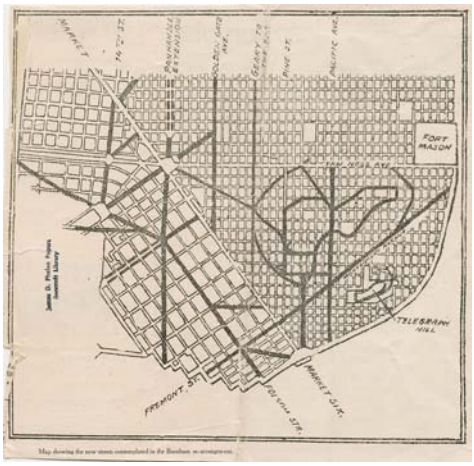

Burnham, Daniel Hudson, 1846-1912.
Report on a plan for San Francisco, by Daniel H. Burnham, assisted by Edward H. Bennett. Presented to the mayor and board of supervisors by the Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco. Ed. by Edward F. O'Day. September MCMV. [1905]
Bancroft F869.S3.9.B96 \x\

Room Five: Reconstructing a New City

A New Plan for Chinatown

When the time came to consider a comprehensive plan for San Francisco's reconstruction, James Phelan was triumphant. Was there not already such a design – commissioned by himself – just waiting to be implemented? A man of order, the former mayor had long detested the haphazardness of the city's layout, as well as the rabble who contributed human disorder. He wanted San Francisco to be a beautiful place, in the manner of Paris or Washington, DC. In 1904, Phelan had contracted Daniel Burnham of Chicago, the country's most famous urban planner, to come up with an entirely new vision of San Francisco.

Burnham had a great deal of experience when it came to large projects He was the foremost practitioner of the "City Beautiful" aesthetic, which dictated that architectural beauty and order inspired civic pride within urban residents. Burnham's plan for San Francisco proposed to change the city completely. His 184-page report, replete with 30 large photographs and 23 maps and plans, included broad new boulevards and circular trafficways, parks, and municipal facilities. If realized, the new city would be a radical departure from what it was before the earthquake and fire.

The Burnham Plan required a great deal of patience, money, and wholesale cooperation from property owners – a fact that doomed it from the start of reconstruction. While visually appealing, the Burnham Plan did not allow San Franciscans who wanted to rebuild quickly to do so. It also demanded that some property owners abandon their previous sites altogether to make way for parks or thoroughfares. The cost of implementation itself would be staggering, and residents wanted to invest in themselves, not Phelan's proposal.

This was especially good news for the Chinese population since the Burnham Plan eradicated Chinatown from San Francisco altogether. In a concerted effort to save their community from being uprooted, Chinese leaders convinced municipal leaders and the neighborhood's landlords that the "New" Chinatown should be rebuilt in a distinctive Oriental style that would attract more tourism and business, thereby boosting San Francisco's economy as whole. The results were the familiar

curved eaves, colorful street lanterns, recessed balconies, and gilded facades that we today instantly associate with Chinatown. Most importantly, the enclave was rebuilt at its original locale.