PLAN OF ELGIN:
Edward H. Bennett’s 1917 Plan for the Industrial Midwestern City

Rachel Lesniak
Urban and Regional Planning 510: Urban Planning History and Theory
December 22, 2015
The urban planning profession often focuses on large cities with grand projects, neglecting suburban development and comprehensive plans, even if urban ideas are imbedded in the history and physical space of the suburbs. Attending Elgin High School in Elgin, Illinois, I saw one-way streets, large commercial towers, and historic industrial spaces, which were absent in my suburb that recently had been farmland. Among the urban aspects of Elgin is the history of city planning, which starts with the *Plan of Elgin*, a 1917 plan designed by Edward Bennett, an important man in the history of urban planning but who is often overlooked in favor of Daniel Burnham. While the City of Elgin implemented little of this plan, the existence of the plan shows the civic mindedness of the “City in the Suburbs” and sets the tone for future planning in the city from 1917 to present day.

This essay will explore the historical era of the plan and its contents, and evaluate the plan. I will first give an overview of the planning paradigms from the era. This knowledge will frame my analysis of the *Plan of Elgin*. I will include a brief history of the city, and then look at the reasons for the creation of the plan. After, I will explore the plan’s vision, tone, and specific recommendations from the plan. Finally, I will outline the plan’s implementation and evaluate the its scope and successes.

**Planning Paradigms in 1917**

The City Beautiful movement first started as a municipal art movement in New York City in the 1890s.\(^1\) This decorative art, found in public interiors of major buildings, included various types of media: sculpture, murals, and stained glass.\(^2\) These pieces were designed with the

---


\(^2\) Peterson, “City Beautiful Movement,” 41.
architects, and holistically was called collaborative or allied art. The decorative art was famously seen in the grand, yet temporary buildings at 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The emphasis on decorative art grew in New York City until there was no proposal without it.

In 1896, at a lecture sponsored by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society of London, T.J. Cobden-Sanderson emphasized the term “City Beautiful” in his talk. When the lecture was available in print the US in 1897, the term became popular and was used to describe the municipal art movement; however, “City Beautiful” did not yet include city planning, which would later become a central part of the term. City planning first started as “civic improvement,” a task mostly involving women in clubs and civic leagues as part of the ideals of the Progressive reform movement. In 1897, the American Park and Outdoor Art Association, created by landscape architects and park superintendents, began the discussions of outdoor art, the third aspect of the City Beautiful movement. By 1900, the three parts: municipal art, civic improvement, and outdoor art were all intertwined at conferences and lectures. Throughout 1900-1910, multiple cities commissioned comprehensive plans of all sizes, culminating in the 1909 Plan of Chicago, designed by Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett.

The City Beautiful movement had plenty of critics. The movement was quickly stigmatized as being too focused on aesthetics and generally impractical. A newer paradigm,
called City Practical, became popular thanks to the development of specialization, professionalism, and bureaucracy. Specialists, part of multiple professional organizations, pushed out laymen who did not have university backgrounds or access to the exclusivity of the organizations. City planning professionalization pushed against the idea that “the first duty of city planning is to beautify,” a statement made by Robert Anderson Pope, a New York landscape architect. Professionals emphasized the improvements made in housing in Europe and called for city planning based in social benefit and economic efficiency.

The City Practical movement spun into narrowly imagined projects based on empirical evidence, which fits with the general Progressive era emphasis on professionalism and expertise. Unlike the comprehensive city plans that imagined grand changes, the City Practical plans were based in fact-gathering and feasibility studies. At a 1913 city planning conference, planners anticipated further growth of city planning commissions with a model for a municipal “Department of City Planning,” and in 1915, planners published *The City Plan*, a bulletin that included detailed, scientific literature that showed the scope and possibilities for the city planning field. Unfortunately, the City Practical planners could not complete every aspiration in their plans. Through their struggles with implementation, they developed what Jon Peterson calls, “a flexible pattern of accommodation to urban realities,” and found ways to work without infinitive bureaucratic power.

