No Small Plans and Meet Your City

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No Small Plans was inspired by Wacker’s Manual, a 1911 textbook that was required reading for all 8th graders in Chicago Public Schools for nearly three decades. Wacker’s Manual taught young people about the building blocks of the city and the goals of the 1909 Plan of Chicago. It also challenged readers to steward the city to greatness through “united civic efforts.” Although not fully realized, the 1909 Plan of Chicago was one of the country’s earliest and most important comprehensive urban plans.

When Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) staff shared Wacker’s Manual with our Teen Fellows, the teens were riveted by the story of Chicago’s city plan and the profound responsibility Wacker’s Manual expected. The Fellows asked, “Why isn’t there anything like this for students to read today?” We wondered the same thing.

We spent 2015 talking with dozens of teens, teachers, urban planners and community organizations about the question “What’s most worth knowing and experiencing about civic engagement and urban planning?” This exercise helped us think about themes that are important for today’s young people. In spring of 2016, we announced a competition for Midwestern artists to propose concepts for a new graphic novel that would address, “Chicago’s past, present and future; architecture as a character; youth as change agents; and the city’s grit and shine.” With help from our Advisory Committee and our Teen Fellows, we selected the winners: Devin Mawdsley, Kayce Bayer, Chris Lin and Deon Reed, an artist collective known as Eyes of the Cat Illustration.

The result is No Small Plans, a book that follows the neighborhood adventures of teens in Chicago’s past, present and future as they wrestle with designing the city they want, need and deserve. The artwork is inspired by photographs, real places and stories from Chicago. The Burnham Interludes were written, in part, using actual quotes from historic figures. Daniel Burnham believed in the power of big ideas and the title of this book plays with a quote often attributed to him: “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood.” For the young people in this graphic novel, there is no such thing as a “small” plan.

In 2017, in honor of our 50th anniversary, CAF launched a three-year initiative called Meet Your City designed to address the civic education gap. No Small Plans is at the heart of this initiative. Through partnerships with Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Public Library and other organizations, CAF will give away 30,000 copies of No Small Plans for free to Chicago students in grades 6-10. We'll also support teachers and students through trainings and workshops in order to catalyze civic engagement and city stewardship.