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Today's Chicago makes no grand plans, book contends

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Cityscapes

Chicago, the city of Daniel Burnham and his oft-quoted epigram, "make no little plans," doesn't have a planning department.

Yes, you read that right.

Although the birthplace of modern American city and regional planning still has planners tucked away in its bureaucratic woodwork — specifically, in various divisions of the Department of Housing and Economic Development — it has become, in the view of a provocative and sobering new book, a planning laggard.

"Chicago and planning have long had a special relationship, but that pairing has frayed beyond recognition," write two respected Roosevelt University academics, D. Bradford Hunt and Jon B. DeVries in their lucid study, "Planning Chicago."

Hunt, an associate professor of social science and history, and DeVries, director of a real estate institute at Roosevelt, are not alone in arguing that an absence of comprehensive planning is hampering Chicago as it fights to stem the slide of the last decade, when it lost about 200,000 people, 7 percent of its population. And they are certainly on target in their broader point: Planning matters.

In its series, "A new Plan of Chicago," the Tribune's editorial page has noted the disturbing link between Chicago's rash of homicides and the city's population exodus. Confronting that specter, Chicago can't afford to throw away precious tax dollars that would plant seeds of revival in beleaguered South and West Side neighborhoods. Yet wasteful spending proliferates in areas like South Austin, as Tribune investigative reporters David Jackson and Gary Marx disclosed in September.

Despite warnings from neighbors that the opening of a new liquor store would worsen curbside drug dealing and street fights, a convicted drug dealer, Frederick "Juicy" Sims, got a six-figure city grant to open just such a store on West Madison Street. Citing other failed examples of city-backed projects in South Austin, the reporters concluded that "years of haphazard attempts at development have failed to lift a once-stable community."

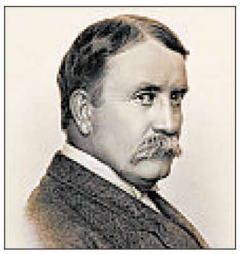
Hunt and DeVries propose a smarter planning framework, not just in the neighborhoods, but citywide.

Given all the civic hoopla and self-congratulation that attended the 100th anniversary of Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago, which is credited for such iconic public works as Navy Pier, readers might expect the authors to cite that plan as a model.

Instead, Hunt and DeVries argue that the height of "city-led planning" in Chicago was an obscure document: the city's 1966 comprehensive plan.

That plan took a holistic perspective, going beyond bricks and mortar to address social services, such as the need for a network of health centers, which were cut from the final edition of Burnham's plan. Planners refer to such exercises as "policy plans" because they articulate general growth policies and prioritize investments but stop short of saying "the new library will go here."

Championing the 1966 plan is no easy task, notably because it produced few concrete results. Yet it still left a significant legacy: The back-to-the-neighborhoods, "equity planning" movement that flourished under Mayor Harold Washington in the 1980s maintained the plan's focus on the whole city, not just downtown. And the plan's activist spirit led to key regulatory measures such as the Lakefront Protection Ordinance of 1973, which has proved an important tool in upgrading of the Lake Michigan shoreline.



CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM

Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan is credited for Navy Pier.

Still, wonky policy plans are bound to be a tough sell in Chicago, where, as one planning department veteran told the authors, planning means projects and projects mean contracts — "something the machine could understand."

The promise of citywide comprehensive planning dimmed when expected federal funds for it dried up in the 1970s.

And that style of planning took a further hit from Mayor Richard M. Daley, who, despite putting planners in his cabinet and pushing large-scale projects like Millennium Park, distrusted comprehensive planning, reportedly because he felt it restricted him. Reflecting that dislike, the word "planning" was stricken from the title of the city's development department near the end of Daley's reign, when the merger of several city agencies created the Department of Housing and Economic Development.

Through a spokesman, the department's commissioner, Andrew Mooney, declined to comment directly on the book's assertions. But he clearly disagrees with them.

The word "planning" has disappeared from the department's name, but not its functions, the spokesman, Peter Strazzabosco, wrote in an email. Starting next year, he added, the agency will again be called the Department of Planning and Development, reflecting "a more comprehensive approach to the city's overall development, especially the neighborhoods."

Yet as Hunt and DeVries lament, financing still drives planning in Chicago through the controversial tool known as tax-increment financing, or TIF.

By capturing new tax dollars generated by rising property values within their borders, the TIF districts generate tens of millions of dollars for city coffers. But as TIF grants sold to the public as the basis for much-needed fixes to crumbling sidewalks morph into corporate subsidies or back dubious investments like the one that went to the South Austin liquor store, a chorus of critics have rightly labeled TIFs an off-the-books slush fund for the mayor and the alderman.

In characteristically nuanced fashion, Hunt and DeVries call for reform of TIFs, not for getting rid of them. And they cite modestly scaled successes, such as the city's ongoing effort to transform the long-polluted Chicago River into a recreational mecca.

But the big picture remains troubling. Emanuel hasn't pushed aldermen to adopt key recommendations of his TIF task force, such as the creation of a City Council-approved economic development plan that would govern the use of TIF districts. And the city is relying on an economic growth plan shaped by the nonprofit World Business Chicago. It boasts a board laden with CEOs, but, as Hunt and DeVries remind us, little vision for land use and infrastructure.

So for now, we're stuck with occasional bright spots against a backdrop of ad hoc, incremental, politicized planning, the kind that reacts to and regulates development instead of guiding growth equitably and intelligently. It's a far cry from the "make no little plans" legacy of Burnham or from the latest planning thinking, which calls for cities to be remade not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

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