

## IMAGINING THE SUSTAINABLE CITY: THE NOTRE DAME PLAN OF CHICAGO 2109



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I'd like to begin by articulating three premises that underlie the substance of what follows. The first is my most succinct understanding and characterization of religion. The second is my assessment of the current condition of church-state relations in the United States. The third simply identifies and characterizes the Catholic religious and intellectual tradition from which, as a professor of architecture, I act, write, and speak.

In the first instance, I'm going to characterize religion as a shared acknowledgment of sacred order, oriented communally toward worship, and orienting individuals toward vocation as their existential relationship to the cosmos. The "shared acknowledgment . . . oriented toward worship" is critical in distinguishing religion from individual spirituality. Like most people, religious people are spiritual, but religious people are spiritual in a communal way. There is a deep, if too often unappreciated, communal ordering and sense-making in religious practice that transcends simple spirituality, and indeed any understanding of religious belief as simply an individual and private matter.

Second, though I'm not able to speak with any authority about how Canada might differ, the United States has a legal and cultural history of religious pluralism, religious freedom, and non-establishment, currently in jeopardy. Under the American Constitution and Bill of Rights, there is no religious test for public office, and the law protects the civil rights

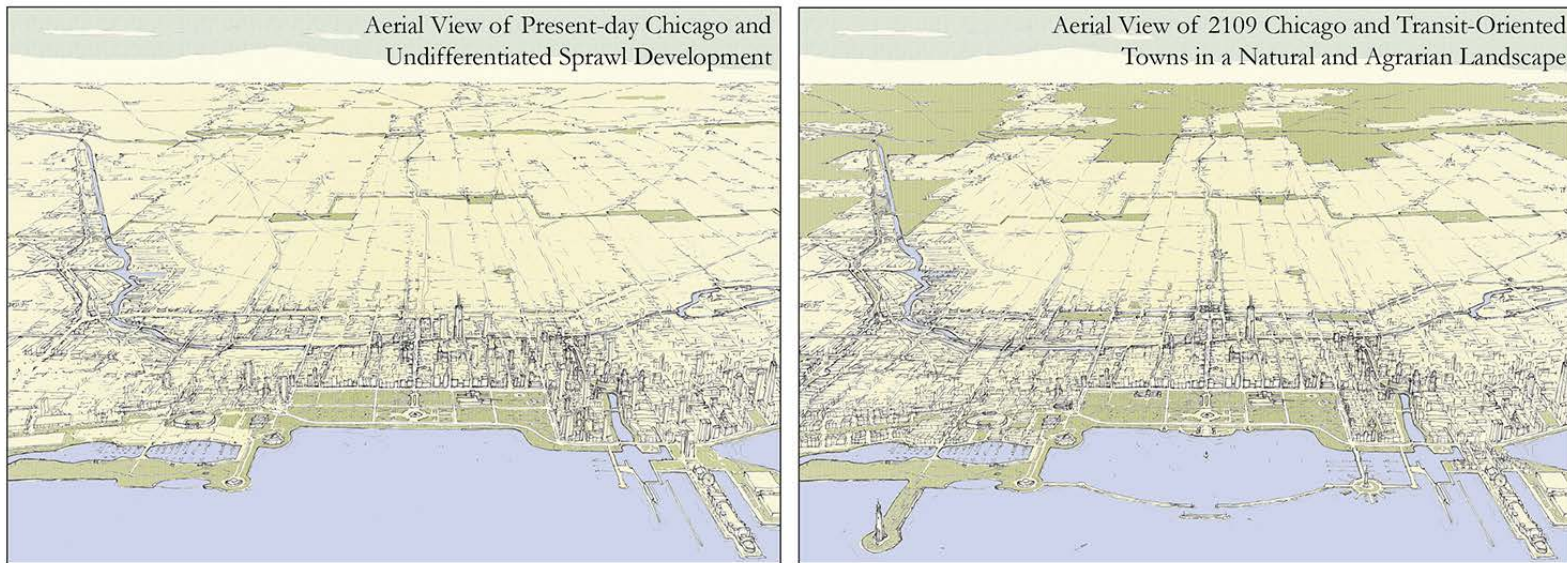
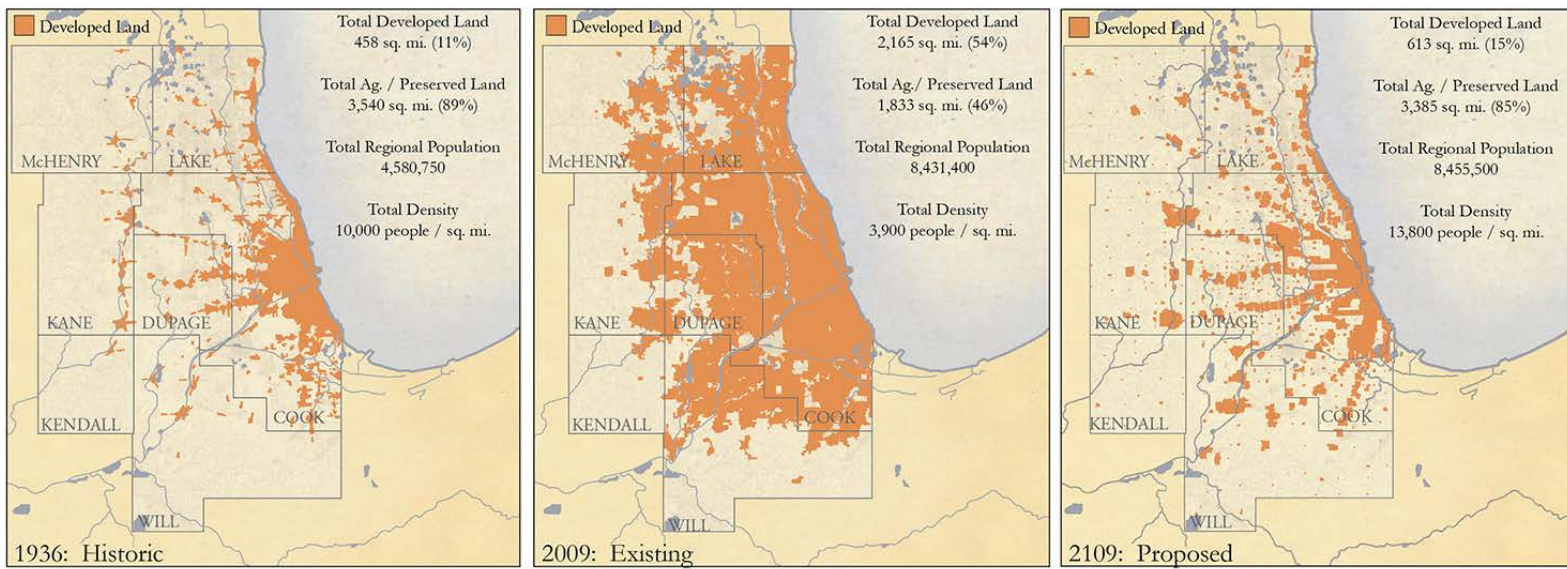


