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Reading Through a Plan

A Visual Interpretation of What Plans Mean and How They Innovate

Brent D. Ryan

**Problem:** Planners may read plans often, but the profession continues to view the interpretation of plan content as something that is either too obvious or too unimportant to require explicit discussion. Plans are seldom adequately interpreted. This is regrettable because plans contain a rich variety of content and meaning.

**Purpose:** This article calls for planners to “read through” plans, not just to grasp their essential ideas or the means of implementing those ideas, but also to perceive additional levels of meaning relating to a) a plan’s place within a larger intellectual sphere, b) a plan’s statement on the social and political values of the time, and c) a plan as a part of the history of the planning profession and the life of cities.

**Methods:** I propose a visual approach to plan reading descended from Panofsky’s (1939) theory of iconology and use this to examine three very different plans that describe different size cities (small, large, very large) during different periods over the past 80 years (the 1930s, 1960s, 2000s). I analyze three levels of meaning in each plan: its factual meaning, or “plain sense” (Mandelbaum, 1990); its contextual meaning, or relation to political, social, economic, and physical conditions; and its temporal meaning, or setting within the scope of observations made by other plan readers in the perspective of elapsed time.

**Results and conclusions:** Factual readings show that information may be found in diverse aspects of a plan document, from seemingly superficial aspects like its cover to unarguably central elements such as recommendations. Factual readings depend on understanding the relationships among different elements, and reveal information about the plan and its framers that may not otherwise be readily apparent. Contextual readings show us that plan recommendations are as much a product of contemporary conditions and norms as they are of plan-specific “survey and diagnosis” (Nolen, 1936). This raises the question of whether plan quality is to be judged only in terms of skillful execution of concerns of the day or whether innovation is also important. Temporal readings reveal that plans and planning have changed dramatically over time, simultaneously confirming and questioning the conventional wisdom of planning history.

**Takeaway for practice:** Many planners read plans on a regular basis, and 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 planning training hinges on providing nascent planners with skills to develop the ideas contained within plans and plan documents. Generating plans is perhaps the central creative act of the planning profession, the act that “gave planning its name” (Neuman, 1998, p. 216).

While plans are arguably “planners’ most important product” (Alexander, 2002, p. 191), important corollaries of this creative process, plan interpretation and interpretation of planning ideas contained in plans, are less often examined. Planners may read plans frequently, 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, p. 350). Recommendations are only part of a rich variety of content and meaning that may be found by reading through a plan.

**Keywords:** plans, plan interpretation, planning theory, plan reading, plan evaluation

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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 interpret these intellectual concepts and may even constitute a critical contribution to their development. In addition, plans are cultural artifacts whose content and appearance shed light on both the society that produced them and the larger cultural artifact (the city or region) treated by the plan. Finally, plans are historical artifacts that occupy a place in the planning profession, the plan’s subject neighborhood, city, or region, and the society or societies that produced the plan. Beyond “plain sense,” a discerning reader may discover a panoply of additional readings and meanings in each and every plan.

This article calls for planners to formally read through plans, not simply to grasp their essential ideas, but also to perceive their additional functions: first, as an idea vessel in the context of a larger intellectual sphere; second, as a statement on the social and political values of its time; and third, as part, although 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 article privileges spatial plans, not because of any inherent spatial bias, but because the history of planning up to the present day has privileged spatial plans. These plans continue to stimulate much of the public’s interest in planning and planning history, from historical accounts of the field’s origin (e.g., Smith, 2006), to major contemporary citywide planning efforts (e.g., Kreyling et al., 2005). Although land use and spatial planning are hardly the only threads of planning practice or planning thought, 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 article examines the interpretation of plans, not their evaluation or their implementation. Understanding the multiple meanings and concepts contained within plans is a very different enterprise than deciding whether the ideas contained within the plans conform to a notion of goodness or not, or understanding the degree to which a plan or plan idea has been realized.

