilities within the city and by building a great freight and warehousing center southwest of the city for handling through freight. Many of these proposals were based on Frederic Delano's 1904 railway plan for Chicago.

- Construct extensive new docks at the mouth of the Chicago River and in the Calumet Lake area.

- Improve the Lake Michigan frontage by developing parks, beaches, and a series of off-shore islands.

- Extend the outer park system, chiefly forest preserves, and develop more parkways to connect existing and proposed parks. A special Park Commission in 1904 recommended a forest preserve system of 37,000 acres. Burnham proposed 40 to 50,000 acres which would give the Chicago area a total park system of about 60,000 acres.

- Create centers of intellectual life and of civic administration so related as to give coherence and unity to the city. Great emphasis was laid on a civic center for Chicago; also recommended were community centers for each suburban town.

Those who prepared the plan and attempted to carry out its proposals admitted that it was far from perfect. However, they had secured the best advice possible and they always maintained that its basic recommendations were sound. Early in the text they noted:

The real test of this Plan will be found in its application; for such is the determination of the people to secure more perfect conditions, it is certain that if the plan is really good it will commend itself to the progressive spirit of the times and sooner or later it will be carried out.⁷

³ Charles Moore, *Daniel H. Burnham—Architect, Planner of Cities* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1921).

⁴ Walker, *op. cit.*

⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1909.

⁶ Burnham and Bennett, *op. cit.* There were those in high office favoring an approach that surely must have seemed radical at that time. At a dinner on January 8, 1910 the Plan of Chicago was formally presented to the city and at that time Alderman B. W. Snow commented: "The first step toward the realization of the ideals presented in the plan... must be to create one governmental unit to direct the affairs of Chicago and its outlying territory. Not through cooperation between the various governing bodies affected but through the consolidation of such governing bodies and the placing of all their forces under the direction of a single intelligence, will results be obtained" (*Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 9, 1910).

⁷ Burnham and Bennett, *op. cit.*

Winning Citizen Support

The men responsible for the creation of the Plan of Chicago realized "that to cast it unheralded and unsupported upon a disinterested city would be to condemn it to early oblivion."⁸

Charles H. Wacker, a leader in the Chicago planning movement from the very beginning, was especially aware of the importance of winning citizen support for urban planning. He later wrote:

Without hesitation, because we knew our plan was right, that it was basically sound and that its adoption and completion would benefit every citizen of our city immeasurably, we tackled the tremendous task of arousing the interest and awakening the desires of our great cosmopolitan mass of two and a half millions of people.⁹

Needing an outstanding executive officer, Wacker persuaded Walter D. Moody, the hard-driving Executive Secretary of the Chicago Association of Commerce, to take the job of Managing Director of the Chicago Plan Commission, a job he assumed in January 1911.

In his promotional work Moody had the support of the 328-member Chicago Plan Commission as well as that of Wacker, its permanent Chairman. This Commission, established by the City Council on November 4, 1909, shortly after the plan had been given to the city by the Commercial Club, was primarily a citizens' pro-

motional group whose effective work was accomplished by a small committee.

The new commission also gave the plan added stature, finally adopting it as the official General Plan of Chicago on July 10, 1911. But it was the Commercial Club, with its many distinguished and powerful personalities, and not the city, that enthusiastically pushed the plan during this period. How Moody, with this vigorous assistance developed his campaign for winning citizen support for the Plan of Chicago is one of the most brilliant episodes in American planning history.

