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B. Making Good Plans

Chapter 37

Reading Through a Plan:

A Visual Theory of Plan Interpretation

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1. Introduction

While not every planner will create a plan during his or her professional career, many planners read plans on a regular basis.¹ In whatever form they may be issued, plans continue to constitute the major printed currency of the planning profession, perhaps because the public continues to see plans as meaningful expressions of future intentions for a place. The regular issuance of plans is one of the few consistencies in a profession that has seen a variety of changes during the past hundred years, and the continuing importance of plans means that their creation remains a critical responsibility of the planner. Much professional training in planning hinges on providing nascent planners with skills to develop the ideas contained within the plans and plan documents that communicate and promote those ideas. Generating plans is perhaps the central creative act of the planning profession, the act that “gave planning its name” (Neuman 1998, 216).

While plans are arguably the “planner’s most important product” (Alexander 2002, 191), an important corollary of this creative process—plan interpretation and the interpretation of planning ideas contained in plans—is less examined. Planners may read plans often, but the understanding or interpretation of plan content seems to be treated by the profession as something that is either too obvious or too unimportant to require explicit discussion. This interpretational shortage is unfortunate because plans communicate much

more than their recommendations' "plain sense" (Mandelbaum 1990, 350).

Recommendations are only one aspect of a rich variety of content and meaning that may be found reading through a plan.

Plans are also ideological artifacts—vessels for larger intellectual concepts that are likely to have emerged before a given plan and are likely to survive it as well. Plans also interpret these intellectual concepts, and may even constitute a critical contribution to their development. Plans may be seen as cultural artifacts whose content and appearance shed light on the society that produced them, and on the larger cultural artifact (the city or region) treated by the plan. Finally, plans are historical artifacts that occupy a place in the lives of the planning profession; the plan's subject neighborhood, city, or region; and the society(s) that produced the plan. Beyond "plain sense," a discerning reader may discover a panoply of readings and meanings in each and every plan.

This chapter calls for planners to "read through" plans, not simply grasp their essential ideas or means of implementation but also to perceive additional meanings: first, a plan is an *idea vessel* with a place in a larger intellectual sphere; second, a plan is a *statement on the social and political values* of its time; and third, a plan is a *part, albeit small, of the history of the planning profession, of the life of cities, and of society*. Plans are the major intellectual projects published within the planning profession, and they deserve nothing less than to be read through for all their meanings.

A first proviso: this chapter will privilege spatial plans, not because of any inherent spatial bias but because the history of planning, up to the present day, has privileged and continues to privilege spatial plans. These plans still capture much of the public's imagination and interest in planning and planning history, from historical accounts of the field's origin (e.g., Smith 2006), to major citywide planning efforts today (e.g., Kreyling et al. 2005). Though land use and spatial planning are hardly the only threads of planning practice or

planning thought (Campbell and Fainstein 2003 provide a complete survey), I will read plans issued in the land-use and spatial traditions as representatives, albeit imperfect, of the larger universe of plans.

A second proviso: this chapter will examine the interpretation of plans, not their evaluation nor their implementation. Understanding the multiple meanings and concepts contained within plans is a very different enterprise from deciding whether the ideas contained within the plans conform to a notion of “goodness” or not, or from understanding the degree to which a plan or plan idea has been realized (see chapters by Hoch and Hopkins, this volume).

2. Histories of Reading(s)

Much like the city itself, a plan may be read in multiple ways depending upon the reader’s perspective. Thus, the history of plan readings is as diverse as those individuals who have taken an interest in the city or in the planning profession. The literature on plan reading is not numerous, but it reflects diverse planning perspectives that bear mention.

Unsurprisingly, most planning practitioners and theorists have a vested interest in the profession’s healthy function, leading to more concern for plan evaluation than plan reading. Many evaluation scholars read plans to ascertain whether they conform to norms of good planning and to understand how to plan better next time. The plan evaluation’s purpose as “an approach to making better plans” is stated baldly by Baer (1997). Other authors interested in plan evaluation include Talen (1996), Hopkins (2001), Hoch (2002), Alexander (2002), Waldner (2004), Evans-Cowley and Gough (2009), and Berke and Godschalk (2009). Each establishes varying criteria to judge plan quality. These criteria are standards for improving professional effectiveness, as well as city and society, broadly considered.

Implementation is a particular interest of some plan evaluators. Implementation is a challenge (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973), and plan implementation is infrequent and

incomplete even in fertile planning contexts (Ryan 2006). But implementation is important to those who believe in planning. Talen (1996) sees implementation as central to evaluation, such that the “analysis of planning documents” is discounted as merely that “form of evaluation that takes place prior to implementation.” She argues that evaluating plan quality but ignoring implementation is “difficult to champion” (1996, 250). This perspective incompletely assesses the value of reading plans that are no longer available or appropriate for implementation, however. It also overvalues plans that are available but may not merit implementation. Plan quality may be only lightly connected to plan implementation, just as plan content may be only lightly connected to plan quality. Despite her skepticism of plan study unconnected to implementation, Talen does describe two threads of plan reading: “detailed assessments of what are deemed to be ‘model’ plans,” and “discourse analysis (and) deconstruction” readings (Talen 1996, 250). Both of these threads constitute important reading trajectories and I will examine them briefly.

The planning profession is only slightly over one hundred years old, and histories of planning began to emerge only in the 1960s. Reps’s (1965) “history of city planning” is actually more a history of ambitious urban visions in the preprofessional era; what is generally considered the beginning of American planning, the period between the Chicago World’s Fair and the 1909 Plan of Chicago, marks the end of Reps’s study. Reps lauds Burnham’s work, noting the plan’s “elaborate and beautifully printed volume, . . . intimate familiarity with the details of the city, . . . and “long and carefully prepared” implementation section (519). For Reps, a plan *document* is inseparable from plan *ideas*: both are monumental and admirable. The 1909 Chicago Plan was early and seminal, and it has received notice in almost every history of planning. One of the most recent studies (Smith 2006), written just before the plan’s centennial, is generally admiring, though Smith, unlike Reps, separates the plan document from the plan ideas. Even as he notes the document’s

“disciplined gorgeousness” (90) Smith recognizes that the plan may “neglect the needs of humane urban living” (96). This study is a paradigmatic “detailed assessment” (Talen 1996, 250), providing much information on the Chicago Plan’s historic context, but providing little additional ideological or theoretical perspective on the plan. Abbott’s (1991) assessment of Portland plans is similarly neutral.