**Histories of Readings**

Much like the city itself, a plan may be read in multiple ways depending on its reader’s perspective. Thus, the history of plan reading 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 abundant, 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 purpose of plan evaluation, “an approach to making better plans,” was stated baldly by Baer (1997, p. 329). Other authors interested in plan evaluation include Talen (1996), Hopkins (2001), Hoch (2002), Alexander (2002), Waldner (2004), Evans-Cowley and Zimmerman Gough (2009), and Berke and Godschild (2009). Each established varying criteria to judge plan quality. These criteria set up standards for improving professional effectiveness, and for improving city and society, broadly considered.

Implementation is of particular interest to some plan evaluators. Implementation is a challenge (Pressman & 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) saw 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 argued that evaluating plan quality but ignoring implementation is “difficult to champion” (p. 250). This perspective incompletely assesses the value of reading plans that are no longer available or appropriate for implementation. 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 did describe two threads of plan reading: “detailed assessments of what are deemed to be ‘model’ plans,” and “discourse analysis (and) deconstruction” (p. 250). Both of these threads constitute important reading trajectories, and I will examine them briefly.

The planning profession is only slightly over 100 years old, and histories of planning only began to emerge in the 1960s. Reps’ 1965 history of city planning is actually more a history of ambitious urban visions in the pre-professional era than a professional history: What is generally considered the beginning of American planning, the period between the Chicago World’s Fair and Burnham’s 1909 Plan for Chicago, marks the end of Reps’ study. Reps lauded 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 (Reps, 1965, p. 519). For Reps, a
plan document is inseparable from its 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,
was generally admiring, although Smith, unlike Reps,
separated the plan document from the plan’s ideas. Even as
he noted the document’s “disciplined gorgeousness”
(Smith, 2006, p. 90), he recognized that it may “neglect
the needs of humane urban living” (p. 96). Smith’s study is
a paradigmatic “detailed assessment” (Talen, 1996,
p. 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 was similarly neutral.

Burnham and Bennett’s (1909) plan 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. (Cerda’s 1867 Example plan for
Barcelona is perceived in a similarly positive light today,
although 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,
was animated not by the 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 that era. Implementation and visual quality were
irrelevant in the face of these plans’ “flawed” ideas, which
“ignored and aggravated” urban problems (p. 150).

In 1990, an interesting, if incomplete, dialogue oc-
curred 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 in a
format that resembled a literary criticism or book review.
The first commentary, planning theorist Seymour
Mandelbaum’s (1990) “Reading Plans,” made several
interesting points, although they had little to do with the
particular content of the plan (which was, after all, yet
another of the neoliberal downtown plans decreed by
Keating and Krumholz [1991]). First, Mandelbaum argued
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 pro-
vided an effective, if dispiriting, explanation for the short-
age 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 provided a framework for plan interpret-
ation, noting that a plan may be read as a “policy claim,” a
“design opportunity,” or a “story” (p. 353). Given that the
plan is an urban design study, the second interpretation
occupied the most space. Mandelbaum concluded some-
what wistfully that the planners seemed to think they had
far more control over the larger forces influencing Philadel-
phia than he felt they actually did. The plan may thus be
interpreted as an exercise in futility and obfuscation. He
concluded by calling for an improved public plan-reading
process, something that may have seemed unrealistic at the
time, but that now, with the explosion of online commen-
tary on seemingly every topic, has become a reality.

Much planning theory since 1990 has focused on
planning as a discursive enterprise requiring adequate, equal,
and coherent communication among diverse entities and
individuals (Innes & Booher, 2010). Communicative theo-
rists 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 im-
proved communications. Methods for assessing such im-
provements are emerging as plans prioritize improvement of
communication through participation in planning processes
(Northeast Illinois Planning Commission [NIPC], 2005,
pp. 266–269). Judging plans on this basis alone, however,
not only underexamines the plan’s degree of implementa-
tion, as Talen (1996) noted; it also runs the risk of overstat-
ing planning as little more than an exercise in communica-
amidst the plethora of voices, the concepts delivered
by plans seem to be diminished in meaning.

