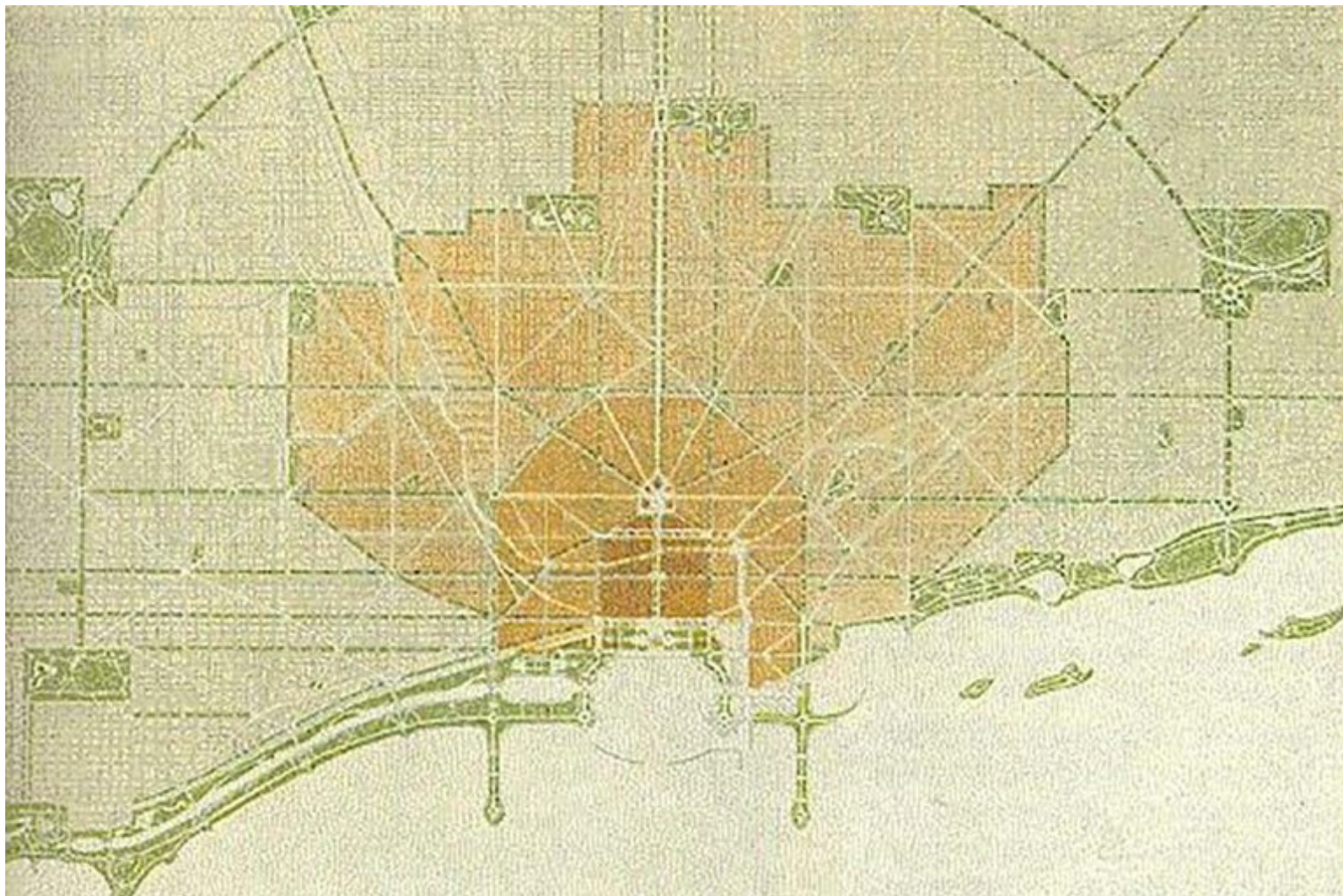


CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS

Chicago's planning vision? Myopic.

A city of haves and have-nots badly needs a comprehensive plan to help bridge divides.

JON B. DEVRIES AND LESLIE S. POLLOCK



Map from Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago.

A city of haves and have-nots badly needs a comprehensive plan to help bridge divides, say urban planning scholars Jon B. DeVries and Leslie S. Pollock.



Jon B. DeVries and
Leslie S. Pollock

Chicago still celebrates urban design pioneer Daniel Burnham's long-ago call to "make no little plans," but it has been more than a half-century since the city's last broad attempt to put those words into action.

The Comprehensive Plan of Chicago, 1966, spelled a citywide vision for development, addressing housing, land use, health care, industry, jobs, parks and schools, and launched 16 development area plans over the next few years that led to new investments in the central area, transit lines, community colleges, riverfronts, industrial corridors, and neighborhoods.

But now, in a different era, we face the challenge of "black flight," with wide swaths of the city experiencing disinvestment, unemployment, population loss, aging infrastructure and violence.

In her first year in office, Mayor Lori Lightfoot has begun to address these challenges by reorganizing the city Department of Planning & Development, hiring additional planners, announcing new neighborhood initiatives on the city's South and West sides, curbing aldermanic prerogative on zoning and spending and appointing multiple new members to the Chicago Plan Commission.

However, the time has arrived to take the next step. To alter the trajectory of a Chicago that has become two cities, one thriving and the other spiraling down, it is time to revive the spirit of Burnham with a new comprehensive plan to address major challenges across the landscape. Political and civic leaders should immediately launch a citywide comprehensive planning effort with the goal of adopting a long-term plan by 2023 that would provide a vision for a decade of growth leading to 2033, the 200th anniversary of Chicago's founding.