Walter D. Moody—Master Salesman of City Planning

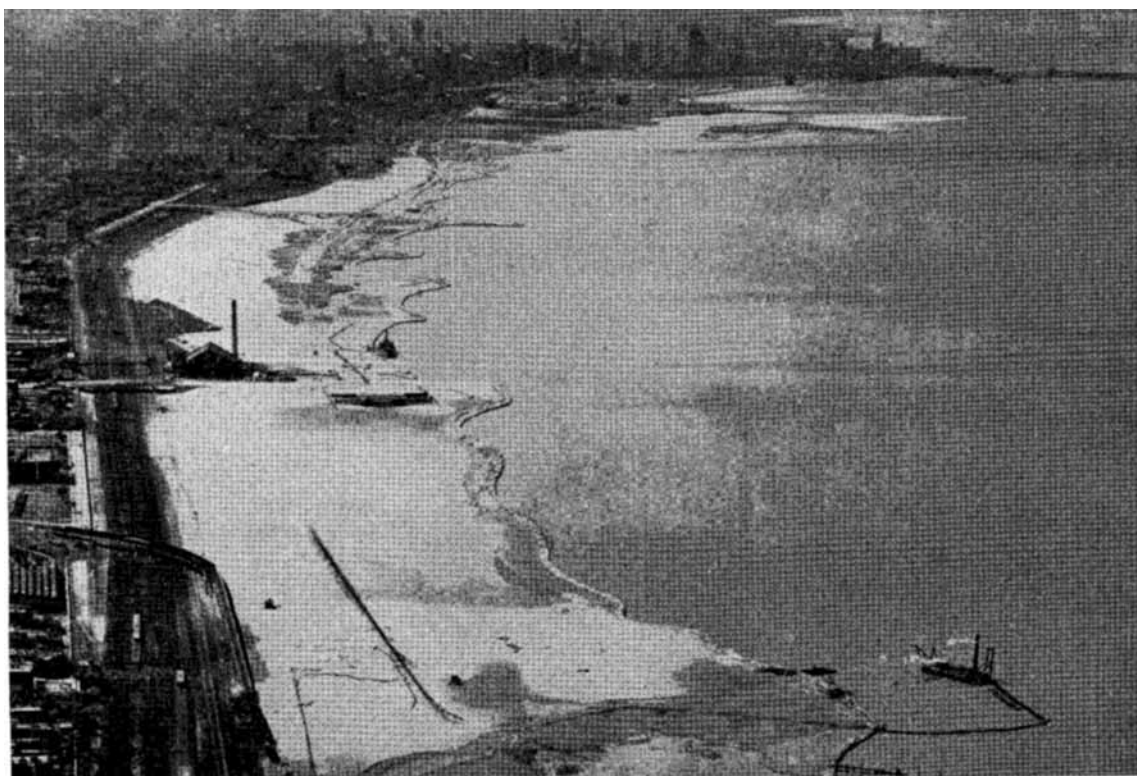
In his book *What of the City*, Moody sounded the keynote of successful accomplishment in urban improvement as he saw it:

City planning work in all its practical essentials is a work of promotion-salesmanship. . . . It is a problem of arousing interest, creating human desire, stirring the spirit for better things and inspiring human action. . . . Primarily to that end all efforts should be devoted. New methods should be employed.¹⁰

⁸ Walker, *op. cit.*

⁹ Charles H. Wacker, "Gaining Public Support for Planning Movement," *Proceedings, 5th Nat. Conference on City Planning*.

¹⁰ Walter D. Moody, *What of the City* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1919).



The Development of Burnham Park along the Lake Front

And upon assuming office as Managing Director of the Commission in January 1911 he observed:

Naturally the plan must be worked out piece by piece. Those who have contemplated it as a whole have said 'Impossible,' forgetful of the all-important fact that every great structure must first have a plan before it can be reared stone by stone. The idea as contained in the plan for creating order out of chaos in Chicago should be taken up by the entire clergy of the city, all school teachers . . . by the professors in all . . . colleges, by clerks in stores and offices, by factory employees, . . . of all classes. Every Chicagoan, neighbor to neighbor, should catch the Chicago Plan spirit and talk about it. It is the one Chicago issue that all Chicago can and should unite on."¹

As with all new progressive ideas, the Plan of Chicago was subject to widespread criticism by those who said that it was impractical and idealistic. The idea of the "city beautiful," a term used at the time of the World's Fair, was ridiculed by many. Feeling that the "city beautiful" designation was unfortunate, Moody emphasized the "city practical" at every opportunity. And, to counteract unfavorable comment, the Commission centered its attention on one specific and highly important recommendation—widening 12th Street and carrying it by a viaduct across the railroad yards south of "the Loop." Completion of this major project, the Commission believed, would strengthen its argument that the plan was a very practical one.

Campaigning to win the bond issue for the 12th Street project was Moody's first promotional work for the Plan Commission. Wacker had admonished him to "establish the plan . . . with the people." The *Plan of Chicago*, however, was sold at \$25 a copy and only 1,650 volumes had been printed. Obviously it could not be widely read, so Moody prepared a brochure called *Chicago's Greatest Issue—An Official Plan*. This 93-page booklet outlined the plan in simple language, using heavy type to drive home major points. To create greater interest, some of the plan's illustrations were reproduced. The book was addressed to the "owners of Chicago" and the 165,000 copies, published in June 1911 at a cost of \$18,000, were distributed to all property owners in the city and to all persons paying a monthly rent of \$25 or more. This direct approach, plus intensive use of the press, brought success. The bond issue was carried, the 12th Street improvement was soon underway, and the backers of the plan were able to point to a solid accomplishment.