Burnham and Bennett’s plans may be well known, but other historical perspectives on plan documents are few in number, most likely because few plan documents are perceived as having impacted the city as significantly as the 1909 plan did. (Cerdà’s 1867 *eixample* plan for Barcelona is another plan perceived in a similar positive light today, though this plan idea was not published in an equivalent document.) Another such study, Keating and Krumholz’s 1991 equity critique of downtown plans from the 1980s is animated not by any perceived historical significance of the plans examined but by the authors’ view of downtown plans as proxies for the larger neoliberal turn of planning during the era. Implementation and visual quality are irrelevant in the face of these plans’ “flawed” ideas that “ignored and aggravated” urban problems (1991, 150).

In 1990, an interesting if incomplete dialogue occurred in the pages of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. Two authors, one a planning theorist and the other a planning practitioner, were asked to comment on Philadelphia’s recently issued Plan for Center City, almost in the form of a literary criticism or book review. The first commentary, planning theorist Seymour Mandelbaum’s “Reading Plans” (1990), makes several points of interest, though they had little to do with the particular content of the plan (which was, after all, yet another of the neoliberal downtown plans decried by Keating and Krumholz [1991]). First, Mandelbaum argues that the “plain sense” of the plan is of little interest outside of the act of interpretation, and that plan interpretation in turn moves far beyond a plan’s plain sense. He then provides an effective if dispiriting explanation for the shortage of literature on

plan reading: plan readers are few and far between, and most readers either read because they have to or because they are interested in a small portion of the plan. He also provides a framework for plan interpretation, noting that a plan may be read as a “policy claim,” a “design opportunity,” or a “story.” Given that the plan is an urban design study, the second interpretation occupies the most space. The author concludes somewhat wistfully that the planners seem to think they have far more control over the larger forces influencing Philadelphia than he feels they actually do. The plan may thus be interpreted as an exercise in futility and obfuscation. He calls for an improved public plan-reading process, something that may have seemed unrealistic at the time but that has in fact arrived with the explosion of online commentary on seemingly every possible topic in the twenty-first century.

Much planning theory since 1990 has focused on planning as a discursive enterprise requiring adequate, equal, and coherent communication between diverse entities and individuals (Innes and Booher 2010). Communicative theorists have, therefore, taken an interest in the plan as a means of improving communication (Healey 1993; Khakee 2000). Given that a plan is by definition a communicative device, it is fair to demand that a plan contribute to improved communications. Methods for assessing such improvements are emerging as plans prioritize the improvement of communication through participation in planning processes (Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission [NIPC] 2005, 266–69). Judging plans on this basis alone, however, underexamines not only the plan’s degree of implementation, as Talen (1996, 250) noted, but runs the risk of overstating planning as little more than an exercise in communication. Amid the plethora of voices, the concepts delivered by plans seem to be diminished in meaning.

3. Toward a Visual Theory of Plan Interpretation

Plans are not only textual but also visual objects: maps, figures, and illustrations were central to Burnham’s plan and have remained such to the present day within the traditional land-use

and urban design core of planning. Mandelbaum's plan reading hinted that literary criticism might offer one approach to plan reading, but given the visual trajectory of plans, visual interpretation may offer another equally valid reading mode. Paintings are a long established means of visual expression, and their interpretation has long been a field of study by art historians. Just as paintings communicate visually, so do plans. How might a theory of art interpretation inform a theory of plan interpretation?

Planning scholars do not seem to have looked previously to art history or visual studies for a theory of plan interpretation. Perhaps this is because much planning scholarship has stemmed more from a policy (i.e., textual) origin than from a design (e.g., visual) origin; or because planning scholars have had little interest in the perspective that might be provided by a visual-studies-based plan interpretation. Those planning scholars with a visual background who have formulated theories or practices of visual interpretation have had little interest in the plan. Beginning with Lynch, whose studies of planning's visual aspect (1959, 1972, 1981) almost never mention plans per se, subsequent visually oriented works (Cullen 1971; Hosken 1972; Clay 1973; Nelson 1977; Jacobs 1984) have examined the city, not the plan. This literature may be thought of as theorizing "how to look" rather than "how to read." Within planning, the seeming subjectivity of visual interpretation has long alienated social scientists from designers (Dagenhart and Sawicki 1992), and the differences are far from finding resolution (Lilley 2000, 15–16). This chapter will not attempt to effect a reconciliation, but it will argue that a theory of plan interpretation derived from art history offers a robust and effective means of reading through a plan on multiple levels.

This theory begins with Panofsky's (1939) landmark *Studies in Iconology*. In this work, Panofsky describes three "strata" or "meanings" in art, which he related through an imaginary narrative of a man raising his hat in the street. Panofsky identified this action as having three meanings. The first meaning was *factual*: he recognized the "plain sense" of the

event (a man raising his hat) as corresponding to “certain objects (and actions) known to me from practical experience” (3–4). It was also *expressional*, in that Panofsky could recognize the emotional content of the event through relatively subtle clues that allowed him to discern the hat-raiser’s sincerity (recognizing expressional content would presumably have permitted him to recognize an insincere or ironic version of the same event).

Panofsky called the second level of meaning *conventional*, in which he recognized the event as being particular to the society and time in which the event occurred. He observed “that to understand (the event’s) significance . . . I must be familiar . . . with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions particular to a certain civilization” (Panofsky 1939, 4).