**Figure 1: Chicago 2109 Proposed Metropolitan Transportation and Land Use**

of believers, agnostics, and atheists alike. But although this legal arrangement—a product of one strand of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—emerged from and in the context of Christian culture, it is wrong to conclude that the United States therefore is (or is properly understood as) a “Christian nation.” The United States is not a Christian nation, nor is it a secular nation. Rather, the United States is a religiously pluralistic nation with a secular government. This certainly has not meant that in

the United States there have been (and are) no tensions between religious believers and the state. Nevertheless, this American legal arrangement and the culture it has encouraged together have resulted in a national history where by and large a plurality of religions have flourished in relative peace, both among themselves and with the state. That relative peace appears to be breaking down and the culture that fostered it is in disarray—not least because the culture of Enlightenment liberalism from which American culture emerged is itself in disarray. Enlightenment liberalism has been superseded almost everywhere in Western culture by the triumph of therapeutic individualism and the deterioration of certain fundamental institutions of civil society (notably family, church, neighbourhood, and voluntary association) that mediate between the individual and the state. Moreover, it would be a mistake to understand this deterioration as unconscious and entirely unwelcomed. In many powerful quarters of the contemporary secularized West, the institutional disarray I have described above is regarded as progress.

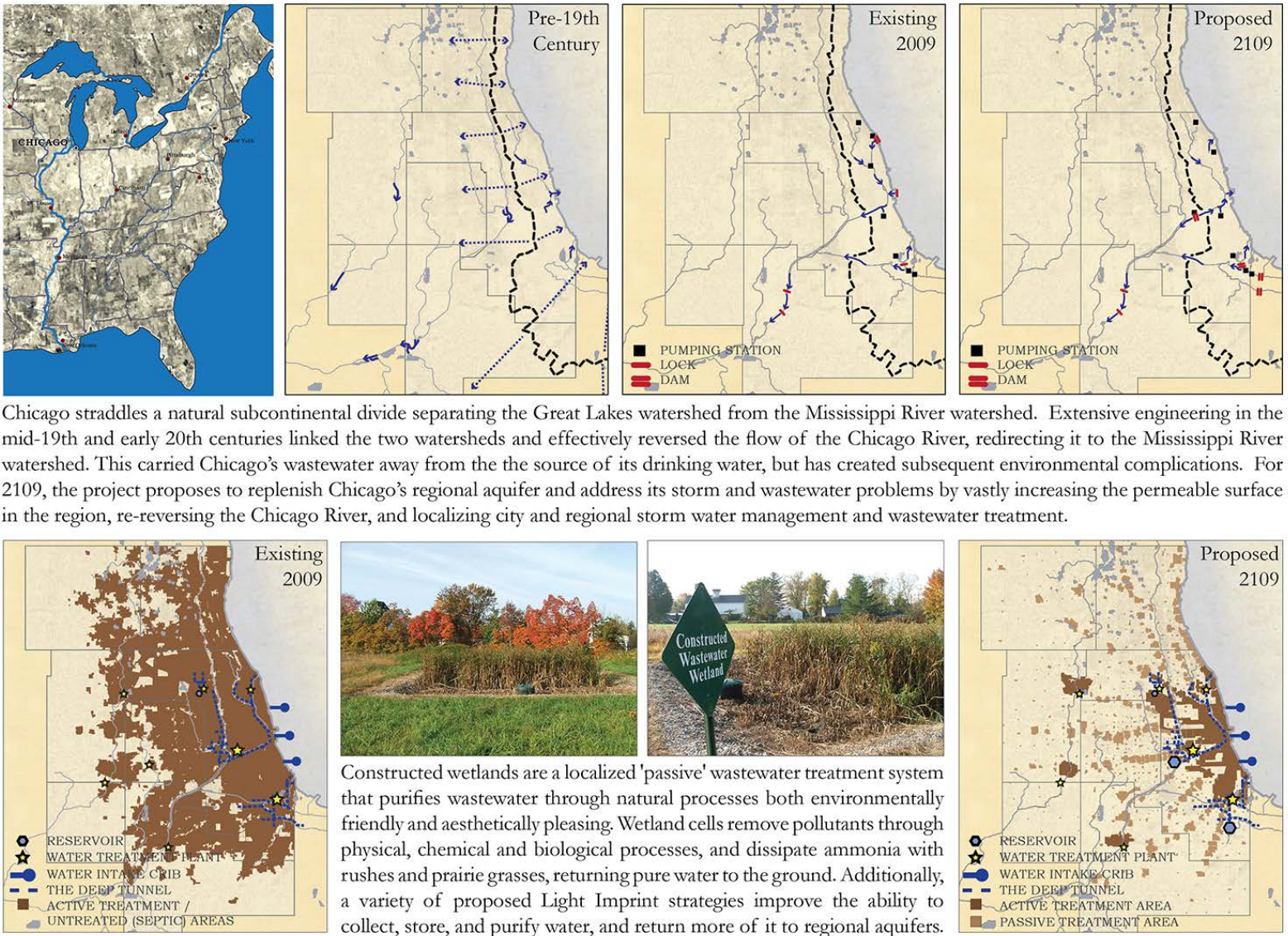
Third, religious traditions remain bearers of long memory regarding who we are and what is possible. In Catholic social teaching, religious freedom (though a late development of Catholic doctrine compared to sixteenth-century Anabaptists and to Lactantius, fourth-century advisor to Constantine) is taught as a great social good mandated by the church’s understanding of the dignity of the human person. Articulated in the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Catholic Church regards religious freedom as a moral imperative and a civil right whether or not there exists an established state religion.



