Research from the field

The other author of the 1908 Plan of Chicago: Edward H. Bennett – urban designer, planner and architect

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Edward H. Bennett (1874–1954) was co-author, with Daniel Burnham, of the 1905 Plan for San Francisco and the 1909 Plan of Chicago. He was extensively engaged in the implementation of the Chicago plan for over 20 years, designing bridges, parks and road improvements. Although Bennett was educated as an architect, he designed few buildings. His consulting practice ranged from the preparation of comprehensive plans for major cities (Minneapolis, Brooklyn, Portland, Ottawa) to the design of civic centres (Denver, Detroit, Pasadena), building ensembles (Washington’s Federal Triangle) open spaces, infrastructure and memorials. Bennett was therefore one of the first American urban designers, although the term was not in general use at the time. Bennett’s papers and drawings are held by the Art Institute of Chicago and are a significant opportunity for research into the practice of a pioneer urban design and planning consultant.

Keywords: City Beautiful; urban design; Plan of Chicago; civic centres; Edward H. Bennett

This essay introduces Edward H. Bennett (1874–1954), perhaps the least-studied of the founders of the American planning movement. It argues that his substantial body of work has been ignored because he was neither a traditional architect nor a land use planner, but rather one of America’s first urban designers. A substantial archive of Bennett’s professional papers, comprehensive plans, zoning bylaws and urban design projects is located at the Art Institute of Chicago, and it is surprising that no planning history scholar has studied such a major body of work in its entirety.1

Bennett’s City Beautiful planning and urban design work is overshadowed by the reputation of his collaborator, Daniel H. Burnham. Bennett was co-author with Burnham on 1905 Plan for San Francisco and 1909 Plan of Chicago, but the record of Bennett’s role in these seminal plans appears to have diminished with time and most commentators refer to them as the ‘Burnham plans’.2 Bennett was probably the leading American planner operating in the City Beautiful style after the 1912 death of his mentor, Burnham. Bennett’s firm prepared numerous city plans, zoning ordinances and civic centre designs from 1910 to 1930, working in small communities near Chicago and major cities such as Brooklyn, Buffalo, Detroit, Minneapolis, Ottawa, Pasadena, Portland, OR and Washington, DC. Bennett was frequently invited to speak at planning conferences and universities and contributed a chapter to John Nolen’s pioneering planning textbook.3 Despite the widely reported death of the City Beautiful movement after 1910, Edward Bennett made a 40-year career as a planning and urban design consultant working in that mode. However, his City Beautiful roots may account for some of

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the lack of attention to his work during the revival of American planning history scholarship in the 1970s, a period when urban design was at a low point in the academy.  

Bennett was born in Bristol, England, and educated in the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where he won a major prize for drawing. Burnham recruited him in 1903 to prepare plans for a design competition for the expansion of the US Military Academy at West Point, NY. Although another firm won the West Point competition, Bennett quickly proved his worth by preparing the San Francisco plan (1904–1905). In a pattern that was to be repeated in other cities, Burnham helped convince the city’s commercial and political elites that a comprehensive plan was needed to guide San Francisco’s growth and redevelopment. He then left Bennett in complete charge of the work after a few weeks in residence, prior to departing for the Philippines. Burnham was overseas or in Chicago for most of the next year, while Bennett worked full-time on the plan, directing a team of draughtsmen and surveyors. Burnham returned to San Francisco for the public release of the plan in 1905, but was careful to give Bennett full credit as co-author of the plan.  

Bennett had found a mentor who shaped his thinking on city planning. A quarter century after Burnham’s death, he recalled his powerful personal influence:

> Mr. Burnham’s influence with men was probably founded on his power to analyze their thoughts or feelings, and to make them realize he understood what was in their minds. A personal basis was often established, giving him greater influence especially over younger men. When a young man realizes that an older man has this perception and when the young man knows that the older one stands for high ideals, it becomes possible to share these ideals, and to raise his plan of thought to them. At least he does not wish to be seen to fall below those ideals, and, willingly or not, he catches the spirit and becomes attuned to the thought of the elder man.