Lastly, Panofsky recognizes an even deeper, *intrinsic* meaning to the hat-raising event. This relatively insignificant action, he concludes, constituted part of a much larger portrait not only of the man’s individual personality but also of what could be called his “philosophy,” his “way of viewing things and reacting to the world,” which could be understood by “co-ordinating a larger number of similar observations and by interpreting them in connection to our general information as to the gentleman’s period, nationality, class, intellectual traditions, and so forth” (Panofsky 1939, 5).

Panofsky then translates the meanings derived from everyday experience into the world of art. He calls these *primary* or “natural subject” meanings; *secondary* or “conventional subject matter” meanings; and *intrinsic* or “content” meanings (Panofsky 1939, 5–8). To understand how these levels of meaning might apply to a work of art, let us examine a completely imaginary painting—say, from the Italian fifteenth century.

Our imaginary painting shows a male human figure, almost naked except for a cloth around his waist, standing against a stone wall. The figure is standing at the end of the wall, near the center of the canvas. The figure is pierced with arrows and appears to be in great

pain. Where the wall ends, one can see a landscape beyond. In the distance on a hill is a castle. The canvas comprises approximately half figure-against-wall and half landscape. Against the wall, to the figure's right, grows a small tree; and within the frame of vision of the painting, this tree is located approximately opposite the castle on the other side of the canvas. The canvas is painted in vivid, quick strokes, giving it a slight lack of detail and a sense of urgency.

A primary reading of this painting tells us exactly what is described above. One instantly and unconsciously recognizes the figure as human, the wall as a wall, and the landscape, castle, and tree. One can also instantly discern the figure's pain, and with a little study, one discerns the composition of the overall painting. The primary reading, in other words, reveals the identity of forms, objects, and events in the work and their spatial arrangement in the painting. Panofsky called these primary elements *pre-iconographical motifs*, since the primary reading provides no meaning beyond simple identification, or "plain sense."

With additional knowledge and insight—say, a general knowledge of fifteenth-century painting, we may perform a secondary reading that provides the meaning of these motifs, allowing us to recognize the painting as a depiction of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian. The painting is not exact, since our knowledge tells us that St. Sebastian was martyred by being tied to a tree, not against a wall, as in the painting. The significance of the small tree and the castle are as yet unclear. One may identify the painting landscape as being recognizably Mediterranean from the vegetation and climate depicted therein. Some of the motifs from the primary reading have become recognizable. Panofsky calls recognizable motifs *images*, and their combinations, *stories* or *allegories*. These secondary readings are "iconographical in the narrower sense of the word" (Panofsky 1939, 6) since particular meanings of the painting (though not all) are revealed.

Let us imagine that one examines further the life of the painter and his society.

Applying this additional knowledge to the painting permits a tertiary or intrinsic reading, clarifying the painting's meaning further. One may find, for example, that the painter took substantial liberties with martyrdom themes in the later period of his life, explaining the anomalous and otherwise inexplicable wall. The rapid style of the painting was also typical of the painter's late period, when his health was failing and precision was impossible. This does not explain the composition, which marks a distinct change from paintings completed before this one, and which indicates a marked growth in the painter's sense of symmetry and perspective. Nor does it elucidate the meaning of motifs such as the tree or the identity of the castle.

Providing additional intrinsic meanings for such a painting would be the work of art historians. If the painting was important, art historians would wish to understand what the castle represented, perhaps to reveal new information about the painter's life experiences or interests. The tree might arouse similar interest at the secondary level (what does it say about the allegory of St. Sebastian?) and at the intrinsic level (what might it tell us about the painter, about this period, or about fifteenth-century Italian society?).

Let us imagine what an analogous theory of plan interpretation might look like. Plans also have primary or literal meanings. The "plain sense" of a spatial plan conveys, first, a set of analyses or studies of a neighborhood, city, or region. These studies include both raw data and interpretations of this data. A plan then conveys future intentions for the subject area based on these interpretations, and it detail the actions, scope, cost, methods, and so on by which both the analyses and intentions were derived. While not every piece of information in a plan, nor every interpretation, can or should be accepted as fact, the content of a plan does represent a certain factual level of meaning. In other words, one accepts plan information,

true or not, as being what it purports to be. I call this first level of meaning in a plan *factual meaning*.

A plan also has additional meanings that require additional knowledge to perceive and interpret. All plans are influenced by political, social, economic, and physical contexts, though this influence is seldom spelled out explicitly. A plan is a reflection of these interrelated contexts at the same time as it may potentially influence them. Understanding a plan's many contexts, and applying those contexts to one's understanding of the content of a plan, provides a *contextual meaning*. A contextual meaning may not be explicit, or it may be obvious. An explicitly stated sustainability plan, for example, must by necessity be understood as part of the larger socioeconomic–political concept of sustainability existing at the time of the plan's creation.

Although some meanings may be available to a contemporary reader, additional meanings may only be discerned with the perspective of elapsed time in different settings: the history of a city's plans; the history of a city; the life of the plan author; or the history of the society that produced the plan. Even as a well-informed fifteenth-century observer of Italian paintings could not view a contemporary painting in historical perspective, a contemporary plan reader cannot understand the *temporal meaning* of a plan without the perspective provided by time and the observations and findings of other plan readers. An epithet like “innovative” or “groundbreaking,” which gives great meaning to a plan, has fuller meaning with the passage of time.

4. Reading through Three Plans

The remainder of this chapter attempts to contribute to an ordered, learnable mode of plan reading by examining three very different plans. The plans describe different-size cities (small, large, very large) during different periods of the past eighty years (1930s, 1960s, 2000s). All are physical, spatial plans, and they do not purport to be a sample but merely

illustrate how the visual theory of plan reading described above may be applied to plans from both the past and present day.