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 they have remained central within the traditional
land use and urban design core of planning. Mandelbaum
(1990) hinted that literary criticism might offer one ap-
proach to plan reading, but given the visual trajectory of
plans, visual interpretation may offer another equally valid
reading mode. Paintings are an established means of visual
expression, and their interpretation has long been a field of
study. Plans, like paintings, communicate visually. How
might a theory of art interpretation inform a theory of plan
interpretation?

Planning scholars have not previously looked to art
history or visual studies for a theory of plan interpretation.
Perhaps, this is because much planning scholarship has stemmed from a policy (i.e., textual) origin rather than a design (i.e., visual) origin; or perhaps it is because planning scholars have had little interest in the perspectives that a visual-studies-based plan interpretation might provide. 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 (1960, 1972, 1981), whose studies of planning’s visual aspect almost never mentioned plans per se, visually oriented works (Clay, 1973; Cullen, 1971; Hosken, 1972; Jacobs, 1984; Nelson, 1977) 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 apparent subjectivity of visual interpretation has long alienated social scientists from designers (Dagenhart & Sawicki, 1992), and the differences are far from being resolved (Lilley, 2000). This article does not attempt to effect a reconciliation, but it does 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 described three strata, or meanings, in art, which he related through an imaginary narrative of a man raising his hat in the street. The first meaning was factual. Panofsky recognized the “plain sense” of the event (a man raising his hat) as it corresponded to “certain objects (and actions) known to [him] from practical experience” (pp. 3–4). This meaning 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 (1939) called the second level of meaning conventional. He recognized the event as being particular to the society and time in which it 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” (p. 4).

Last, Panofsky recognized an even deeper intrinsic meaning to the hat-raising event. This relatively insignificant action, he concluded, 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 in turn 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” (p. 5).

Panofsky (1939) then translated the meanings derived from everyday experience into the world of art. He called these primary, or “natural subject,” meanings; secondary, or “conventional subject matter,” meanings; and intrinsic, or “content,” meanings (pp. 5–8). To understand how these levels of meaning might apply to a work of art, let us examine a completely imaginary painting from 15th-century Italy.

Our imaginary painting depicts a male human figure, almost naked except for a cloth around his waist, standing against a stone wall. He is standing at the end of the wall, near the center of the canvas, and he is pierced with arrows and appears to be in great pain. Where the wall ends a landscape is visible. In the distance, on a hill, is a castle. The landscape composes half the canvas; the figure against the wall composes the other half. Against the wall, to the figure’s right, a small tree grows. Within the painting’s frame of vision, the tree is located approximately opposite from 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 reveals exactly what is described above. One instantly and unconsciously recognizes the figure as a human, the wall as a wall, and likewise the landscape, castle, and tree. One recognizes the figure’s pain, and, with a little study, 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 it. Panofsky (1939) 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 (a general knowledge of 15th-century painting, for example), we may perform a secondary reading that uncovers the meaning of these motifs, allowing us to recognize the painting as a depiction of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. The painting is not completely accurate, since we know that when Saint Sebastian was martyred, he was tied to a tree, not standing against a wall, as he is in the painting. The significance of the small tree and the castle are as yet unclear. The vegetation and climate depicted in the painting identify it as being Mediterranean. Panofsky (1939) calls recognizable motifs images, and their combinations stories or allegories. These secondary readings are “iconographical in the narrower sense of the word” (p. 6) since particular meanings of the painting (although not all) are revealed.
Let us examine further the life of the painter and of his society. Applying this additional knowledge to the painting permits a tertiary, or intrinsic, reading, clarifying the painting’s meaning further. We may find, for example, that the painter took substantial liberties with martyrdom themes in the later period of his life, which would account for the anomalous and otherwise inexplicable wall. The rapid brushstrokes were also typical of the painter’s late period, when his health was failing and precision was impossible. This does not explain the composition, which represents 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 were important, art historians would want 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 might it say about the allegory of Saint Sebastian?) and at the intrinsic level (what might it tell us about the painter, about this period, or about 15th-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 is represented by 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 details the actions, scope, cost, and methods 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, we accept a plan’s 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 has additional meanings that require different types of knowledge to be perceived and interpreted. All plans are influenced by political, social, economic, and physical contexts, although this influence is seldom spelled out explicitly. A plan reflects these interrelated contexts just as it potentially influences them. Understanding a plan’s many contexts, and applying this knowledge to our understanding of the content of a plan, reveals the plan’s 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 that existed at the time of the plan’s creation.

