

Creating Familiar: The Document That Outlines Your Entire Hometown

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Comprehensive Plans are responsible for everything that goes into the planning and development of spaces within cities and villages. In this article, Brian Zimmerman investigates the process of creating these plans and how they are distributed and enacted in the real world.

I really like maps. Whether it's scrolling around on Google Earth or looking at old historical maps, something about them has always really captured my eye. Because of this, I have stumbled upon some pretty interesting things. A few months ago, one of these things was the Burnham Plan of Chicago. At first, I didn't think too much of it. All I thought I had found were some old maps of the city and some grandiose images of things in the city that were either exaggerated or never made it beyond paper. Despite not thinking they were any bigger than what was in front of me, I still wanted to know more about what I was looking at and where it came from, and eventually I came across the Plan of Chicago, one of the most influential documents in not just the city of Chicago's history, but city planning in general.

The Plan of Chicago, also known as the Burnham Plan, was a comprehensive plan for the city of Chicago and its surrounding area created in 1909 by Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett. It's divided into three sections. The first section goes through preplanning and looks at the other great cities like London, Washington, Rome, and Cleveland, as well as

the status of 1909 Chicago and its surrounding area. The second section is the actual plan, which contains most of the maps and building concepts that I had originally found. The third section contains the actual implementation of the plan and how it can be changed and amended as time progressed, photos of which can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

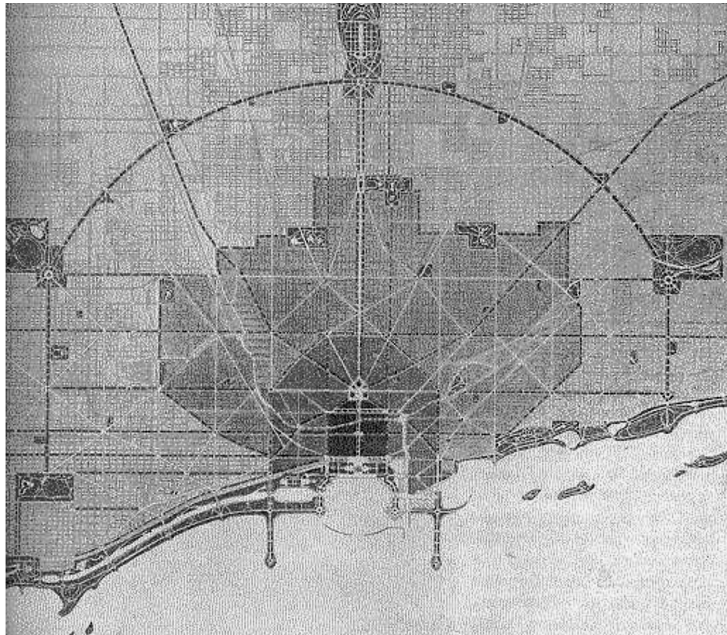


Figure 1: Aerial view of streets under the Burnham Plan.

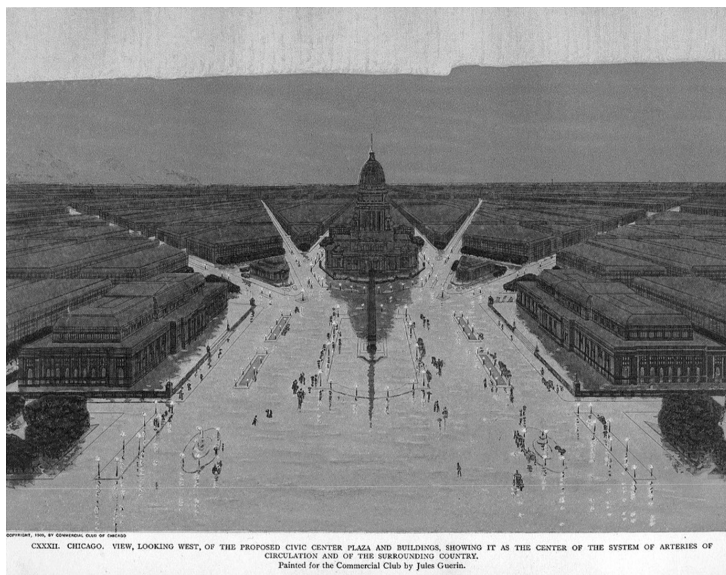


Figure 2: Concept for a civic center and plaza in the current location of the Jane Byrne Interchange.