**Collaboration on the Chicago plan**

Burnham and Bennett’s greatest collaboration was on the 1909 *Plan of Chicago*. Burnham was clearly the instigator and guiding force of the plan, building on years of experience as a civic activist and owner of Chicago’s largest architectural practice. He rose to the prominence in civic affairs as Director of Works for the 1893 World’s Colombian Exposition (WCE), when he chaired a national committee of architects and artists that produced a powerful classical design that had a profound effect on American architectural taste for the next 20 years. Burnham received much credit when the exposition became a runaway success, and he was later requested to reprise his WCE role with the 1902 McMillan Commission plan for Washington, DC.  

Equally important, preparations for the holding of the World’s Fair in Chicago required Burnham to work closely with the city’s commercial elite, who were its sponsors and financial backers. His already flourishing firm strengthened its hold on the Chicago market and built projects in many other cities, based on Burnham’s reputation and ability to inspire clients. By 1905, D.H. Burnham and Company was the first prototype of the national architectural firm, with branch offices in New York and San Francisco and numerous clients within the reach of fast overnight trains from Chicago. The firm was expert at complex, high-cost downtown projects like office buildings (Flatiron Building, NY 1903), train stations (Washington, DC, New Orleans), banks and department stores (Marshall Field, Chicago 1902; Wanamaker’s, Philadelphia, 1903; London Selfridge’s 1906). During the 1904–1910
period, three-quarters of Burnham’s commissions were outside Chicago, and he spent several days each week on the road meeting clients, before returning for Sunday with his family in Chicago.

Burnham’s many downtown building projects often connected him with civic improvement proposals for other cities and he took a leading role in proposals for a Cleveland civic centre (1903) and comprehensive plan for San Francisco (1905). Burnham generously donated his time for many city planning projects, and he was on an equal social status with his patrician clients. However, the cities did not receive a plan for no cost, since Burnham’s expenses and the salaries of his staff that worked on the projects were usually reimbursed. By 1904, the San Francisco and Manila plans required so much time that Burnham turned the technical planning for the former project over to Edward Bennett.

When the Merchants Club and Commercial Club approached Burnham to prepare a similar plan for Chicago in 1906, he had a clear working method for the project based on his past experience. Burnham helped the businessmen estimate the costs for the project, raise the money and gave strategic advice. Bennett was installed as project manager for the plan, and worked full time on the plan from 1906 to 1910, supervising the office and consultants, revising reports and preparing most of the maps, technical analyses and drawings. Burnham, busy with a thriving national architectural practice, once again donated his time to the project and usually took a Sunday evening briefing from Bennett at his home. Burnham also chaired a weekly progress meeting in his office on the top floor of the Railway Exchange building, overlooking the city.

Burnham prepared an early draft of the text and brought in his friend Charles Moore from Washington to edit the report. However, Burnham again insisted that Bennett should be given status as co-author of the work. This was no mere promotion of a valued associate, since Bennett had been the lead designer on almost every aspect of the project. However, Bennett receives little credit for work, with even the most detailed scholarly analyses of the plan devoting more space to the commercial illustrators like Jules Guerin, who spent several weeks preparing renderings, than to Bennett’s four years’ effort creating scores of maps and plans.

However, we should not bemoan the fate of Bennett’s work on the Plan of Chicago too strongly, since that is the way an architectural practice works – the associate who is the project manager does most of the work, and the partner gets most of the glory. Furthermore, Burnham’s political and financial work was more important – many plans fail, not for their urban design, but for poor financial strategy and administrative structures for implementation.

But Bennett also gets insufficient credit for his key role as the chief designer for the implementation of the 1909 plan. As an indication of Bennett’s importance in the implementation process, the Chicago Plan Commission (CPC) retained his services as its city planning advisor until 1930. During the 20-year period following the plan’s release, he supervised the implementation of many proposals from the report, including Grant Park and the Michigan Avenue extension. Bennett finally parted ways with the CPC after a disagreement about the future of Congress Street, the central axis of the 1909 plan. When the commission ignored his advice, Bennett privately published a brochure on the topic.

Once again, other actors, such as Dwight Moody, have received far more scholarly attention for their work in implementing the Chicago plan. Edward Bennett clearly played a leading role in the preparation and implementation of one of America’s most prominent
early plans for over a quarter of a century, yet there is not a single scholarly article on this work.