Although some meanings may be apparent to a contemporary reader, additional meanings may only be discerned in the context of the history of a city’s plans, the history of a city, the life of the plan’s author, or the history of the society that produced the plan. Just as a well-informed 15th-century observer of Italian paintings could not view a contemporary painting in historical perspective, a contemporary plan reader could not understand the temporal meaning of a plan without the perspective provided by time and by the observations and findings of other plan readers. Epithets like innovative or groundbreaking, which give great support to a plan, become even more significant in the context of history.

Reading Through Three Plans

The remainder of this article 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 decades in the past 80 years (1930s, 1960s, 2000s). All are physical, spatial plans. They do not purport to be representative of their eras, nor do they purport to be representative of the total universe of plans. Rather, they illustrate how the visual theory of plan reading described above may be applied to plans from both the past and the present.

The Comprehensive City Plan for Dubuque, IA (John Nolen, 1931 and 1936)

A Factual Reading: Dubuque. The document, entitled Comprehensive City Plan for Dubuque, Iowa (Nolen, 1936), was published in hardback in September 1936. The plan is attractive and polished (Figure 1). It is brief, only 48 pages, but it is printed on fine paper, and 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 × 48 inches) detached folding map of the city and vicinity (Figure 2). The latter is labeled the master plan and “one of a series of maps plans and reports [sic] comprising the city plan” (Nolen, 1936).

The author, John Nolen, a landscape architect and a “pioneer” of the planning profession (Hancock, 1960, p. 302), was nationally known by the time he was hired for the plan in 1930. His dramatic recommendations are communicated by the cover, which depicts proposals for the city’s downtown (Figure 1). This decision—to reveal one of the plan’s primary concepts on its cover—conveys
Figure 1. The cover of John Nolen’s 1936 *Comprehensive City Plan for Dubuque, Iowa* is cheerful and even cartoonish. It shows a portion of the plan’s waterfront vision, effectively marketing one of the document’s principal ideas.
Source: Nolen, 1936.

(Color figure available online.)
Nolen's confidence in the drama of the plan's ideas and a desire to convey the scale of the changes being proposed. The plan thus communicates an important message before it is even opened.

The plan explains a small city's problems and outlines proposals to solve them. It is easy to understand because the large folding map is the sole piece of information needed to understand the plan's ideas, making the document a sort of appendix that provides 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” (Nolen, 1936, p. 9) are mentioned as methods that led to the plan's recommendations, but these are otherwise left unexplained. Not even the plan's time-frame is mentioned. This conveys a sense of the author's confidence and expertise, but it also hints at a methodological secrecy that is at odds with the plan's welcoming cover.

The plan, primarily concerned with traffic flow and open space, uses 19 of 48 pages to present solutions to these problems. It contains a great deal of local information, but both the problems and proposals are 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 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 fabric makes large-scale restructuring challenging, and the plan is, therefore, enthusiastic about developing outlying areas, where roadway and open space can be optimized. The plan proposes regional parkways and open spaces throughout the peripheral area, most of which actually lies beyond the city’s political boundary. Apart from some widened streets that increase access to suburban areas, the existing city (except downtown) is left unaltered. The plan does not project changes to the residential areas composing the rest of the city. Its 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 placed together in a civic center, and reorganizes railroad and industrial land along the river, multiplying theings placed together in a civic center, and reorganizes railroad and industrial land along the river, multiplying the

A Contextual Reading: Dubuque. This reading requires reflection on at least the outline of larger-scale events occurring both inside and outside of cities and the planning field at the time of the plan’s publication. Mainstream urban texts like Fogelson (2001), Hall (1988), Isenberg (2004), Mumford (1961), Schaeffer (1988), and Scott (1969) contextualized plans within the urban development and planning trends of the time. The year 1936 was in the midst of the Great Depression, when downtown development stagnated and industrial production slowed (Midwestern cities like Dubuque, which was heavily dependent on industry, suffered particularly badly) but automobile ownership and suburbs expanded.