At this point, I was really interested in the plan. It had never even occurred to me that cities could be planned all at once. I always assumed that buildings, streets, parks, and other city amenities were planned separately and just put into place upon approval, but now I was looking at a plan for a massive city like Chicago that touched on all of that and more. I could not find a full version of the plan online, but from what I found, I could tell that there was a lot of consideration and detail put into the plans and a lot of interesting styles of writing that seemed out of place in an official plan for a major city.

I decided that I was going to dive into the writing process that these plans went through to be created. Starting small, I decided to head north and look at my hometown and its surrounding communities; by examining some more plans and talking with some people who work with them, I tried to find out what these plans were used for and why they were written in the way that they were.

Huntley

My hometown is odd. Fifty miles northwest of Chicago, everything to the east is suburbia, and everything to the west is corn. It's the place where you'll be driving on a four-lane road with stores and houses on each side, and also see a tractor driving across the same road. Its uniqueness is only amplified because of the town's past. For most of its history, it was a relatively small farm town, but that changed in the early 2000s when its population began to expand rapidly. It looked like it was going to grow into another typical northern suburb of Chicago, but when the stock market crashed in 2008, it was left looking like a checker board of subdivisions and cornfields.

Driving through Huntley you can see a lot of unfinished ideas. There are patches in neighborhoods where houses were supposed to be, and some would-be subdivisions that are just winding roads with nothing but utility boxes along them. There are also streets, like the one in Figure 3, that lead to nowhere or stop at a field, or streets that have the same name but are separated by a field because there was



Figure 3: The end of Central Park Blvd. in Huntley is marked off as a dead end. The road was originally supposed to go farther but the connecting roads were never built. One of the many roads like this in the Huntley area.

originally a plan to connect them that never saw the light of day. When I first moved there, it was sad to think about the vision that was clearly there for the town that was never put into reality, but as time went on, I grew accustomed to the different identity the town took on as a hybrid farm town/Chicago suburb.

Despite becoming comfortable with its new identity, I was still curious about the Huntley that never was, and I began to try to connect the dots between certain areas and try to see what ways it was specifically changed. Upon finding out about the Burnham Plan, I became curious if there was a master plan for Huntley, and I found it through the town's website. At first, I wasn't sure what I had stumbled across. It was a 113-page PDF document that was somewhat hard to navigate at first glance. After a few minutes of scrolling through, I realized I was looking at the master plan for Huntley, Illinois.

The plan starts out fairly simple with a cover page and a list of everyone who had a say in the plan, including the Village President and Village Manager. It also notes two amendments from 2011 and 2012, but it does not have the original date of the plan's creation. After that, there is a table of contents. There were seven chapters in Huntley's plan: Preface, Community Goals and Objectives, Existing Conditions, Plan Recommendations, Transportation Plan, Subareas, and Implementation. There are also sections in the table of contents to point out where certain maps and figures are located.

To my surprise, the rest of the plan is also written fairly simply. There is a header indicating what each section will address, and then the text that follows flows well and is easy to understand. There isn't a lot of legal jargon, and for the most part anyone can understand what the text is indicating.

3.2.1 School District 158

One of the most important characteristics of the Village is the quality of public education. School districts in growing communities, constituted primarily of affordable single family homes typically experience substantial enrollment growth as young families move in. Unit School District 158 serves both elementary and high school students. Administrative offices are located at 12015 Mill Street in Huntley. An elementary, middle school and high school campus is located on Harmony Road. A new campus consisting of elementary and middle schools is now being constructed on Reed Road, east of Route 47. This campus falls within the corporate limits of the Village of Lake in the Hills; however, it is surrounded on two sides by the Village of Huntley.

Figure 4: Excerpt from Huntley Comprehensive Plan that shows the setup of each section.

Despite being easy to read and flowing well, the more I read the more questions I had about what I was looking at. The wording in the plan wasn't very specific and seemed more like a general outline than an official legal document. There were not a lot of numbers or set deadlines as much as just a vague description of what the town needed. At this point, I wasn't really sure what the purpose of the plan was, who was supposed to be using it, or how it was supposed to be implemented.

My confusion only grew further as I got to some of the maps. One of the older maps in the plan showed the creation of a new boulevard, but with knowledge of what the town looks like today, I know that there is currently a subdivision there, and if the road were put into place, it would go through several of the houses. After exploring the plan enough, I eventually figured out that most of the original plans were written up in 1998 and 1999 before the neighborhood was built. As seen in Figures 5 and 6, it was clear that the road wasn't meant to go through the houses, but, rather, the houses were not a part of the original plan and things had changed.