---

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 286.
16 Ibid, 287.
18 Peterson, *Birth of City Planning*, 263.
19 Wilson, “Moles and Skylarks,” 89.
20 Ibid.
Elgin, Illinois: 1835 – 1917

In 1835, Hezekiah and James Gifford from central New York founded Elgin along the banks of the Fox River, thirty-eight miles from Chicago.22 James Gifford lead efforts to create a road, now Route 20, from Elgin to Chicago, and convinced the United States Post Office to create a mail route through Elgin and appoint him as the postmaster.23 In 1850, the Galena & Chicago Union (G&CU) railroad connected to Elgin, which was the end of the line until the company could gain enough capital to create a river crossing over the Fox River to continue the line to Belvedere, near Rockford.24 The railroad brought in settlers to the community on their way West, which created a prosperous, yet short-lived, hotel industry and other associated businesses.25 Other railroads went through Elgin and in 1864 all merged into the Chicago & North Western (C&NW) railroad company.26 After twenty years of growth, Elgin incorporated in 1854.27

Elgin became a hub of dairy farming in the 1850s due to its railroad connections to Chicago. This, in turn, allowed for associated industrial businesses, such as condensed milk, butter, and cheese factories, plus factories that made shipping packages for the goods. The National Watch Company started in 1866, first making only movements and sending them to jewelers for casing. The company had incredible success, becoming the largest employer in the city for almost a hundred years, and transformed the city from a farming town into a factory town. The success of the watch company created various industrial manufacturers in Elgin and neighboring villages along the river.

24 Ibid, “Railroads.”
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
Elgin in the 1910s was generally prosperous. The U.S. Census noted 25,976 residents in 1910, making Elgin the fifth-largest city in Illinois, and estimated 27,485 in 1914. Old buildings were razed for newer ones and industrial growth spurred new businesses and plants. The Commercial Club, founded in 1908, had the mission of attracting industry to the city, but at first only attracted one long lasting company, the Western Thread Company. The Commercial Club, renamed Elgin Association of Commerce, had more success after World War I.

The freight railroad connections continued to facilitate industry in Elgin, but the Aurora, Elgin and Chicago Railway Company, an electric railroad, carried passengers between the three cities using heavy third-rail cars. The company also operated light rail trolleys inside of Elgin in a streetcar system. Like elsewhere in the US, automobiles were in high demand. Although most local dealers purchased cars from Detroit, multiple factories in Elgin dabbled in car production at the turn of the century. Because of car travel, in 1917, the state funded the paving of many main roads, such as Route 31, a well-traveled north-south route.

Plan of Chicago and its Influence On the Plan of Elgin

After the success of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, the Commercial Club hired Daniel Burnham, a Club member, to create a general plan for the whole city. Burnham and his young associate, Edward H. Bennett, took three years to research and design what became the
Plan of Chicago, published in June 1909. Bennett was the lead designer on the Plan of Chicago while Burnham led the political and financial implementation efforts. The plan is considered a landmark in planning due to its private-sector funding, grand vision and long-lasting implementation. After Burnham’s death, Bennett became the face of the Plan of Chicago and acted as an advisor to the Chicago Plan Commission for twenty years.

In 1917, the Elgin Commercial Club hired Edward Bennett to design a plan for the city. By hiring Bennett, Elgin knowingly invested in the expertise that made the Plan of Chicago successful. The businessmen of Elgin most likely heard of the progress and publication of the Plan of Chicago. If the Elgin Commercial Club did not have direct ties to the members of the Chicago Commercial Club, the Elgin businessmen would have at least known about the Plan of Chicago through newspaper coverage of the publication and implementation.

After the Plan of Chicago, Bennett set up his own firm and continued to create comprehensive plans for cities across North America, such as Minneapolis, Portland, Detroit, Ottawa, and nearby Illinois cities Highland Park, Joliet, Lake Forest, and Winnetka. Bennett later planned Federal Triangle in Washington, DC. As noted by David L.A. Gordon, Bennett’s plans continued in the same City Beautiful style, with trademark inclusions of downtown civic centers and analysis of transportation and park systems. Bennett also advocated for land use designation through his plans, which he called “districting.” All of these Bennett signatures are included in the Plan of Elgin.