A contextual reading shows that the plan is both pragmatic and utopian: It promotes some existing socio-economic and physical trends while recommending the reversal of others. It 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 commissioned the plan perhaps because it felt the twin pulls 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 city administrations, and planners such as Nolen may have been asked to provide solutions to both populations and both problems (sprawl and decline).

A contextual reading also identifies odd geographical and topical lacunae in the plan. The plan displays little interest in the form of the suburban settlements that its proposed parkways would generate. It is likewise uninter-
ested in the dilapidated older housing areas that must have comprised much of the city. The simplest explanation is that Nolen had neither the time nor the budget to develop solutions for these areas. Yet, the amount of attention and detail evident in the plan’s proposed civic center shows that detailed proposals for certain areas of the city were of greater interest to the plan framers (or to the planner) than others, leaving issues like older housing suppressed or ignored. Understanding the reasons for these lacunae requires further research.

A Temporal Reading: Dubuque. A temporal reading of the over-70-year-old plan may be challenging because it demands a comprehensive understanding not only of Dubuque, but also of cities and planning in the United States. 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 identifying and studying the plans produced between 1936 and the 1990s requires additional research that few readers will have the time or the interest to undertake.

It is much easier to discern the degree to which the plan’s ideas were implemented. Aerial photographs available on the Internet indicate that both pragmatic and utopian aspects of the plan were, in part, realized, particularly along the waterfront and in parkways along the city’s edge. It is harder to know whether the plan played a direct role in these changes. However, contemporary aerial photographs also show that much suburban settlement occurred, even though this type of settlement was not directly portrayed in the plan. This confirms the lacunae observed in the contextual reading.

The utopian and pragmatic aspects of the plan may be due to its position between two eras of urban growth and two approaches to urban planning. The 1930s and the Depression lay between explosive urban growth, motivated by industry and technology, and urban decline and suburban expansion, motivated by the automobile and by other technological and economic changes. The plan did and did not foresee these changes. Some proposals, like the union railroad station and civic center, are holdovers from Beaux-Arts planning and are merely smaller versions of proposals in the 1909 Plan for Chicago (Burnham & Bennett, 1909). These ideas were dated, if not obsolete, by 1936, although perhaps they were more current when the plan was written in 1930–1931. Other ideas, like the extensive parkways lacking any outline for suburban growth that they would
spur, 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 pro-planning policies over the ensuing decades thereby making realization of the plan’s ideas possible. The plan itself was 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 due more to luck than 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. Although the plan’s preface shows that formal plan approval took five years, Nolen was accepted as an expert who had little apparent accountability to citizens. The plan’s brevity and efficiency are nonetheless, refreshing. Its ideas are clear and confident, and even if many are not locally derived or innovative, they are attractively presented and bold in scope. 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 one now considers the full range of plan responsibilities (issues like social equity that are considered important elements of planning theory today are not present in the plan, for example).

**Master Plan 1964 City of Newark, NJ**
(Newark Central Planning Board, 1964)

A Factual Reading: Newark. Newark’s master plan is a large document, 11 × 11 inches, printed in inexpensive paperback format. The plan’s cover (Figure 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 welcoming the reader, nor encouraging him or her to peruse the plan. Unlike the welcoming, almost cartoonish cover of the Dubuque plan, Newark’s cover reveals little except its officialdom to the casual reader. The document, at 126 pages, is substantial in length and well illustrated. Its only special feature is an interior, color folding map 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.

It is illustrated with numerous black-and-white photographs, color maps, and the occasional site plan. Photographs depict both typical scenes in the city and signs of progress. Children playing, busy department stores, and blooming flowers are intermingled with documentation of concrete pipes and construction sites. The latter clearly represent the implementation of projects, although they are not correlated 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 or that progress is already underway, thus precluding the need for a plan? Or are they meant to show that the city is full of problems, thus necessitating a plan?