**Figure 2: Historic and Proposed Metropolitan Chicago Land Use**

In light of these premises, allow me to address the key questions posed for this session, which speculate about the near and long-term futures of religion in civil society. I am convinced that future research on, collaboration in, and learning about these subjects require intentional focus and investment. I am also convinced that these will become more difficult in the coming years and that we can consider those difficulties in the related dimensions of both economics and culture.

Economically, in the United States, with below-replacement birth rates, contested immigration, and the dissolution of the two-parent family, it will become increasingly difficult to maintain (let alone extend) either the physical infrastructure of our sprawl settlement patterns or the financial infrastructure of our social safety net (notably unfunded pension obligations, but perhaps also our health insurance and social security programs as currently constructed). This portends economic shrinkage attended by social stress and increasing social conflict, including scapegoating. Under duress, the frictions



Chicago straddles a natural subcontinental divide separating the Great Lakes watershed from the Mississippi River watershed. Extensive engineering in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries linked the two watersheds and effectively reversed the flow of the Chicago River, redirecting it to the Mississippi River watershed. This carried Chicago's wastewater away from the the source of its drinking water, but has created subsequent environmental complications. For 2109, the project proposes to replenish Chicago's regional aquifer and address its storm and wastewater problems by vastly increasing the permeable surface in the region, re-reversing the Chicago River, and localizing city and regional storm water management and wastewater treatment.

Constructed wetlands are a localized 'passive' wastewater treatment system that purifies wastewater through natural processes both environmentally friendly and aesthetically pleasing. Wetland cells remove pollutants through physical, chemical and biological processes, and dissipate ammonia with rushes and prairie grasses, returning pure water to the ground. Additionally, a variety of proposed Light Imprint strategies improve the ability to collect, store, and purify water, and return more of it to regional aquifers.

**Figure 3: Chicago 2109 Metropolitan Waste and Storm Water Issues**

between anti-religious progressives and various religious communities could very well intensify. Religious communities form readily identifiable communities and in certain cultural environments can become easy targets for scapegoating (both by those in political power and via social media), i.e., as a focus for pent-up resentment and feelings of powerlessness. For Christians in particular I might add that scapegoating temptations can work both ways, and that Christian and other faith communities may need to work hard to avoid succumbing to their allure.

Culturally, in many areas of the United States (and perhaps Canada and Europe), Christians (and eventually other religiously observant persons) cannot for the immediate or foreseeable future presume the good will of a secularist (not, n.b., merely *secular*) state, a secularist press, or secularist educational institutions. I distinguish between secularist and secular because although a secular state does not presume any given religious perspective it nevertheless both respects and engages religious communities

as an important, even constitutive, part of civil society. Secularists, on the other hand, regard religion as essentially private and would regard as properly civic only those institutions and “players” that are not religious. These two perspectives lead society in very different directions.

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One way that exclusionary secularism may manifest itself is by the withdrawal of tax-exempt status from religious communities and their educational and charitable ancillaries, and the denial of state tuition loans and state research funds to religious institutions of higher learning that do not adopt secularist state policies at odds with their own religious beliefs. Such policies, counter to current practices, would seriously undermine the common-good contributions that now come from religious communities.

In our deliberations together, we have seen how people like Tony Carnes and his team are uncovering religious activity now largely unreported or otherwise hidden from public view. He describes New York City as a post-secular city—i.e., as a world-leading cultural city also deeply and pervasively religious. This is not necessarily surprising to people with any degree of historical perspective because cities from their origins typically have exhibited an orientation to the sacred, more often than not manifested clearly in the formal order of the cities themselves. Religious presence is not so readily apparent in the formal order of today’s hyper-modern cities, and we therefore typically assume our utilitarian, globalized economy has permanently displaced if not discarded completely the sacred sensibilities heretofore characteristic of traditional urban life. But it seems very likely this is not the case, and I think we can become more astute in noting, talking about, and understanding both how cities continue to exhibit sacred sensibility and religious commitment, and how both religious sensibilities and commitments might manifest themselves in cities in the future.