Pushing ahead with its promotional work, the Plan Commission published *Wacker's Manual of the Plan of Chicago* late in 1911. Moody wrote this celebrated book in an elementary style and illustrated it profusely so that it would carry the message of the Plan

¹ Walter D. Moody, *Wacker's Manual of the Plan of Chicago* (Chicago Plan Commission, 1911).



Chicago's Southside Lake Front Park Today

of Chicago to eighth-grade students. These children were at a very impressionable age, and many of them would drop out of school after this grade. In reference to the *Manual's* use in schools, Moody wrote:

The results of study of this book appear threefold—attracting the attention and sympathy of the parents to the Plan of Chicago through the children as a medium; the training of a future citizenry to become responsible in matters of government control; the ultimate accomplishment of the whole Plan in future years through an enlightened citizenry.¹²

Wacker's *Manual*, adopted by the Chicago Board of Education in 1912, was used as an eighth-grade text, and some 50,000 copies eventually were printed. This was the first time a text in planning was admitted for studying by an American school board, and it was used for almost a decade with unusual success. Some schools reported that their students begged to have more of this subject, and even today many a Chicagoan looks back with nostalgia to the days when he studied this little book.

Realizing the importance of personal contact, Wacker and Moody early considered the possibility of developing a lecture bureau, in their efforts to win public support. They aimed at developing a series of illustrated lectures on city planning with the same appeal as a Burton Holmes travelogue. Preparing an interesting lecture was comparatively easy, but preparing a fine collection of slides was indeed a problem in those days. At first there was much trial and error, but no expense was spared in getting the best. Eventually, leading photographers in twenty-four nations were hired to take specific pictures needed in the lecture series, since the presentation of examples of good planning from other lands was considered a desirable way to sell planning at home. Thus a splendid collection of 200 slides, most of them hand tinted, was secured. Lectures usually were held in school auditoriums before capacity houses, made up of people living in the general locality of the school. Each program was announced in a colorful three-page circular that told something about the plan and program. Two tickets were enclosed with each invitation, and the number of invitations mailed was double the seating capacity of the auditorium. This virtually assured a full house. And for those who didn't come there was always the folder to read with its short message on planning in Chicago. As many as 90 lectures were given in a single winter season, and almost 400 over a seven-year period with a total attendance of approximately 175,000, more than half by invitation.

The motion picture, then in its infancy, also was used. A two-reel film, "A Tale of One City," was prepared and shown at a major downtown theater at a



Charles H. Wacker

gala "first night," and later at 60 theaters throughout the city with a total attendance of more than 150,000.

By the summer of 1914 almost five years had passed since the organization of the Chicago Plan Commission, and during this period significant progress had been made in implementing Burnham's plan. To commemorate this advance and to build up community confidence and devotion to the planning program, in July 1914 the Commission published *Chicago's World Wide Influence in City Planning*. The introduction indicated the Commission's view of its importance:

It may be rightfully stated . . . that the work of the Chicago Plan Commission is exercising international influence and carrying the fame of Chicago in this branch of civic endeavor to the farthest corners of the earth.

The publication is filled with letters and other comments from all parts of the world, many of an envious nature, praising the Plan of Chicago and the program of public improvements based on it.

Another interesting and very effective pamphlet, *Fifty Million Dollar for Nothing*, was issued late in 1916 in an effort to win public support for a lake-front park. It pointed out that waste material, which was being taken out into Lake Michigan and dumped, could be used to make 1,300 acres of new park by building land along the lake front. Within twelve years, at virtually no cost to the city, according to the pamphlet, a new park could be created. In later years this park was developed and appropriately named Burnham Park, one of the most significant improvements based on the 1909 plan. This pamphlet was only one of many Commission publications dealing with specific projects. Two major publications, prepared under Moody's direction as World War I drew to a close, were *Economic Readjustment from a War to a Peace Basis* and *Seed Thoughts for Sermons*. The latter was particularly unusual. It described in some detail the humanitarian aspects of the Plan of Chicago. All ministers in the city received copies of this pamphlet.

¹² Moody, *What of the City*.



Walter D. Moody

let with the suggestion that they gave at least one sermon based on the ideas outlined therein; and in due time the value of comprehensive city planning was preached from virtually every pulpit in Chicago.