We must build a community where people, especially our youth, sense that there is a positive future for them in an improving and growing Chicago.

This "Chicago 2033" plan can identify investments for major infrastructure and civic systems—transportation, education, health, public safety, recreation and housing. This framework can also provide programs and actions that are specific to neighborhoods but linked to a citywide vision. And it can set population, job and investment growth goals to rally and measure progress.

The business community, foundations and universities can provide personnel, financial and intellectual support to a city-led effort. During that effort, the city could rebuild its planning capacity with staff and resources that would reaffirm planning as a decision-making practice and guide for the city departments, mayor, Chicago Plan Commission and City Council.

A plan is a plan, not action, but it is the first step to getting everyone on the same path forward. Chicago's new plan must rise above showcase projects to identify the long-term needs of communities, recommend the systems and infrastructure to address them, and guide a coordinated and multiyear program of investments to address those needs. Our neighborhood crisis demands that this be a plan that reflects the voices of all Chicagoans to prioritize needs, build consensus and set shared and City Council-adopted goals for the city's future.

Planning is often a misunderstood concept. Since the early-20th-century days of Burnham, we tend to think of planning as monumental projects like creating the public lakefront or constructing Millennium Park. Or we equate planning with land-use regulation and local zoning.

But planning should be understood as something much more expansive. It is the practice of making informed choices about the future—including citizen input, population and economic projections, and best practices—to create and maintain places where people want to live, work and play.

Once a world leader in city planning, Chicago is now one of the few major cities in the U.S. and Canada without a long-term comprehensive plan. A New York City plan put in motion under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg sets a goal of 1 million new residents; Denver's 2040 plan is creating new job and population centers along light-rail lines—a strategy

Minneapolis and St. Paul also have underway.

Zoning reforms are also in the works in multiple cities—Minneapolis recently abolished single-family zoning to stimulate more affordable housing. There are multiple city plans Chicago could now draw on in creating its own blueprint: Portland 2035, Philadelphia 2035, Boston 2030, Plan D.C., Forward Dallas, Imagine Austin, Seattle 2035 and OurLA in Los Angeles.

Toronto is perhaps the North American city most comparable to Chicago, and in December 2019 it approved a 10-year housing plan to create over 40,000 new affordable rental homes, prevent 10,000 evictions for low-income households, improve housing affordability for 40,000 households and help more than 10,000 seniors remain in their homes or move to long-term care facilities.

It has also been actively recruiting and assisting immigrants and refugees, resulting in population growth of 100,000-plus residents per year. As a result, the population of Toronto proper now stands at 2.7 million, surpassing that of onetime immigrant magnet Chicago, where galloping growth in residents from abroad has stalled in the wake of restrictive U.S. immigration policies.

Development initiatives in Chicago, rather than being sweeping, have too often been dictated by myopia.

Citywide coordination is hampered by a patchwork of more than 140 tax-increment financing districts that limit tax subsidies for development to narrow geographic zones. The city's 50 aldermen often also flex prerogatives to steer funds to their own wards rather than pool them to benefit the city more broadly.

Major new developments are approved, deals are made and surrounding areas are impacted with scant reference to current or future community needs, goals and infrastructure. Major transit and other infrastructure investments spanning multiple wards and requiring large investments are postponed or considered unattainable.

Multifaceted issues require community support and focused resources—and all major city problems, including shootings and depopulation, are multifaceted. We have paid attention

in some neighborhoods. One exemplary initiative in Chicago is the New Communities Program of the Local Initiatives Support Corp. that built partnerships and "Quality of Life" plans in 16 neighborhoods.



Daniel Burnham, who led the effort to construct the World's Columbian Exposition seen in the above photo, was the co-author of 'The Plan of Chicago.'

Another example is the 2009 Central Area Action Plan, which recommended major transit investments to expand in underserved areas and to add capacity for future office and employment growth. More recently, the 2012 Chicago Cultural Plan brought together a range of voices to craft a citywide plan for growth of the arts.

To move these and other initiatives forward, Chicago needs to coordinate its efforts and undertake a comprehensive planning effort covering all sectors—not unlike the 1966 plan.

The basic goals of our 2033 initiative are not hard to envision: strong neighborhoods, an expanding job base, a 21st-century industrial policy, transportation investments, sustainable energy and environmental practices, recreational parks and trails, education initiatives at all levels, accessible health care and a strong central area that continues as the economic engine of the region.

Perhaps most important, the creation and implementation of a new, comprehensive plan would set us on the path to becoming one city, not two, united in pursuit of the health, safety and welfare of all citizens.

Yes, all of this takes money and time. But we often spend money and time on uncoordinated projects that may or may not help us reach a desired future. Our businesses, institutions and residents will feel secure in making commitments in a city that has a vision and plan. Businesses thrive when they can depend upon consistent public decisions and policies, and the same is true for neighborhoods. A citywide plan that is embraced by city officials and has strong public support provides such consistency.

Planning is not a straitjacket. It is a guide and vision for the city's future—continually implemented, updated and consulted. It is what strong organizations—and healthy cities—do. Where is Chicago's guide for its 21st century? When will we collectively announce Chicago's future vision? In the past we have produced such visions. We need to do so again today.

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Inline Play

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