This work of understanding and advocacy, however, is intensive, and certainly in the short run will not get any easier. In particular, if Christian institutions (and their ancillaries) are threatened with the loss of tax exemption and government funding (which of necessity may be drastically diminished in scope), maintenance and expansion of Christian institutions will require self-funding from a combination of both accumulated financial capital and (just as importantly) a disciplined (re)development of human capital.

As an example of the latter from a not-too-distant American history, consider the vast American Catholic school system once run by religious orders whose way of life included a cheerful and generous voluntary poverty. Voluntarily poor or not, however, durable wealth creation, the restoration and advancement of civil society, and the promulgation of the gospel will depend much upon how well we as Christians inculcate among ourselves habits of disciplined generosity. Once they are habits, they will (by definition) be easier—and also more likely to be recognized as a resource for the common good, as social capital for the wider culture rather than a liability to be shed.



HAMLET  
<40 Acres

Population: 4,800-8,000/Square Mile  
Density: 3-5 Dwelling Units/Acre



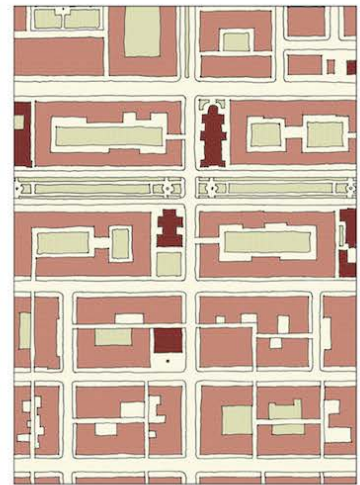
VILLAGE  
40-640 Acres

Population: 4,800-12,000/Square Mile  
Density: 3-7.5 Dwelling Units/Acre



TOWN  
1-4 Sq. Mi.

Population: 9,600-20,000/Square Mile  
Density: 6-12.5 Dwelling Units/Acre



CITY (neighborhood)  
> 4 Sq. Mi.

Population: 16,000-40,000/Square Mile  
Density: 10-25 Dwelling Units/Acre



Figure 4: Chicago 2109 Metropolitan Settlement Types, from lowest density and smallest area to highest density and largest area: hamlet, village, town, city (neighbourhood)



Figure 5: Chicago 2109 Proposed Historic Centre Sacred Axis, looking northwest

To the question of what religious faith that contributes to the common good might look like, my reply as an architect and classical humanist urbanist is that it could look something like the walkable mixed-use urbanism of pre-1950 European and American villages, towns, and city neighbourhoods characterized by streets, squares, background private buildings, and foreground civic and religious buildings, arranged in a more or less legible hierarchical order. Achieving this is not as simple as it may seem, not least because many Christians themselves have reflexively adopted both suburban habits of mind and contemporary secularist assumptions about the private character of religion—an understanding that would seem inevitably to marginalize public religious practice.

This presumes a couple of things: that the global economy will continue humming away indefinitely, unaffected by the social dislocations it engenders, and that in these circumstances secularist sensibility will prevail. But these are not givens, and historical and anthropological perspectives on both urbanism and religion challenge secularist religious assumptions, and suggest an agenda for religious communities in the public realm.

For Christians, this agenda must involve better thinking through how—Christian sins and imperfections notwithstanding—the happy Christian duties to proclaim the forgiveness of sins and to share the love of God have manifested themselves institutionally in countless acts of charity and education, and physically in beautiful buildings that adorn the public realm, in ways that attract people to God (and even some to a life of religious devotion).

How do Christians (how do Christian architects and urbanists) begin to model these kinds of redemptive communities in the less-than-perfect social circumstances in which we currently find ourselves? One of the challenges faced by aspiring traditional architects and urbanists (and their teachers) is the mobility encouraged—sometimes required—by the arrangements of modern life. When students seek my advice about professional life after

graduation, I tell them to go wherever they need and can afford to go—New York, Boston, Chicago, London—to get their professional credentials and continue learning their craft. But to those who really want to make a life making a place, I advise looking for some undervalued down-and-out locale off the beaten path, some pre-1945 town or city with “good bones”: a main street, a network of streets and blocks, some pre-1950 housing stock. In that place, be an architect, a builder, a developer who fills in the gaps as it were, who enfleshes the bones. My Notre Dame students make beautiful hand drawings, so to build start-up capital I advise them to scan their architecture school drawings and sell the originals. (No one I know has taken me up on this!) Start small. Build or renovate. Rent or sell. Repeat. Build with local financing. Have a good life helping to make a good place over time—exactly the way most good places have been built over time! In today’s world, this is countercultural activity. But in the larger perspective such activity is, precisely, cultural. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, “We love Rome because it is great, but Rome first became great because it was loved.”