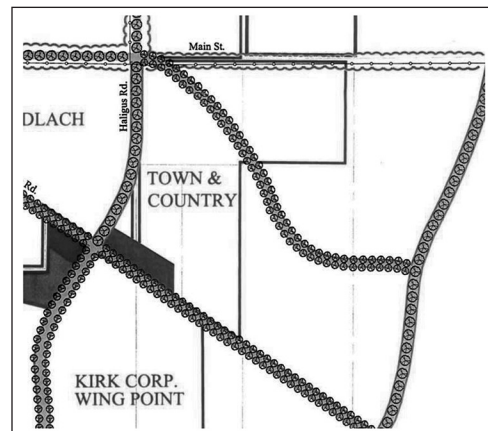


Figure 5: The original road plans from the Comprehensive Plan.



Figure 6: Present day map of the same area in Huntley. The lines marked with stars represent the planned roads that were not built and show that they would go through houses if they were built today.

Examining the plan further made me feel more confused and defeated about trying to understand what it was and what it was for. So many parts of it just didn't seem to click with what Huntley actually looks like now. Even taking into account the market crash, some of the changes were not unfinished projects, but different projects altogether that made the ones planned seem impossible. I would assume maybe it was an outdated plan, but this one had amendments from as recent as five years ago, and those were thrown in the middle of the old plan and seemed unorganized and didn't seem to match the rest of the plan. I made some guesses about why the plan was so misleading. My number one guess was that maybe the plan was written by a committee and not just one person. That could mean that different ideas were all thrown in, but not all of them were voted as a go. My only other guess was that maybe the plan wasn't law as much as it was a guideline that could be casually followed. Either way, I was confused, and I was also completely in the dark about the writing process behind making it, so I decided I needed to talk to someone with more experience in the field. Luckily, the Building Commissioner in Vernon Hills, a nearby suburb, returned my call and was willing to answer questions about the process.

Vernon Hills

I sat down with Vernon Hills Building Commissioner Mike Atkinson to ask him about the writing process that goes into making a village plan and to get help understanding what everything in these plans means. Atkinson is responsible for multiple things in regard to the village and planning, including the comprehensive plan. After giving him a little background about CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory), we started our interview by going over the writing process and some of the CHAT terms that might help explain the making of a village plan.

BRIAN: Who is involved with the production of the plan? Is it a group of people from the village or usually just one person?

ATKINSON: At staff level, it's usually the director of planning and development, who is an educated planner. He'll work with the planning and the zoning commission, and they'll look over it and review it and make a recommendation to the village board—who will make the final decision.

BRIAN: So, is the planner the only person designing the plan or do any of the others put in their own ideas?

ATKINSON: Usually the planner will put all the information together, including the village's map, and he'll point out vacant land because that's what the comprehensive plan is mostly geared to, creating a vision, so looking into the future, you can see how it's going to be developed. The map will also include areas adjacent to the village and how they will be developed if they are annexed into the village. The planning and zoning committee may make changes and, after their review, the final product will be presented to the village board.

BRIAN: In Huntley's plan, it mentions planning for school districts and other organizations. Who gets represented in the discussion, and do they get a say in any of the planning or do they usually have to wait and see what happens?

ATKINSON: They're usually included in the discussion. They'll be notified of when the planning and zoning commissions take place, and they will have an opportunity to voice any opinions or concerns they have.

BRIAN: Looking at Huntley's plan, it doesn't seem very formal. How serious is the implementation of the plan taken?

ATKINSON: Plans are meant to be used as a guide. It's not meant to say, "This is what's going to happen at this property." It's used as a tool mostly by staff so that when a developer comes in and says, "I want to develop this land and annex it into your village," staff can go to this comprehensive plan and look at it and say, "The village board has already set a vision for this property and that is for it to be residential." So, if they come in and say they want to make it a retail store, the village can show them their vision of it being residential. If they do propose a residential plan, that's where you'll get into the fine details. So, this by design is pretty conceptual.

BRIAN: Are the plans distributed village-wide or do they usually just stay with the planner until they need to be opened for reference?

ATKINSON: We make them available. The public hearing takes place and the announcements are put on the village website and in the newspapers, which is required by law. Then the information is made available at Village Hall, so if someone wanted to come in and see the information, they could. They can also always show up to the public hearings and listen.

BRIAN: So, is the actual writing of the document done just by the planner?

ATKINSON: Yeah, and the commissioners will recommend changes or give direction to the village planner, but the writing tends to stay with the planner.

BRIAN: So, the plan works as a guideline, but I know, for example, that Huntley's plan is written for about up to twenty years. Do they make a new plan every twenty years or just amend the old plan?

ATKINSON: Vernon Hills updates their plan every ten years, which is typical. Twenty years seems like a long time to wait to update. They may have a twenty-year vision, but they'll probably update it sooner.