The plan features several maps (Figure 4). Each is topical, depicting a facility inventory (schools, parks, etc.) and suggesting locations for 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 necessity of these facilities. The reticent plan graphics, which require that the plan reader enter the text in order to understand the plan, sharply contrast with the almost childlike clearness of the Dubuque plan. Given the length and unwelcoming appearance of the document, the plan’s suggestions are difficult to discern. Mandelbaum (1990) noted ruefully that “no one reads” (p. 35) most plans. The same may have been true for the Newark plan.

The text is both an inventory of and a proposition for new facilities and land uses. The plan emphasizes an “analysis of the potential...for growth,” (Newark Central Planning Board, 1964, p. 13) showing growth to be a central concern. Yet, it states that Newark is likely to grow only marginally over the next 20 years. It also concludes that employment and housing will increase if the city keeps pace with the region. Although the plan attempts to persuade the reader that the city will grow, its own statistics indicate 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 to reverse a decades-long decline.

Further study 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 category is treated differently: Land use is significantly reconfigured, many public buildings are closed, and 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 simply assumed. There is no single vision for the city; instead, the
master plan is an aggregation of different change projections that seem to have little relationship with each other.

Why might this be? Perhaps the plan is intended for disparate audiences, like parks officials and traffic engineers. But why, then, would the plan attempt to appeal to different audiences with a single document? The fragmented nature of the plan makes its seemingly unified, authoritative title of “master plan” seem like a fiction. Again, this could not be more different from the Dubuque plan, which represented a single, comprehensive urban design. The authoritative, difficult-to-read Newark master plan is little more than a collection of inventories and
Figure 4. Newark’s “Parks & Recreation Plan” within the 1964 Master 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.

Source: Newark Central Planning Board, 1964.

(Color figure available online.)
projections for different sectoral audiences. The plan is divided, and it also confronts a conundrum, how to plan in a city that is not growing and may in fact decline. The plan does not provide a solution to this conundrum, 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: Newark. The relatively recent date of the plan, the large size of the city, and the well-known circumstances of the time make a contextual reading of the plan easier. The 1960s were a time of great difficulty for older cities, including Newark, and the plan was issued amid these troubles. Conditions would get worse: Newark’s 1967 race riots resulted in over 20 people being killed and millions of dollars in property being destroyed (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, pp. 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 reveals why certain types of change but not others were 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. In fact, the plan itself may have been issued in order to take advantage of funds or even provide a rationale for federal spending.

The clinical appearance of the plan is ironic. Newark was in the midst of tumultuous change, and the staid plan masks the fraught intermingling of economics, population, race, and infrastructure in a troubled city. In context, 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 independent (highways) and change that is unlikely to occur (population stability and economic recovery), while ignoring change that is already underway (racial change, poverty, and inequality). The plan confuses topic (growth or decline?), message (change? how?), and content (what kind of plan?), leading readers to seriously question what the planners were thinking, which ideas they felt responsible for, and which ideas they really believed in. The plan appears inadequate to confront the complicated context of the city.

A Temporal Reading: Newark. Newark and other older cities underwent substantial changes in racial composition, economic vitality, and population in the decades after 1964. The authoritative appearance of Newark’s master plan not only masks confusion; it also masks stunningly inaccurate forecasts. Since the plan was issued, the city changed dramatically and for the worse (Tuttle, 2009). Its population declined from 405,220 in 1960 (Newark Central Planning Board, 1964, p. 111) to 281,402 in 2006 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010). (The plan had projected growth from 406,000 to 416,000.) Employment declined even more sharply: Manufacturing jobs fell from 75,000–80,000 as cited in the plan to only 17,844 in 1995 (Newark Central Planning Board, 2004, p. 13), a far cry from the plan’s most pessimistic projections of 66,000. The plan’s projected Newark, economy restored, population stabilized, 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 constructed as the plan recommended. However, it does not seem to have fulfilled its larger purpose, which was to show Newark’s “most appropriate course of development for the next 15–20 years” (Newark Central Planning Board, 1964, p. 3). One can sympathize with the planners charged with projecting the future of a declining city. Caught between projecting additional decline or forecasting improvement, they opted for the latter, politically acceptable solution. That the plan could not confront the severe urban problems of mid-20th-century America is not totally the fault of planners, who may have been politically unable to speak the truth or conceptually unable to understand 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). In retrospect, the Newark master plan is a tombstone not only 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 (NIPC, 2005)