**In that place, be an architect, a builder, a developer who fills in the gaps as it were, who enfleshes the bones.**

Such practices reverberate deeply back into Western Christian traditions both Protestant and Catholic. The ur-communities of Christian witness and conversion in Europe were the Benedictines, who pursued a communal monastic life guided by the Rule of St. Benedict. Their life together of voluntary poverty was organized around daily prayer and work (*ora et labora*), with special mandates to stability of life (meaning they stayed put unless sent elsewhere by their abbots), to teaching, and to charity and hospitality. (Benedictines were not to beg, but rather to give.) Although they typically lived within the walls of their monasteries, their way of life attracted others to them. Over the course of centuries these originally rural religious communities often became centres of towns and cities, demonstrating in the process a certain economic truth that history has confirmed over and over again: that productive work conjoined with ascetic discipline produces durable wealth.

I don’t mean here to romanticize pre-modern life, or to suggest that accumulated wealth is its proper end. Wealth can corrupt even religious communities, and in the history of the Christian church corruption by wealth is often a proximate cause of religious reform. Moreover, in the Christian tradition the strong gospel mandate is that accumulated wealth is to be given away. Nevertheless, wealth is much more than money. It is a means to life opportunities, but it is also embedded in tangible material goods that when shared, can be



a means of sacramental presence. For all these reasons and more, it is important for Christians both to model good work and to sponsor good work.

Much of that work will occur *in situ* in existing cities and suburbs, but some of that work may be the work of reform and may be visionary. At the University of Notre Dame, where I teach, given our classical humanist approach to architecture and urbanism, our proximity to Chicago, and Chicago's astonishing history and troubled present, I've been working with students to begin thinking about the bicentennial of Daniel Burnham's 1909 *Plan of Chicago* by looking both backward and forward. We will draw on classical humanist traditions of architecture, planning, and the imperatives of Catholic social teaching—the dignity of the human person, social solidarity, subsidiarity in the organization of political life, law and government for the common good (with special attention to the needs of the poor), environmental stewardship, and religious freedom. Our ambition is to envision metropolitan Chicago in 2109 as a flourishing agrarian-urban unit.

*The Notre Dame Plan of Chicago 2109* is not a unitary proposal to be imposed, but rather a visionary framework within which to promote a thousand different projects. Nevertheless, its scope and ambition are comprehensive, addressing problems (and proposing some solutions) on issues ranging from transportation (Figure 1), to land use (Figure 2), to storm and wastewater management (Figure 3), to settlement-type size, density, form, and structure (Figure 4). It will also address sustainable building construction and materials, the phased adoption of a regional land value tax, and the symbolic content of Chicago's formal order itself. This last issue in particular is addressed by our proposal to establish a north-south "sacred" cross-axis at the heart of Chicago's historic centre (Figures 5 & 6) that gives places of prominence for representative houses of worship from Chicago's existing religious communities, and is also a physical embodiment in the public realm of America's historic principles of religious free exercise and non-establishment.

We do not presume that achieving any of these ambitions will be easy, nor do we imagine the ambition represented by our sacred axis proposal in particular would go uncontested. (It was not uncontested even in the design studio in which it originated.) Nevertheless, we envision this kind of alternative developmental urbanism for Chicago because we believe