BRIAN: That makes more sense now because in this plan there are updates from 2011 and 2012.

ATKINSON: That would make sense. If it originated in 1998 and they're amending it in 2011, that's normal.

BRIAN: How does the natural environment interfere or change plans?

ATKINSON: If there's an environmentally sensitive area in the village or if one could be annexed into the village, the comprehensive plan would have language on how to control that.

BRIAN: I know here in Vernon Hills, Lake Michigan is used as a direct source for village water. Is that put into the comprehensive plan or is that a separate issue?

ATKINSON: Separate issue. If a village were using wells to serve its citizens' water, that could be in a long-term plan. In Vernon Hills, we have Lake Michigan water already, so that's not an issue we'd address.

With the understanding I gained from asking Atkinson questions, I was able to easily see how I could apply CHAT to the plans. The production of a plan is done by a smaller group, and a planner works on it along with the planning and zoning commission. Other groups like school districts, the park district, public works, and others are still included as their input and comments are accepted and reviewed by the planners. The plans are distributed around the village when they are needed. Since the plan is more of a guideline and not a set-in-stone plan, usually if someone needs them they will have to ask for them. The plans are also made public, and any member of the public is able to access them. Reception varies based on what the plan is saying and who is reviewing the plan. For example, a park district may like a plan that marks a lot of areas for reserves and parklands, whereas a commercial developer may not like that at all. All groups have access to review the plan, as the meeting where it's reviewed is public. After the plan is adopted, the socialization of the plan can be fairly private because of the fact that the plans are often only looked at when someone is trying to build something, and they aren't usually spread around the village otherwise. While they are just a guideline, the activities done in both creating

and implementing the plan can be very important, as they direct what the village would like to be done with each section of the village. Ecology affects the plans in a pretty straightforward way as they can be used to protect or preserve certain lands. But, they can also detail how nearby resources are going to be used by the town, like water sources in the town (showing how ecology impacts the development of the plans overall).

Along with answering the CHAT questions, I walked through Huntley's plan with Atkinson and went over some of the confusion I had with the map. As far as 2011 and 2012 amendments being mixed in with the original plan, Atkinson said that was probably just poor organization when creating the PDF. After talking with Atkinson, the Huntley plan made a lot more sense. Looking at the plan as a guideline, the language makes much more sense rather than if it were a law. It also explains why certain plans like roads were never implemented and why subdivisions filled their place. The size of Huntley's plan also made much more sense given that these plans tend to focus on empty land and Huntley was fairly rural in 1998.

Chicago

Knowing more about how the plans work after going through Huntley's plan, I decided to revisit the Burnham Plan and see what similarities it had to Huntley's and what the differences were. Since I was unable to find the full plan online, I decided to check and see if it was available at the library, and sure enough it was. Immediately upon opening the book I noticed similarities between the Plan of Chicago and Huntley's Comprehensive Plan. The table of contents at the beginning was nearly identical, dividing the plan into different subsections. Each plan had a separate section to point out maps and figures.

Understanding the plan as a guideline also made much more sense. Most of the plan looks foreign to modern-day Chicago. It contains ideas such as a civic center, a second pier the size of Navy Pier, and a road layout that doesn't even resemble the modern city. Looking at the plan as a guideline, you can see why certain things didn't go through. For one, in 1909 the growth of the automobile was probably not considered, and its rise must have had a huge impact on roadways in the city. Figure 7 shows the original plans for the roadway meant for pedestrians. For the most part, the plan's layout stayed identical to Huntley's for most of the book. Based on the influence the Burnham Plan had, it would make sense why other towns, especially those in the shadow of Chicago, would try to copy its writing and design tactics.



Figure 7: Image of roadway from the Plan of Chicago showing the emphasis of foot travel over cars, most likely a leading factor of why it was not fully implemented.

Conclusion

After researching the work and planning that goes into making a town, driving down the streets feels different. It's amazing to pass neighborhoods or stores and know that there was a plan in place to make sure it all fit and created a town that was functional and well designed for the people who live there. In Huntley, the cut-off streets and empty fields are not as depressing to look at anymore because I know that the village's plans for that land will evolve as time goes on and that they will create a space that they think is best for the village. Not only has this research allowed me to appreciate the writing and work that goes into the design of a town, but it also makes me think about the other crucial designing that goes into everything else in life that isn't given a second glance.

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Brian Zimmerman is a freshman at Illinois State University studying history social-sciences education. He enjoys history, politics, music, and Chicago sports teams. He spent the last night of writing this article watching the Blackhawks lose Game 3 to Nashville and was very upset.