A Factual Reading: Northeastern Illinois. The 2040 Regional Framework Plan, authored by NIPC, is actually two plans, a softbound document with 279 pages (Figure 5) and a separate summary document with only 17 pages and a compact disc containing the full plan text. The summary plan is clearly meant to increase access to the rather unwieldy full plan in the same manner that Wacker’s Manual (Moody, 1915) democratized the Plan for Chicago (Smith, 2006). Both documents contain a detachable regional framework map (Figure 6), but neither document mentions the existence of the other in its text, and the
Figure 5. The Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission’s 2005 2040 Regional 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.


(Color figure available online.)
publication date (2005) of the plans are difficult to locate. A silver decal on the front cover of both plan and summary documents states that the plan received a National Plan of the Year Award from the American Planning Association. Both documents were available on the Internet in 2009 as a portable document format (PDF) file, but were no longer available online by mid-2011 for reasons that will be explained below.

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 it limits the plan’s accessibility to a wide public audience. Was the plan intended as a technical document for a specialized audience? The inclusion of a summary document indicates that NIPC recognized the prohibitive length of the full plan even as they published it. 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

Figure 6. The Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission 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.


(Color figure available online.)
central concepts. The only plan prescription that is clearly description (what should be) applies to each of the plan's features rather than new or unknown features. The plan, for example, identifies 292 "centers" (NIPC, 2005, p. 26). Is this an existing number of centers (in 2005), or is it the number in 2040 (the buildout date of the plan)? This confusion between description (what already is) and prescription (what should be) applies to each of the plan's central concepts. The only plan prescription that is clearly different 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. The plan's projected future differs little from what would occur in the plan's absence. Does the plan really matter? 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 supported 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: Northern Illinois. Because the plan is more or less contemporary to the time of this writing (2005 and 2011), a contextual reading demands little historical knowledge. The plan's excessive length and tepid content reflect the framers' desire to satisfy a large, diverse, and fractious constituency. It exists in a time when public outreach is a required and necessary part of the planning process, when planning is regarded as a complex effort involving public input and consensus-building (Arnstein, 1969; Forester, 1989; Healey, 1992). Yet, consensus in a large, diverse setting is difficult to achieve, and strong recommendations are even more difficult, as the plan indicates. Otherwise, the plan is consistent with contemporary planning wisdom. Each of the plan's ideas, such as "[promoting] livable communities" (NIPC, 2005, p.165) and "[promoting] walking and bicycling as alternative modes of travel," (NIPC, 2005, p.193) are familiar concepts advocated at a national level by many individual planning practitioners and academics under the smart growth banner (Burchell, Listokin, & Galley, 2000). Smart growth is, in turn, consistent with the architectural and planning movement of new urbanism (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 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 more likely to appeal to a broader audience. A plan with
uncontentious recommendations is less likely to offend sensitive parties and to build a wider support base. Without speculating too far as to the effect of public participation in plan recommendations, we can conclude that the extensive public outreach that informed the plan probably pushed it toward conservative, uncontentious recommendations rather than dramatic spatial and regional shifts, à la Burnham and Bennett (1909). 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 the energetic implementation that it recommends. Under ordinary circumstances, weak recommendations would not require significant action. However, if the true goal of the plan is not to implement recommendations but to sustain interest in regional-scale planning, this focus is more understandable. By creating such a framework plan, NIPC rationalizes its own existence as implementer. This is particularly valuable given the widespread fiscal crises faced by state governments and the 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 can also be understood in the context of plans and urban events that came before them. NIPC’s plan was 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 had been returning to Chicago, making it a very attractive place to live by the early 21st century (City of Chicago, 2002; see section 2.9). The plan’s pro-center attitude and pro-open-space approach is consistent with larger late-20th-century trends that benefitted existing cities and to some extent mitigated sprawl. NIPC’s plan benefits from those trends and uncritically accepts and advocates them as well.