Edward Bennett as city planner

Chicago was Burnham’s last collaboration on a city plan. After 1908, he refused all further planning commissions, referring potential clients to Edward Bennett, or Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., his collaborator on the 1902 McMillan Commission plan for Washington. Bennett set up his own firm in 1910 and in the next two decades completed plans for major cities across North America (Table 1)

These documents were often the first comprehensive plans prepared for their communities, combining Bennett’s trademark City Beautiful designs for downtown civic centres with the extensive analysis of road networks, parks, streetcars, railroads and utilities that he led in the Chicago plan. Only the published document for Minneapolis is as extensive and well illustrated at the Chicago Plan (Figure 1). Bennett also prepared charming plans for small towns and bedroom communities near Chicago (Table 1), including Winnetka and his hometown of Lake Forest, IL

Table 1. Edward Bennett’s city plans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>1912–1914</td>
<td>project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buffalo, NY</td>
<td>1920–1922</td>
<td>project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Byron, IL</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>1906–1909</td>
<td>(with DHB)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Detroit, MI</td>
<td>1911–1915</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elgin, IL</td>
<td>1916–1917</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary, IN</td>
<td>1920–1923</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland Park, IL</td>
<td>1919–1920</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Joliet, IL</td>
<td>1919–1921</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lake Forest, IL</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Minneapolis, MN</td>
<td>1910–1917</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ottawa and Hull, Ont.</td>
<td>1912–1915</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palm Beach, FL</td>
<td>1929–1930</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pasadena, CA</td>
<td>1923–1925</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Phoenix, AZ</td>
<td>1920–1921</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portland, OR</td>
<td>1910–1912</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rock Island, IL</td>
<td>1922</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Paul, MN</td>
<td>1921–1922</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco, CA</td>
<td>1904–1905</td>
<td>(with DHB)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington, DC</td>
<td>1917–1921</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnetka, IL</td>
<td>1917–1921</td>
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Substantial holdings at the AIC. Source: Draper 1982, Appendix.
Bennett was an early advocate of designating land use districts, including these schemes in his plans before the term zoning became popular for this practice\textsuperscript{23}. He prepared the first comprehensive zoning bylaws for Chicago, Pasadena, CA, St. Paul, MN and five smaller communities (Table 2).

Bennett’s high-profile commissions in the 1910s and 1920s placed him among the early leaders of the American planning profession. Most cities did not employ full-time urban planners during this period, but instead retained consultants to prepare plans, zoning bylaws and advise city planning commissions\textsuperscript{24}. The most successful consultant was St. Louis engineer Harland Bartholomew, who prospered as the dominant mode of practice evolved from the City Beautiful to a more statistically based approach, sometimes known as the City Scientific or the City Functional\textsuperscript{25}. Bartholomew’s plans tended to have one or two City Beautiful images for a civic centre embedded in a mass of technical analysis\textsuperscript{26}. Bennett’s consulting practice survived the young profession’s shift to the City Scientific because he combined functional and aesthetic design, often interspersing his illustrated speeches with detailed descriptions of the infrastructure work from previous plans\textsuperscript{27}.

Edward Bennett’s status as one of America’s leading planners was confirmed by his appointment to the elite team of technical advisors to New York’s Regional Plan Association, with Thomas Adams, Bartholomew, George Ford, John Nolen and F.L. Olmsted, Jr.\textsuperscript{28}. The 1929–1931 *Regional Plan of New York* was Bennett’s last major land use planning project, as his consulting practice dried up in the Depression of the 1930s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davenport, IA</td>
<td>1925\textsuperscript{a}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Wayne, IN</td>
<td>1927–1928\textsuperscript{a}</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joliet, IL</td>
<td>1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Forest, IL</td>
<td>1923\textsuperscript{a}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasadena, CA</td>
<td>1923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul, MN</td>
<td>1922\textsuperscript{a}</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a}Substantial holdings at the AIC.
Source: Draper 1982, Appendix.

**Edward Bennett as architect**

The lack of attention to Bennett’s planning career is a mystery, since his companions from the launch of the profession have almost all been the subject of books and dissertations. While the lack of scholarly attention to Edward Bennett’s planning career may be surprising, there is no mystery around his low profile as an architect. Although he was educated at the world’s leading design school and worked in a major American architectural practice, Bennett left remarkably few buildings. Early in his time at D.H. Burnham & Co., he designed a few park pavilions for the poor neighbourhoods in Chicago’s south side (Figure 2). Bennett’s next building, other than his suburban house, was his final professional project, the 1931–1938 Federal Trade Commission (FTC) building in Washington, DC (Figure 3).