40 Ibid.
43 Ibid, 232.
Contents of the Plan of Elgin

The Plan of Elgin begins with caution: “This report is general in scope.” Bennett writes that this plan is to present the current conditions and the possibility of normal growth in Elgin, not to create a far reaching vision. Recognizing the constraints of his study and the possible implementation, most likely from his past seven years of experience, Bennett cautiously sets out expectations for the primary reader of the plan, the Mayor. Bennett may have also written these expectations as a preemptive defense from the critiques of City Practical. By writing a general plan that purposefully recommended further studies by technical experts, Bennett could leave the scientific study to others better suited for those roles, and he could continue writing plans based on his design strengths.

Bennett sets up the problem: growth. Elgin had grown tremendously from 1835-1890, but had tapered off in 1900. Bennett’s graphs show two possible scenarios: an annual growth of 2% through 1960, and a possible steeper growth of 3% through 1960 if industrial activity increased. Based on the current densities of Elgin, Bennett draws out an area which will be needed to hold the possible 65,000 Elginites in 1960. The problem of growth also becomes a social problem. The introduction of the plan states that the improvements and results will prevent the “intolerable conditions” of larger cities and will create the “maximum of health, happiness, and efficiency” for the citizens of Elgin. Bennett then lays out his suggested improvements in categories from large to small proposals and includes example maps and images from other cities to support and illustrate his ideas.

---

44 Appendix A shows Bennett’s map of “General Improvements.”
45 Bennett, Plan of Elgin, 9.
46 Ibid, 12.
47 Bennett, Plan of Elgin, 16b.
48 Ibid, 9.
Bennett proposes “districting,” or land use, as a way to stabilize real estate values and separate heavy industry from residential areas so that factories can work efficiently together in shared spaces. In conjunction, he suggests land subdivision in standard sizes with front, rear, and side yard minimums.

Elgin’s “Railway Problem” is a significant part of the comprehensive plan. As a hub of multiple railroads, both sides of Elgin suffered from traffic due to train movement. This problem had been felt by Elginites long before (and after) Bennett’s Plan of Elgin. Bennett proposes routing all trains — both freight and passenger — on the west side and removing all grade crossings. In addition, Bennett suggests developing the streetcar lines farther west and north so that they can connect new residential areas to the developing industrial area on the south side of the city.

Anticipating the needs of new automobile drivers, Bennett focuses strongly on the creation of thoroughfares connecting existing streets together. The redesign of the street system also includes widening and paving streets and installing a sewage system. Bennett includes specific measurements, but also defers to the “City Engineer” to design a grading system.

Bennett emphasizes the importance of parks for children’s play and athletics. Besides suggesting the addition of playgrounds in schools and in new subdivisions, he plots a large new park in the southwest corner of the city, complementing Lord’s Park and Wing Park, the existing large parks on the east and west side, respectively. Bennett also suggests the acquisition of the Elgin Cemetery to be turned into a park and the development of the Elgin State Hospital.

50 Bennett, Plan of Elgin, 17.
51 Ibid, 14, 41.
52 Bennett, Plan of Elgin, 36.
grounds. Bennett’s plan includes a municipal center, which is a main carryover from the *Plan of Chicago* and a defining aspect of his and other City Beautiful plans. He suggests a larger and fireproof City Hall along main thoroughfare Chicago Street on the east side of the city at the end of Milwaukee Street, which would put the center at the top of the hill to be seen from all directions entering the city, but would also free up valuable land near the river for the city to sell for commercial use.

Overall, the plan makes concrete, plausible suggestions related to its goal of planning for growth and citizen well-being. By focusing on many areas, Bennett develops a comprehensive plan able to improve multiple facets of daily life. Implementation of this plan is a different story.