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), 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). NIPC may have wanted its plan to speak softly and present uncontentious ideas in order to avoid alienating suspicious or mistrustful constituents. The plan seems to have indeed achieved consensus, and there was little criticism or even discussion of the plan when it was issued. Still, this quiet return of the master plan was achieved at the expense of the plan’s creativity.

Reading Lessons

Perhaps the most salient conclusion of the factual readings is that information may be found in diverse aspects of a plan document. Factual readings drew conclusions from seemingly superficial features like document design, as well as from unarguably important features like plan recommendations. Planners are trained to analyze recommendations more than graphic design, yet, in each case design was deeply communicative. Each of the plan covers, for instance, mirrored the clarity and intensity of the plan’s recommendations. In the three cases, it was fair to at least partially judge a plan by its cover. Ultimately, factual reading depended on carefully looking at the plan (both its overall appearance and its graphics), carefully reading it, and carefully examining and understanding the relationship between graphic features and text. In each case, reading revealed information about the plan and its framers that was not readily apparent.

Contextual readings revealed that each plan 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 contained nothing that
would surprise a planner of the time. Contextualizing plans 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” (Nolen, 1936, p. 9). Further, if every plan is a product of its time, should one judge a plan only on the way it addresses contemporary concerns (parkways in 1936, highways in 1964, outreach in 2005)? If so, what about a plan’s 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 (although innovative ideas do occasionally occur in plans; Ryan, 2006). Further exploration of the occurrence and value of innovation in plans and planning is badly needed.

Our temporal plan readings, like Panofsky’s (1939) observations about painting, show that the format and content of plans changed dramatically over time, reflecting changes in practice that are not visible through contextual readings. Many of the changes in the planning profession that are evident in the three plans are consistent with current assessments of planning history. For example, this article’s plan-reading sample, while admittedly small and imperfect, may be interpreted as representing a planning profession governed first by expert designers, then by remote, out-of-touch technocrats, and finally by humble and sincere, if uncompelling, communicators. This reading conforms to 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 & Booher, 2010).

Temporal readings also permit plan readings that differ from the conventional wisdom. Nolen’s (1936) plan, for example, communicates its recommendations so eagerly that it almost advertises them. This is very far from the stereotype of the remote master architect implied by plans like Burnham and Bennett’s (1909). 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 the present as well as the past. The differences between Nolen’s plan and NIPC’s (2005) provoke thought about the efficacy, perhaps even the meaning, of the communicative ideal that currently dominates planning theory.

If a concise, accessible plan provided by an expert planner (who was also a designer), is bad according to today’s communicative, process-oriented ideal of planning, does this, in turn, make NIPC’s plan, which attempts to conform to those contemporary ideals, good? Hardly. We have seen that although the plan is process based, it is also unwieldy and uncommunicative. Temporal plan readings are both diachronic, permitting the present to be seen as the current end of a linear narrative; and kaiological (Zukin, 2010), 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 (1939) 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 plan readers interested in conducting temporal readings of plans.

Any discussion of plan reading must mention the transformative changes that will occur 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 become primarily digital? NIPC’s (2005) plan takes some early steps in this direction: It is available online, and the summary version of the plan is in part electronic. CMAP’s (2011) GO TO 2040 plan website goes further, not even indicating whether the “document” is available in printed form. Other communicative aspects of the NIPC plan already seem dated as of 2011, including the long outreach period that preceded 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 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 promising changes will transform the planning profession, but whether they will transform the face of our cities remains to be seen.

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Notes
1. Not all plans are identical. They are issued by a variety of entities (public planning departments comprising only a small fraction of these) and treat a wide range of topics and spaces.
2. Campbell and Fainstein (2003) provide a complete survey.

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