The Comprehensive City Plan for Dubuque, Iowa

A Factual Reading

The document, entitled a *Comprehensive City Plan* (Nolen), was published in September 1936. The plan appears attractive and high-quality (figure 37.1). It is brief—only forty-eight pages—but hardbound and printed on fine paper, and was well illustrated with photographs, street plans, and maps. It contains two special drawings: a foldout “public buildings and grounds plan” on vellum paper, and a large (24 by 48-inch) detached folding map of the city and vicinity (figure 37.2). The latter is labeled the “Master Plan” and was “one of a series of maps plans and reports [*sic*] comprising the city plan.”

<<insert figures 37.1 and 37.2 here>>

The author, John Nolen, well known as a “pioneer” of the planning profession (Hancock 1960) and a landscape architect, was nationally known by the time he was hired for the plan in 1930. His dramatic recommendations are conveyed by the cover, which shows proposals for the city’s downtown (figure 37.1). This decision—to reveal one of the plan’s primary concepts on its cover—displays confidence in the drama of the plan ideas and a desire to convey the scale of the changes being proposed. The plan thus succeeds in communicating an important message before it is even opened.

The plan explains a small city’s problems and the proposals to solve them. It is easy to understand because the map is the sole piece of information needed to understand the plan ideas, making the document a sort of appendix, providing additional explanations. The document spends little time on the plan’s formulation, history, rationale, and methodology; Nolen clearly did not feel a need to explain his decisions. “Survey” and “diagnosis” are mentioned as methods that led to recommendations, but are otherwise left unexplained—even

the plan's time frame is not mentioned. This conveys a sense of confidence and expertise on the author's part, but also a methodological secrecy that is at odds with the plan's welcoming cover.

The plan, primarily concerned with traffic flow and with open space, uses nineteen of its forty-eight pages to present solutions to these problems. It contains a great deal of local information, but both the problems and the proposals are presented, or framed, as standard, local manifestations of problems afflicting cities across the United States. Nolen is concerned that the city layout is inadequate both for automobile transportation and for meeting the necessary standards of recreation and education. Numerous statistical tables demonstrate substandard transportation and amenity levels.

The plan does not resolve these problems within the existing city. Constrained by hilly topography and by the existing street network, the city's fabric makes large-scale restructuring challenging, and the plan is therefore enthusiastic about developing outlying areas, where roadways and open space can be optimized. The plan suggests regional parkways and open spaces throughout the peripheral area, most of which actually lie beyond the city's political boundary. Apart from some widened streets to better access suburban areas, the existing city except downtown is unaltered. The plan does not project changes to the residential areas making up the rest of the existing city. The plan's tacit message is that the existing, pre-automobile-era city is inadequate, and that improved living requires suburbanization. To address the dysfunctional mix of commerce and industry downtown, the plan proposes new public buildings and reorganizes railroad and industrial land along the river, multiplying the city's industrial area many times over.

A Contextual Reading

This reading requires reflection on at least the outline of larger scale events occurring both inside and outside of cities and planning at the time of publication. Mainstream urban texts

like Hall (1988), Fogelson (2001), Schaeffer (1988), Mumford (1961), Scott (1969), and Isenberg (2004) illustrate a plan's consistency with urban development and planning trends of the time. In 1936, the country was in the midst of the Great Depression, when downtown development stagnated and industrial production slowed. Midwestern cities like Dubuque, Iowa, were heavily dependent upon industry and suffered particularly badly, but automobile ownership and suburbs were expanding despite the crisis.

A contextual reading shows that the plan is both pragmatic and utopian, promoting some existing socioeconomic and physical trends while recommending the reversal of others. The plan acknowledges the reality of suburbanization through its parkway recommendations, and simultaneously denies the reality of industrial decline by proposing dramatic infrastructural shifts downtown. This dual accommodation was likely a pragmatic decision on Nolen's part. Dubuque perhaps commissioned the plan because it felt the twin pull of suburbanization, which drew people away from the city, and decline, which left many central-city areas abandoned. Both suburban and central-city constituencies doubtless demanded attention from the city administration, and planners such as Nolan may have been asked to provide solutions to both populations and both problems (sprawl and decline).

A contextual reading also indicates and identifies odd geographical and topical lacunas in the plan. It displays little interest in the form of the suburban settlements that its proposed parkways would generate. Nor does it display interest in the dilapidated older areas of housing that must have constituted much of the city. The easiest explanation is that Nolen had no time or budget for solutions for these areas. Yet the civic center hints that detailed proposals may have been of greater interest to the plan framers, or planner, than others, leaving issues like older housing suppressed or ignored. Understanding the reasons for these lacunas requires further research.

A Temporal Reading

The Dubuque plan was published over seventy years ago, and a temporal reading of the plan may be challenging because it demands a comprehensive understanding of not only Dubuque but also of cities and planning in the United States more broadly. The former is likely to be difficult for readers located outside of the Dubuque area, yet local knowledge is particularly important for a temporal reading. Without access to local information, it is difficult to know, for example, whether Dubuque issued plans before or after this one. An Internet search reveals at least one master plan dating from the late 1990s (City of Dubuque 2008). But understanding the plans that lie between requires additional research that most readers will not have the time or interest to undertake.

Instead, it is much easier to discern the degree to which the plan ideas were implemented. Aerial photographs available on the Internet indicate that much of the plan's vision seems to have been realized, particularly along the waterfront and in parkways at the city's edge. It is harder to know whether the plan played a direct role in these changes, but it seems that both pragmatic and utopian aspects of the plan were in part realized. However, contemporary aerial photographs also show that much suburban settlement occurred that was not directly portrayed in the plan, proving the lacuna observed in the contextual reading.