**Implementation of the *Plan of Elgin***

I have evaluated the *Plan of Elgin*’s implementation based on maps and content from the 2005 *Comprehensive Plan and Design Guidelines*. I could not find dates, even general eras, for the implementation of many aspects of the plan. A full study of the implementation between the 1917 plan and the succeeding 1959 plan would require in-depth research into area newspapers and city documents to find developments. This research would likely be unfruitful, as the majority of suggestions have never been implemented.

The Chicago and North Western tracks no longer exist on the east side of the river. As the Chicago and North Western freight system was abandoned in 1939, the tracks going through downtown possibly were removed sometime after that. The electric Aurora, Elgin and Chicago Railway tracks along the eastern river bank were removed sometime between 1991 and 2005 based on the texts of the 1991 Center City Master Plan and maps in the 2005 Comprehensive

---

53 Ibid, 27.
54 Milwaukee Street was renamed East Highland Avenue in 1984, per City of Elgin. “Street Name Changes.”
55 Bennett, *Plan of Elgin*, 27.
plan. The Fox River Bike Trail now goes along the electric railway’s path and is a main tourist draw in the summer months.

Although most thoroughfares were not created, those that were built were east-west connections on some of the busier roads such as McLean Boulevard and Shoe Factory Road. Had Bennett’s suggestions been implemented, north-south travel through Elgin would be much easier than it is today. Similarly, the parks that Bennett included were not developed. No park exists on the southwest side of city, and the Elgin Cemetery closed, with remains moving to Bluff City Cemetery on the southeast side. The site of Elgin Cemetery now holds Channing Elementary School, which has a small playground, but is not the large park Bennett imagined. The grounds of the Elgin State Hospital, renamed Elgin Mental Health Center, are still state property and are closed off to the public.

The strongest implementation of Bennett’s plan is the civic center. The center, set in a plaza along the east river bank and close to downtown, includes City Hall, the Hemmens Auditorium, the post office, the police department, the Illinois 2nd District Appellate Court, and a recreation and community center called the Centre of Elgin.

Without historical context, the Plan of Elgin may appear to be a failure -- after all, very little of the suggestions were implemented. This gap in imagined versus actualized is common of many plans in the pre-war period. Jon Peterson notes that without power to implement, city planning “settled for almost any action within reach.”57 Rather than judging plans based on their unattained ideals, Peterson concludes that these plans should be considered for their role in American urban development on behalf of the public interest. Like many cities with

---

57 Peterson, Birth of City Planning, 290.
comprehensive plans, Elgin adopted zoning laws in 1928 as suggested by Bennett,\textsuperscript{58} which is the only significant result of the \textit{Plan of Elgin}.

\textbf{Evaluation and Conclusions}

Even though very little of the \textit{Plan of Elgin} was implemented directly after the plan was published, I consider the plan valuable. The original framing of the plan as an approach towards growth was appropriate for the concerns of the industrial city, and because of that framing, the plan seems plausible and necessary, not impossible and lofty. Additionally, the framing of the plan shows that Bennett anticipated the growth of automobiles, something he may have observed in his work in many cities across the country.

The existence of this plan shows the civic mindedness of Elgin in the 1910s. As a city known for industrial output - especially its famous watches - the businessmen of the Commercial Club anticipated industrial and resulting population growth. Focusing on the quality of life for workers and their children, the Commercial Club chose an expert to make the city a functioning and desireable place to live. This tradition of civic mindedness is something I have personally observed when talking to Elginites. Pride for the past and optimism for economic growth keep Elgin looking forward. Through urban planning strategies such as historic preservation and affordable housing developments for artists, Elgin continues to develop its rich history in the planning field. Others may be surprised Bennett worked on a plan in a city in the middle of nowhere; to me and others that know the city, it's another example of Elgin's strong civic character.

\textsuperscript{58} Elgin Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee, Section 1 – Introduction in \textit{Comprehensive Plan and Design Guidelines}, 2.
Appendix A

*Plan of Elgin - “General Plan of Improvements”*
Bibliography