Both these buildings are competent designs, executed as components of much larger plans. The recreation pavilions were part of a parks system designed by Olmsted Bros. for Chicago’s
South Park Commission. The FTC building was a small building at the apex of the Federal Triangle district, completing a master plan prepared by Bennett for the US government.

The contexts for these two buildings give an important clue about the nature of Edward Bennett’s professional identity. Although he had the talent, education and opportunity to become a successful architect, he chose to design projects that were not buildings, but urban elements that ranged in scale from small memorials to metropolitan regions. There was no contemporary word to describe such a person, but today we would call him an ‘urban designer’.

**Edward Bennett as urban designer**

Edward Bennett prepared physical plans for large communities and designed building ensembles such as civic centres, arts centres, universities, without necessarily being the architect of the buildings. As such, he was one of North America’s earliest urban designers, a term that does not regularly appear until the 1960s. Bennett also designed urban components: bridges, parks, boulevards, waterfronts, fountains and memorials, demonstrating a range of practice strikingly similar to today’s best urban design consultancies.

Bennett often illustrated a civic centre as part of a comprehensive plan for a community. He was later commissioned to prepare detailed plans for building civic centres in at least
10 cities (Table 3) and his designs appear to have been largely followed in Denver (1917) (Figure 4) and Detroit’s Arts Centre (1913). Other large-scale projects included colleges, army bases and site plans for major expositions such as San Francisco’s 1915 Panama-Pacific exposition and the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair.

Washington’s Federal Triangle is the most complete of Bennett’s large-scale plans for ensembles of public buildings. He prepared the site plan and chaired the Board of Architects for the complex of office buildings located between the White House and the Capitol. Each board member designed one building, within the classically inspired guidelines of Bennett’s plan. Bennett’s firm designed the smallest building, on the difficult triangular site closest to the Capitol. Unfortunately, a huge parking lot replaced the grand central public gardens shown in Bennett’s site plan, since the government considered the proposed underground garage an unnecessary extravagance during the Depression.

Bennett’s designs for infrastructure and other urban components drew upon his Beaux Arts training – he won a prize for design of a staircase as a student. His work with the CPC
involved collaboration on many infrastructure projects proposed in the 1909 plan. For example, Bennett was consulting architect for 18 bridges between 1913 and 1932, with the Michigan Avenue Bridge being perhaps the most prominent (Figure 5). He also designed the original Wacker Drive (1917–1926) and North Michigan Avenue extensions (1910–1918) and advised Miami, FL, on the streetscape for Biscayne Boulevard (1926).
Public spaces were the final category of urban components designed by Bennett. His firm prepared plans for parks in New Orleans and Pasadena, and waterfronts in Cedar Rapids, IA and Tiffin, OH. In Chicago, Bennett designed Grant Park, including the magnificent Buckingham Fountain and a peristyle that was demolished in the 1960s. In a belated tribute to Bennett’s contribution to the classic design of its public spaces, Chicago recently rebuilt his peristyle as an entrance to its remarkable Millennium Park. It is time for the planning history academy to catch up.

In conclusion, we must look at Bennett as an early practitioner in urban design – a new vocation located between architecture and planning; he was not an academic or a theoretician. He crafted plans for cities, towns and public spaces in keeping with City Beautiful principles. Edward H. Bennett appears to have been ignored in early histories of planning because he was neither a ‘heroic’ architect like Burnham nor politically engaged planner like F.L. Olmsted, Jr. He designed in the City Beautiful style, which was not a respectable academic topic during the Modern period from the 1940s to the 1990s. And there is also Burnham’s shadow, which
obscur[es] Bennett’s 20 years implementing the *Plan of Chicago*. As a consequence of this lack of detailed work, Bennett’s papers, drawings and lantern slides in the archives the Art Institute of Chicago present an opportunity for a doctoral student or young academic to make an important contribution to the history of urban design and planning in the USA.