A temporal reading tells us that the plan may have been both utopian and pragmatic because it lay between two eras of urban growth and two approaches to urban planning. The 1930s and the Depression occurred between periods of explosive urban growth motivated by industry and technology and urban decline and suburban expansion motivated by the automobile and by technological and economic changes. The plan both did and did not foresee these changes. Some proposals, such as the union railroad station or civic center, are holdovers from Beaux-Arts planning and are merely smaller versions of those produced in the 1909 Plan of Chicago. These ideas were dated if not obsolete by 1936, though perhaps they were more current when the plan was written in 1930–31. Other ideas, such as the

extensive parkways lacking any outline for suburban growth, seem naïve if not irresponsible. Yet the plan may also have been well timed. The Depression marked the beginning of a fertile period for public planning, and the plan's timing may have enabled the city to take advantage of these policies over the ensuing decades, permitting realization of the plan's ideas. The plan was itself conceived at the very beginning of the Depression, so explicitly taking advantage of federal funds was likely not Nolen's intention. Thus, the plan's timing may have been more due to luck than to anything else.

The plan's brevity seems inconsistent with today's understanding of city planning as a complex enterprise requiring significant data gathering and public review. Nolen was clearly accepted as an expert who had little apparent accountability to citizens, although the plan's preface shows that formal plan approval took five years. Yet the plan's brevity and efficiency are also refreshing. Its ideas are clear and confident, and they are attractively presented and bold in scope, if they are not locally derived or innovative. The plan exudes confidence, reflecting its well-known consultant and well-trodden recommendations. Perhaps this self-assuredness encouraged implementation of the plan. It is a boilerplate Depression-era plan that confronts only some of what I now consider the full range of plan responsibilities (where is equity?). Yet, this conceptual familiarity may also have encouraged implementation by the small-town government of Dubuque.

Master Plan 1964 City of Newark, New Jersey

A Factual Reading

Newark's *Master Plan* is a large document—11 by 11 inches—printed in inexpensive paperback (Newark Central Planning Board 1964). The plan cover (figure 37.3) is a military green that reveals little about its contents or intention, and its back cover is similarly blank. The publication format and design provide the plan with an air of economy and reticence. Neither welcomes the reader nor encourages him or her to peruse the plan. Unlike the

welcoming, almost cartoonish cover of the Dubuque Plan, Newark's reveals little to the casual reader except its officialdom. The document is substantial in length—126 pages— and is well illustrated. Its only special feature is an interior folding map in color showing proposed land uses. Unlike the Dubuque Plan, where the term “plan” refers both to the document and to a proposed physical design represented by a large map, “plan” here refers only to the document itself.

<<insert figure 37.3 here>>

The plan is illustrated with numerous black and white photographs, color maps, and the occasional site plan. Photographs show both typical scenes in the city and signs of progress. Images of children playing, busy department stores, and flowers blooming are intermingled with documentation of concrete pipes and construction sites. The latter clearly represent the implementation of projects, though they are not keyed to actual plan recommendations. A few photographs refer specifically to existing problems like traffic congestion. The overall effect of these photographs is confusing. Are they meant to show that Newark is already a successful place (why then would one need a plan?), that progress is already under way (again, why would one need a plan?), or that the city is full of problems (thus requiring a plan).

The plan features several maps (figure 37.4). Each is topical, showing a facility inventory (schools, parks, etc.) and suggestions for the future location of new facilities. These maps are at least partially future oriented, but they are abstract and diagrammatic, showing the city at a small scale and indicating little about the nature or need for these facilities. The reticent plan graphics sharply contrast the almost childlike clearness of the Dubuque Plan, which requires that the plan reader actually read the text in order to understand the plan. Given the length and unwelcoming appearance of the document, this makes the plan's

suggestions more difficult to perceive. Mandelbaum (1990, 35) notes ruefully that “no one reads” most plans. The same may have been true for the Newark plan.

<<insert figure 37.4 here>>

If one does read the text, one finds it to be both an inventory and a proposition for new facilities and land uses. The plan emphasizes an “analysis of the potential . . . for growth,” showing growth to be a central concern. Yet, the plan states that Newark is likely to grow only marginally over the next twenty years. It also concludes that employment and housing will increase *if* the city keeps pace with the region. The plan seems to be attempting to persuade us that the city will grow instead of shrink, but its own statistics inform us of the opposite—population, employment, and housing had been declining for decades in 1960s Newark. A reader alert to this fact will no doubt wonder how the plan proposes reversing a decades-long decline.

Further reading of the plan is not reassuring. It inventories and projects different conditions of land use, “traffic and transportation,” “community facilities” (parks, schools, etc.), and public buildings, with maps of existing and forecasted facilities. Each is treated differently; land use is significantly reconfigured, but many public buildings are closed, while open space and roadways are increased dramatically. The overall impression is somewhat confusing. If the city is not growing, why are large-scale changes needed? The plan does not provide an answer to this question—the need for large-scale change is assumed. Clearly, there is no single vision for the city in this plan. Instead, the *Master Plan* is an aggregation of different change projections that seem to have little relationship to each other.

Why might this be? Perhaps the plan is intended for disparate audiences, like parks officials or traffic engineers. But then why contain these within a single document? The nature of the plan makes the *Master Plan* seem like a fiction. Again, this could not be more different from the Dubuque Plan, which was a single, comprehensive urban design. The

authoritative, difficult-to-read master plan is unmasked as a collection of inventories and projections for different sectoral audiences. The plan is divided, and it is also confronting a conundrum: how to plan in a city that is not growing and may decline. The plan does not settle this conundrum successfully, and it is difficult to imagine how it might do so. The document does not seem to project either significant change or a vision for that change.

A Contextual Reading

A contextual reading is eased by the relatively recent date of the plan, the large size of the city, and the well-known circumstances of the time. The 1960s were a time of great difficulty for older cities, including Newark, and the plan was issued amid these troubles. Things would get worse: Newark had race riots in 1967 in which over twenty people were killed and millions of dollars in property destroyed (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968, 56–69). As the plan stated, Newark’s population, income, jobs, and housing were all in free-fall during the 1960s. The city was in the midst of a severe crisis.