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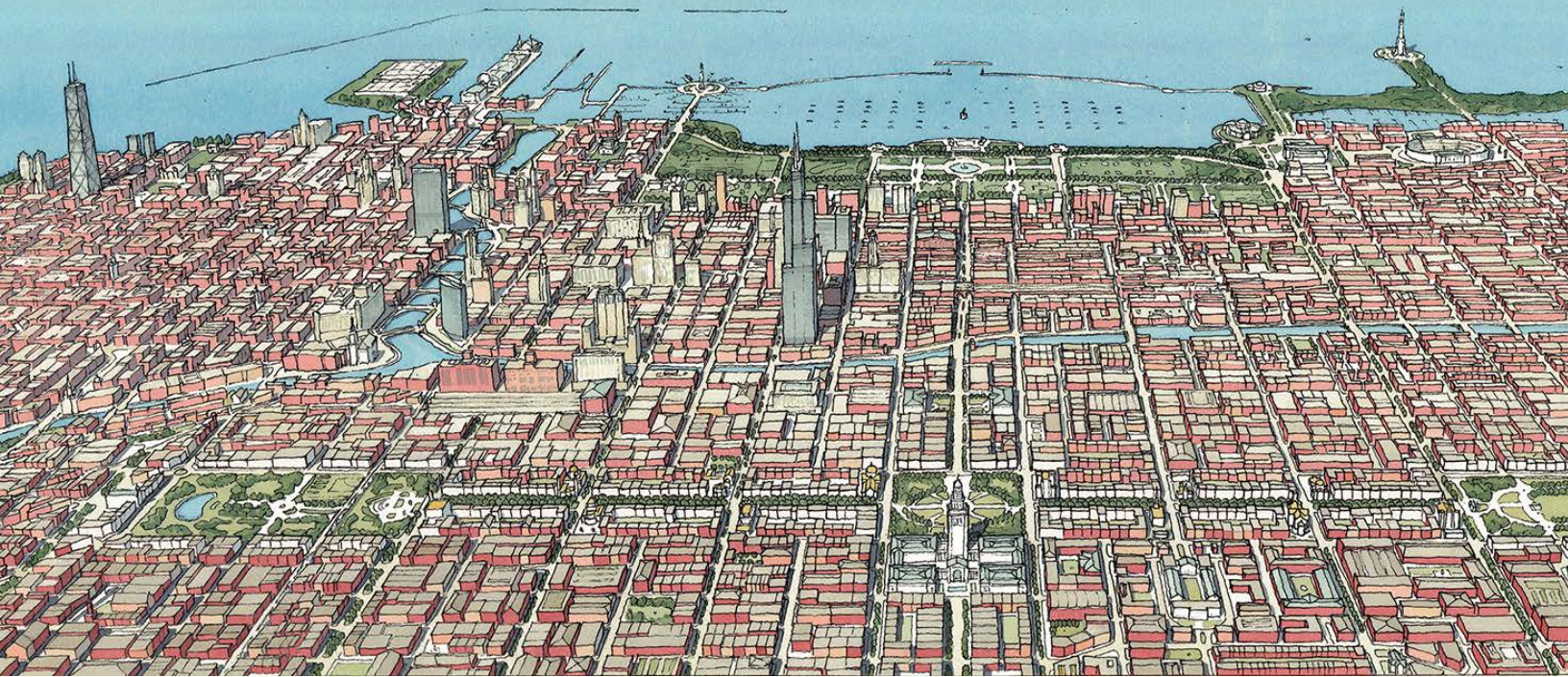


Figure 6: Chicago 2109 Proposed Historic Centre, looking east

the current trajectories of secularist culture, the global economy, hyper-modern architecture, and suburban sprawl ultimately are economically, environmentally, and anthropologically unsustainable. We think that if the human race has a future, then both religion and traditional urbanism have a future.

I am both worried and hopeful about the future. I am most worried about our apparent trajectory toward (and the near prospect of) civil war. My hope comes in part from the gospel and in part from the students I have taught, for whom I pray. But my conjectures about the future of religion have to do with both religion's and my convictions about metaphysical realism: that reality is real, and that human beings flourish when we conform ourselves to reality in virtuous ways. Both religion and traditional cities have long, if not always, existed to promote human flourishing. If we are to flourish, it seems to me most likely it will be in traditional cities in which religions are recognized for the social and spiritual goods they provide, and hold places of honour in the formal order of the city.

[For a more complete account of *The Notre Dame Plan of Chicago 2109*, go to [www.after-burnham.com](http://www.after-burnham.com) ]