**Acknowledgements**

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David L.A. Gordon is professor and director of the School of Urban and Regional Planning at Queen’s University in Canada. He has also taught at Toronto, Ryerson, Harvard and Pennsylvania, where he was a Fulbright Scholar. David graduated in urban planning and engineering from Queen’s and received his doctorate from Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. His most recent books are *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities* (Routledge 2006; 2010) and *Planning Canadian Communities* (Nelson 2008 with Gerald Hodge). A book on the planning history of Canada’s capital city is currently under review.

**Notes**

5. Bennett’s background is summarized in J. Draper, op. cit.
7. The quote is from a speech by Bennett at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1929. DHB papers Box 40, file 2.


10. Hines, op. cit. Appendix A. Only 15 of 61 major projects in this list were in Chicago; the firm had eight projects in Pittsburgh, six in Washington during this period, while others stretched from San Francisco to New York and Houston to Duluth.

11. See DHB diaries, series II, Box 25.


13. Burnham estimated the cost initially as $24,900, but eventually $80,000 was spent; see Smith, op. cit. Fig. 31, from the EHB collection. The 2007 equivalent costs would be $1.2 million and $4 million, based on the 1908 *Engineering News Record* Construction Cost Index of 97.2 and 1970 index of 1386.36 from Hines, op. cit. Appendix B and inflation values of 1908 converted to 2008 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Inflation Index Calculator, http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl (accessed June 11, 2008).

14. See DHB papers, series VII, Box 66.


19. For the Chicago plan, see EHB papers, series VII, Boxes 54–62 and the DHB papers.

20. Burnham’s referrals are in numerous letters in his 1907–1912 correspondence in DHB, vol. 1, series I; For example, when Sir William Van Horne solicited his services for a city plan for Montreal, Burnham suggested Bennett be retained. DHB letters to Van Horne, August 16 and 24, 1910.


22. Lake Forest City Plan, 1929, EHB papers, series VI, reel 18.


27. For the 1914 speech to the Canadian club, see EHB papers, series IV, reel 12; D.L.A. Gordon, ‘Introducing a City Beautiful Plan for Canada’s Capital: Edward Bennett’s 1914 Speech to the Canadian Club’, Planning History Studies 12, nos. 1–2 (December 1998): 13–51.

28. Committee on the Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs, 8 vols. (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1927–1931); Unfortunately, the RPA did not make use of Bennett’s strength in urban design; Thomas Adams assigned him to prepare a sector study of Staten Island and New Jersey, which was perhaps the weakest of the background studies – see D.A. Johnson, Planning the Great Metropolis: The 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs (London/New York: E & FN Spon, 1996).

29. J.L. Sert founded the first urban design degree program at the Harvard GSD in 1963; E. Mumford, Defining Urban Design (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 2009); Sert was secretary of the CIAM and unlikely to cite the work of City Beautiful designers from half a century earlier.


31. Draper, op. cit. Figure 1.

Appendix. The Edward H. Bennett collections at the Art Institute of Chicago

The Edward H. Bennett collection was donated to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1973, a gift of Edward Bennett, Jr. The archival collection in the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries is fairly large: 24 linear feet, plus oversize materials. It documents many of Bennett’s professional activities, but does not contain much personal information or records. It includes his business diaries and project papers, with some general business correspondence, manuscripts for lectures and essays, and photographs. There are drawings in the museum’s curatorial Department of Architecture and Design that complement the papers in the archival collection.

Several themes can be traced through the collection: the evolution of the first generation of city plans, the maturation of the planning profession, the changing nature of the interaction between planners and government and business leaders, the inception and the spread of the City Beautiful movement in USA. The collection can also supply specific data for a particular architectural project or plan from correspondence, statistics and their analysis, costs, key players, specifications and images.

Historically, scholars have been drawn to the collection for its extensive documentation of the 1909 Plan of Chicago. However, the papers also provide opportunities for research into the implementation of the Chicago plan until 1930 and the professional career of a founder of the American planning movement and one of its first urban design consultants.

Note: This appendix was written by Mary Woolever, Art and Architecture Archivist, Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60603, USA; mwoolever@artic.edu. Scholars interested in investigating the E.H. Bennett collection should contact Mary Woolever at mwoolever@artic.edu. A finding aid for the contents of the collection is available online at http://www.artic.edu/aic/libraries/rbarchives/.