In 1964, major federal programs were in full swing to construct interstate highways and reconstruct “blighted” areas. This indicates why certain types of change but not others are projected in the plan. Federal money was available for highways and public facilities, and the plan indicates that Newark intended to take advantage of those funds. The plan itself may have been issued in order to take advantage of funds or even provide a rationale for federal spending.

The clinical, dry appearance of the plan is ironic. Newark was in the middle of tumultuous change: the staid plan masks a troubled place with economics, population, race, and infrastructure dramatically intermingling. In context, I can see that these events, like the suburbanization and industrial decline of Dubuque, were independent of the Newark *Master Plan*. The plan is clearly uncertain about how to address this change. It simultaneously projects change that is plan independent (highways), suggests change that is unlikely to occur

(population stability and economic recovery), and ignores other change that is happening (racial change, poverty, and inequality). The plan confuses Topic (growth or decline?), Message (change? how?), and Content (what kind of plan?), leading one to seriously question what the planners were really thinking, which ideas they felt responsible for, and which ideas they really believed in. The plan appears inadequate to confront the deeply troubled context of the city.

A Temporal Reading

Newark and other older cities underwent substantial sea changes in racial composition, economic vitality, and population in the decades after 1964. The authoritative appearance of Newark's *Master Plan* masks not only confusion but also stunningly inaccurate forecasts. The city changed dramatically and for the worse (Tuttle 2009). The city's population declined from 405,220 in 1960 (Newark Central Planning Board 1964, 111) to 281,402 in 2006 (U.S. Department of Commerce 2010), rather than the 406,000–416,000 growth projected by the plan. Employment declined even more sharply: manufacturing fell from the 75,000–80,000 cited in the plan to only 17,627 in 1995 and 11,000 in 2005, a far cry from the plan's most pessimistic projection of 66,000. The plan's projected Newark—economy restored, population stabilized, and city reborn—did not come to pass.

The Newark *Master Plan* may not be a complete failure—additional research could track whether particular facilities were perhaps constructed as the plan recommended. However, it does not seem to have fulfilled its larger purpose of showing Newark's "most appropriate course of development for the next 15–20 years" (Newark Central Planning Board, 1964, 3). One can sympathize with the planners charged with projecting the future of a declining city. Caught in a bind, to either project additional decline or to forecast improvement, they opted for the latter, the politically acceptable solution. That the plan could not confront the severe urban problems of mid-twentieth-century America is not totally the

fault of planners who may have been politically unable to speak the truth or intellectually incapable of understanding it. But the plan's distinct lack of connection to reality speaks volumes about the larger changes that the planning profession, and the conception of the master plan, underwent around 1970 (Friedmann 1971; Neuman 1998, 208). In retrospect, the Newark *Master Plan* is not only a tombstone for industrial Newark but also for the "master planning" model that was so closely linked to the infrastructure and neighborhood transformations shown in the plan.

2040 Regional Framework Plan for Northeastern Illinois

A Factual Reading

The *Framework Plan*, authored by the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC 2005), is actually two plans: a softbound document with 279 pages (Figure 37.5) and a separate summary document with only seventeen pages, and a compact disc with "the full plan text." The summary plan is clearly meant to increase access to the rather unwieldy full plan in something of the same manner as *Wacker's Manual* (Moody 1915) democratized the Plan of Chicago (Smith 2006, 123–25). Both the long and short plan documents contain a detachable "regional framework" map (Figure 37.6), but neither document mentions the existence of the other in its text, and the publication dates of the plans are hard to locate. Both documents are available on the Internet (2009) in PDF format, but were no longer available online by mid-2011 for reasons that will be explained below.

<<insert figure 37.5 here>>

<<insert figure 37.6 here>>

The length of the full plan raises serious readability questions. Three hundred pages is a serious commitment of time and energy for any reader, and such great length does not make the plan accessible to a wide public audience. Was the plan intended as a technical document for a specialized audience? The summary document indicates that NIPC recognized the

unreadable nature of the full plan even as they published it. Why is the plan so long? Doubtless a large volume of information was required to treat Chicago's extremely large, sprawling metropolitan area. Perhaps the plan document was designed as a lexicon, to be consulted episodically but never intended to be read in full, as Mandelbaum suggests for other plans (1990, 350–51). Another, less optimistic possibility is that the plan is simply verbose, containing more information than it needs to communicate. The plan summary proves that the plan's ideas can be discerned in only seventeen pages and a framework map. This indicates that the full plan may be superfluous.

A dedicated reader who pores through the longer document will find that the plan is clearly organized and conveys its structure quickly. An "executive summary" is followed by two brief chapters (9 and 10 pages) explaining methodology and reiterating central ideas. A subsequent much longer chapter (almost 70 pages) explains these ideas in detail. After two more brief chapters with additional methodology and some institutional issues, the second half of the plan (almost 130 pages) discusses implementation. The plan framers clearly wish the reader to understand the plan's ideas, since they are repeated three times in the plan (and again in the summary plan). But implementation is the plan's focus, seemingly more important than the plan ideas themselves. Why was NIPC particularly concerned with implementation? Whatever the reason, the plan's wildly different chapter lengths convey a sense that NIPC inconsistently valued its content. These inconsistencies do not make the document any easier to read and they hint at an inconsistent planning process.

The central plan ideas ("centers, corridors, and green space") propose a spatial structure for the Chicago region. While the genesis of these ideas is not stated, the plan describes a four-year public outreach process that included hundreds of participants. This extensive public process diffuses and democratizes the authorship of the plan ideas, implying that many of them were generated by the public. Yet NIPC must have generated some of the

ideas; implementation details, for example, are unfamiliar to the public and require technical expertise to conceive. Ultimately, the authors do not claim authorship of the plan ideas, but they take responsibility for them by publishing them under NIPC's name.