Notable Achievements of the Plan

By 1920 the Plan of Chicago had been for almost ten years an effective instrument in guiding the city's growth. This period was Chicago's "golden age" of comprehensively planned public improvements, according to most authorities. The team of Wacker and Moody, aided by unusually fine citizen support, pushed ahead with the utmost vigor in promoting their educational activities and in coordinating new development with the plan. Their efforts were financed in part by the city of Chicago, but mostly by the Commercial Club whose total subscription above the cost of the plan passed the \$200,000 mark. Moody, the dynamic salesman of a comparatively unknown product—city planning—died in 1920, and thereafter some of the steam was taken out of the promotional work. But under Wacker's chairmanship, which continued until November 1926, many other projects proposed by the plan were either started or completed. After Wacker resigned in 1926, planning responsibilities largely passed from the hands of the original officers and backers, and a brilliant chapter of American planning history was closed.

Wacker served as Chairman of the Plan Commission for seventeen years; and "through all the Commissions' work in this period," according to Walker, "the Plan of Chicago was its bible. It was the source of inspiration and the key to the promised land."¹³ Thus, in reporting on its first ten years of progress the Plan Commission noted that:

No other city of modern times has been given a plan so comprehensive—one that proposes so many economic, hygienic, sociological, commercial and humanitarian benefits—and one so thoroughly calculated to meet the needs of a vast and growing population.¹⁴

The Plan of Chicago was basically a plan for public improvements, chiefly within the city, but for highways and parks it was regional in scope. In the decade that followed its completion the plan was not "updated" from time to time as is the practice today. In fact, the Commission had no technical planning staff to speak of, but only a staff to push development in accordance with the plan which, it should be remembered, had been a gift to the city. And although the original plan was a far-seeing one, its proposals for solving a number of pressing problems were not very effective.¹⁵ The time did arrive, in the 1920's, when its recommendations had to be reevaluated, and through the years its broad proposals have been adjusted to evolving technology and to economic and social change. Yet up to the present day most of the basic recommendations of Chicago's first great plan are incorporated in the city's General Plan, and affectionate reference frequently is made to Burnham, Bennett, and Wacker, as great leaders of the past. Not so well remembered is Moody and his outstanding efforts to win public support and carry bond issues, yet without his special talents the accomplishment might well have been far less notable and impressive.

In order to finance various public improvements, 86 bond issues, totaling 234 million dollars, were sold by 1931; in addition, special assessments on property immediately affected by improvements came to 58 million. Thus over a period of 20 years almost 300 million dollars was invested by the municipality in improvements proposed by the Plan of Chicago.

In 1933, at the beginning of Chicago's second World's Fair, the Plan Commission published *The Chicago Plan in 1933—Twenty-five Years of Accomplishment*.¹⁶

Among other things, the 1933 survey reported "some 85 public improvements outlined in the Plan of Chicago are today complete, or so far advanced that their early completion is assured."

These improvements ranged from the modest to the spectacular. Possibly no American city has had so much to show in such a short period of time. Included were scores of street-widening projects, such as that of Michigan Avenue north to Lake Shore Drive and the mile-long viaduct carrying 12th Street (Roosevelt Road) across the railroad yards south of "the Loop." The double-decked Wacker Drive and several large

¹³ Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

¹⁴ Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁵ For example, its plan for eradicating slums was to open up these areas by cutting wide boulevards through them, just as Baron Haussmann had done in Paris.

¹⁶ *The Chicago Plan in 1933—Twenty Five Years of Accomplishment* (Chicago: Chicago Plan Commission, 1933).

bridges were major improvements along the main stem of the Chicago River, west from Michigan Avenue. The weaving of Chicago's major road network into the regional system also was accomplished. Proposals for railroad consolidation were not highly successful; nevertheless, the large new Union Station was built as suggested by the plan. The South Branch of the Chicago River was straightened, and harbor facilities were enlarged both in the downtown area and at Lake Calumet. The famous Navy Pier was built far out into Lake Michigan. Now land was slowly built up as the lake was pushed back and over twenty miles of lake-front park and beaches resulted, including Burnham Park—all new land lying south of Grant Park and extending almost seven miles to Jackson Park. And within these lake-front parks notable museums and other institutions were developed, much as Burnham and his associates had suggested. The outlying forest preserves were vastly extended until by 1933 they included 32,400 acres, about 75 per cent of it still in a natural state. Other accomplishments could be cited, but those men-

tioned include the major improvements. Surely an impressive list.

Why was so much achieved? Unusually fine work in winning citizen support was an important factor in this success. The intense interest and wholehearted backing of Chicago's top business leaders was perhaps of equal importance. Basic to everything, however, if significant achievements were to be secured, was a plan that would arouse the fighting enthusiasm of those responsible for community betterment. This they had in the Plan of Chicago. As Daniel H. Burham had stated in 1907 when he was fully engaged in the Chicago study:

Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably 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.¹⁷

¹⁷ Moore, *op. cit.*



Chicago's Magnificent "Front Door" on Lake Michigan