The plan ideas are stated as prescriptions. Yet, their prescriptive nature is ambiguous, since they are also described as existing conditions in northeastern Illinois. Since the plan ideas already exist to some extent, the plan seems to propose a rearrangement of existing spatial features rather than new or unknown features. The plan, for example, identifies 292 "centers." Is this an existing number of centers (in 2005), or is it the ideal number in 2040 (the "buildout date" of the plan)? I may assume the latter, but cannot be sure. This confusion between description (of what already is) and prescription (for what should be) applies to each of the plan's central concepts. The only plan prescription that is clearly differentiated from existing conditions is the arrest of suburban sprawl in the region's outermost areas and its preservation as agricultural space. The distinctively prescriptive nature of this idea indicates that it was a favorite of the plan authors.

The plan's core ideas are clearly stated, but the distinction between the plan's recommended future and a "no-build" or no-plan future is ultimately confusing. That is, the plan's projected future appears little different from what would occur in its absence. Does the plan really matter, then? The plan does not acknowledge or address this existential question, except if one reads the plan's publication as an assertion that "planning matters!" The plan's interest in implementation is also not aided by the confusion between prescription and description. Fuzzy plan recommendations argue against rather than for implementation. Why spend effort implementing something that might happen anyway?

A Contextual Reading

Because the plan is more or less contemporary to the time of this writing (2005 and 2011), a contextual reading demands little historical knowledge. Both the excessive length and the

tepid content of the plan reflect the framers' desire to satisfy a large, diverse, and fractious constituency. The plan exists in a time when public outreach is a required and necessary part of the process, and planning is seen as a complex effort involving public input and consensus building (Arnstein 1969; Forester 1989; Healey 1992). Consensus in a large, diverse setting is difficult to achieve, and strong recommendations are apparently even more difficult, as the plan indicates. Otherwise, it is consistent with contemporary planning wisdom. Each of the plan's ideas like "promote livable communities" and "promote walking and bicycling as alternative modes of travel" are familiar concepts that are advocated at a nationwide level by many individual planning practitioners and academics under the smart-growth banner (Burchell, Listokin, and Galley 2000; see chapters by Talen and Song, this volume). Smart growth is in turn consistent with the architectural and planning movement of New Urbanism (Duany et al. 2001). Critics of both movements describe them as deeply conservative (Southworth 2003), and NIPC's framework plan is certainly conservative.

This conservatism may have resulted from method as much as ideology. Charged with producing a spatial strategy for a large metropolitan region, NIPC doubtless felt the need to build consensus and satisfy a wide range of constituencies. A lengthy plan is less likely to be read, but it is more likely to contain something for everyone. A plan with uncontentious recommendations is less likely to offend sensitive parties and to build a wider support base. Without my speculating too far as to the effect of public participation on plan recommendations, the plan's extensive public outreach probably pushed it toward conservative, uncontentious recommendations rather than dramatic spatial and regional shifts à la Burnham and Bennett. Outreach resulted in a bigger plan with many more participants, but it also produced a less interesting plan.

The weak recommendations of the plan contrast with its energetic implementation. But why do weak recommendations require significant action? Under ordinary circumstances

they would not. However, if the true goal of the plan is not to implement recommendations but to sustain interest in regional-scale planning, this focus becomes more understandable. By creating a framework plan, NIPC also rationalizes its own existence. The existence of a plan with weak recommendations but strong implementation creates a strong rationale for NIPC to exist as the implementer. This is particularly valuable in an era of widespread fiscal crisis in state government and of skepticism in “big government” more broadly. NIPC did not totally succeed—it was merged with the region’s transportation agency in 2007 in a cost-saving operation—but one of the new agency’s first decisions was to formally adopt the NIPC-authored framework plan (NIPC 2007, p.4)

Even though the NIPC plan is near-contemporary, enough events have occurred subsequently to allow us to perform a temporal reading of the document. Although the new Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) adopted NIPC’s plan upon its absorption of that agency in 2007, CMAP began its own regional planning process in September 2007 (CMAP, 2011, p. 28). This resulted in the issuance of the second Chicago-area regional plan in five years, *GO TO 2040*, in October 2010. This latter document, apart from any individual merits that it may have, is a full-scale replacement—an obliteration, even—of the NIPC plan, evidently for political purposes. The NIPC plan’s online unavailability makes more sense, for the plan was obsolete within five years of its issuance. In this sense, NIPC’s plan timing, coming directly before its institutional author’s dissolution, could not have been worse. We can thus read the NIPC plan’s concentration on implementation as both futile and poignant: With all its detail, the plan ignored the one thing—politics—that would be its Achilles’ Heel.

Both the NIPC and its successor plan were written in a time when economic, environmental, and social trends were reactivating central cities, revitalizing existing town centers, and pushing riders toward mass transit. Since at least 1980, the middle class has been

returning to Chicago, making it a very attractive place to live by the early twenty-first century (City of Chicago 2002, 2.9). The plan's pro- "center" attitude and pro- "open space" approach are consistent with the larger history of late-twentieth-century trends that benefited existing cities and to some extent mitigated sprawl. The NIPC plan acknowledges those trends and uncritically accepts and advocates them in turn.

The framework plan may also be read as a tentative return to "master planning" in the wake of the disastrous changes of the 1960s (e.g., Hall 1980, 56–86), an era when such enterprises had been broadly discredited (Friedmann 1971). This return to master planning is consistent with larger shifts in the planning profession (Neuman 1998). One can imagine that NIPC might want their plan to avoid alienating suspicious or mistrustful constituents by speaking softly with uncontentious ideas. The plan seems to have achieved consensus, and there was little criticism or even discussion of the plan when it was issued—but this quiet return of the master plan was achieved at the expense of the plan's creativity.

5. Reading Lessons

Perhaps the most salient conclusion to be drawn from the factual readings is how information may be found in diverse aspects of a plan document. Our factual readings drew conclusions from such seemingly superficial features as the document design to unarguably important features like plan recommendations. Planners are trained to analyze recommendations more than graphic design, yet in each case the latter was deeply communicative. Each of the plans' covers, for instance, mirrored the clarity and intensity of the plans' recommendations. In our three cases, it was fair to at least partly judge a plan by its cover. But ultimately our factual reading depended on carefully looking at the plan— both document appearance and plan graphics—carefully reading it and examining and understanding the relationship between graphic features and text. In each of cases, the reading revealed aspects of the plan and the plan framers that were not readily apparent.

Our contextual readings informed us that each of our plans conformed strongly to social, economic, and political forces of the time, as well as to contemporary urban design and planning conventions. None was a “groundbreaking” plan when compared with its peers or with professional practice of the time. In this sense, each plan is what a planner of the time might have predicted the plan would contain—no surprises! Contextual conformance confirms that plans cannot be isolated from their settings and that plan recommendations are as much a product of contemporary urban conditions, social norms, and professional conventions as they are of plan-specific “survey and diagnosis,” to use Nolen’s words. And if every plan is a product of its time, should one look for plan quality only in its skillful execution of contemporary concerns (parkways in 1936, highways in 1964, outreach in 2005), or perhaps also in its degree of innovation—that is, its introduction of concepts, aims, or methods that have not previously appeared in plans? Innovation is highly valued in design, but it occupies little space in contemporary planning discourse. Yet innovative ideas do occasionally occur in plans (Ryan 2006, 48–49, 60). Further exploration of the occurrence and value of innovation in plans and planning is badly needed.

Much as Panofsky observed in painting, our temporal plan readings show that plans have changed dramatically over time, reflecting changes in practice that are not visible through contextual readings. Just as the contextual readings indicated consistency with contemporary plan norms, many of the changes in the planning profession evidenced by the three plans are consistent with current assessments of planning history. Our plan-reading sample, for example, while admittedly small and imperfect, may be interpreted as illustrating a shift from a planning profession governed by expert designers, to one governed by remote “out of touch” technocrats, to one governed by humble and sincere, if unconvincing, communicators. This reading is consistent with the “master narrative” of planning presented

in histories of the field (e.g., Hall 1998), as well as with current planning theory (e.g., Innes and Booher 2010).

However, temporal readings also permit plan readings that differ from the conventional wisdom. Nolen's plan, for example, seems eager to communicate, almost to advertise, its recommendations. This is very far from the stereotype of the remote master architect that one may derive from plans like Burnham and Bennett's. Nolen may have been a paradigmatic expert planner, but his plan is much more concise, and readable, than the NIPC plan. Such differences are usually of interest only to historians, but temporal readings provide perspective on both the past and the present. The differences between Nolen's plan and NIPC's, for example, provoke thought about the meaning, perhaps even efficacy, of the communicative ideal currently dominating planning theory. If a concise, accessible plan provided by an expert planner (who was also a designer) is "bad," does this in turn make NIPC's plan "good"? Hardly. We have seen that the plan is both unwieldy and uncommunicative, although process based. Temporal plan readings are both diachronic in nature, permitting the present to be seen as the current end of a linear narrative, and kairological (Zukin 2010, 101), permitting the present to exploit the past without directly acknowledging it. In this fashion, NIPC alludes to the glory of Chicago's Burnham and Bennett-era planning while simultaneously evading the negative connotations that would come from any such direct comparison. Temporal plan readings, like Panosfky's intrinsic readings of art, permit us to discern the meaning of plans in the fullest sense currently available to us. The examples above are only the beginning of a variety of interpretations that may be derived from even a small plan sample, and many more insights await those planreaders interested in conducting temporal readings of plans.

Any discussion of plan reading is remiss without mentioning the transformative changes that will occur in the coming decades as the mode of presenting and sharing

information shifts from the printed to the electronic word. Will the plan, as a series of printed pages, become obsolete, or will it, as is more likely, shift to being primarily digital? The NIPC's plan takes some early steps in this direction: it is available online, and the summary version of the plan is in part published as digital media (a compact disc). Yet other communicative aspects of the plan already seem dated in 2010, including the long outreach period preparatory to publication of the "final" plan. Perhaps in the future advanced social media techniques will permit both instant and constant popular feedback on planning ideas, resulting in a perpetually shifting series of public imperatives. Is the plan, a set of fixed ideas for the future, even relevant in a time when our collective desires change almost by the second? This question is not easy to answer, but it does seem likely that plan reading will become ever more common even as plans promise to change beyond recognition. These welcome changes will transform the planning profession, but whether they will transform the face of our cities remains to be seen.

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Note

1. Not all plans are identical. In fact, they are diverse; not only are plans issued by a variety of entities, with public planning departments making up only a small fraction of these, but they treat a wide range of topics and spaces.

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Figure 37.1

The cover of John Nolen's 1936 *Plan for Dubuque* is cheerful and even cartoonish. It shows a portion of the plan's waterfront vision, effectively marketing one of the document's principal ideas.

Figure 37.2

A section of Nolen's master plan map for Dubuque. The plan leaves the existing city mostly alone, but widens the streets leading to as-yet-undeveloped suburban areas.

Figure 37.3

The cover of the Newark 1964 *Master Plan* is reticent, revealing nothing about the plan's content but listing a bewildering variety of authors. It unfortunately conforms to stereotypes of this era's planning being authoritative and even inhumane.

Figure 37.4

Newark's "Parks and Recreation Plan" within the 1964 plan shows eight new parks (visible as green triangles) but does not specify the size, nature, or rationale for these facilities. In a declining city unable to expand, the plan spends more time inventorying existing facilities than projecting new ones.

Figure 37.5

NIPC's 2005 *Framework Plan* for the Chicago region shows city, (prewar) suburb, and farm on its cover. Is this a description, a prescription, or both? Interestingly, auto-oriented postwar suburbs, probably the majority of the region's built environment, are not shown.

Figure 37.6

The NIPC plan's projected regional future aggregates ideas derived from community meetings and outreach. The resulting "regional framework" seems little different from today's region. This may be a reassuring scenario to citizens weary or cautious of change, but it is also an unlikely one given the explosive sprawl of the past six decades.