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Title

Revitalizing Chicago Through Parks and Public Spaces [Place Views]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8rd7b2xv>

Journal

Places, 15(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

2003-07-01

Peer reviewed

Revitalizing Chicago Through Parks and Public Spaces

Richard M. Daley

People sometimes think of steakhouses and smoky bars when they think of Chicago — and we do have them. We also have elevated trains that show up all the time in movies and on television. We have plenty of factories and railroads and hard-working people who are responsible for our nickname, “the city of big shoulders.”

But there is a softer side of Chicago. It is reflected in projects as small as the window boxes on City Hall and the playlots in our neighborhoods, and as large as our new Millennium Park, which is being built over downtown railroad tracks at a cost of more than \$300 million, most of it from the private sector.

Come to Chicago and you will see flowers and shrubs in the street medians, not just downtown, but in the neighborhoods as well. This is a result of our Landscape Ordinance, which requires developers of everything from office buildings to parking lots to install and maintain landscaping around their property and on the public way.

You will see neighborhood fountains. We have built and renovated a dozen of them, including one that was 117 years old. Besides being beautiful, fountains are natural gathering places, and they cool off a public space during hot summer days.

You will see more trees than you expected. We have planted more than 300,000 since I became mayor in 1989, to beautify the city and reduce noise, air pollution, and summer heat. On top of City Hall, there is a rooftop garden, containing 20,000 plants of more than 150 species. Because green roofs are cooler than dark roofs, we expect to save \$4,000 a year in heating bills, and we hope to inspire the owners of private buildings to build their own gardens.

Trees, flowers, parks, attractive open spaces: these things are contagious. When people experience them, they want more of them. And they are willing to pay for these places, because they know they are getting something for their money. I believe that cities that pay real attention to quality of life will be those that thrive.

Part of this is psychological. Cities are vibrant and exciting, but they also can be overwhelming and intimidating. Parks soften the rough edges of a city, calm your nerves, make you feel a little more in control of things. They are also the essential building blocks of strong neighborhoods.

Over the last fifty years many Chicago neighborhoods lost their cohesion as families moved to the suburbs. I am convinced that the main reason for this flight was the decline of the city’s public schools. That is why the education of our children is my number-one priority, central to everything else we are trying to accomplish in Chicago:

creating jobs, reducing crime, attracting industry and ending poverty.

As the schools lost their effectiveness as community anchors, the same thing happened to neighborhood parks, libraries, and other public spaces. People stopped using them, and the city stopped taking care of them. Or maybe people stopped using them because the city stopped taking care of them. It was a downward spiral.

Government cannot expect people to take care of their property unless government takes care of its property. How can people believe we value education if we allow our schools to deteriorate? How can people believe we value neighborhoods if we allow our parks to deteriorate?

Now we are rebuilding these community anchors. Since 1996 we have spent some \$600 million on capital improvements to city parks, including fieldhouse repairs, skate parks, playgrounds, water parks, batting cages, beach improvements, lagoon rehabilitation, and junior golf courses. We’ve made our parks safer, as well.

Besides rebuilding schools, parks and libraries, we are getting administrators in charge of these facilities to work together on programs, especially on summer and after-school programs involving learning and recreation. For example, we have a program called After School Matters, which offers courses in the arts, technology, and sports to thousands of youngsters. This program links each of twenty-four high schools with a nearby park and library. Some of the students learn computer skills and Web-page design at the library. Others go to the parks to train for jobs as summer camp counselors, lifeguards, scorekeepers, and coaches at public parks and private athletic clubs.

Finding New Park Space

Improving parks and their programs is one thing. Adding new parkland is more difficult because Chicago, like many other older cities, has been fully developed for many years. Chicago has less parkland per capita than most other big cities, so we are trying to acquire new parkland any way we can, in big tracts and small.

One of our most successful efforts has been our “campus park” program. Some time ago, the people in charge of the Chicago Public Schools decided to pave over most schoolyards with black asphalt. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time, but it does not make for very attractive or usable space. We are tearing out the asphalt; planting grass, trees and shrubbery; adding benches and playground equipment when appropriate; and turning these areas into campus parks.

School children use these spaces on weekdays, and neighborhood residents use them in the evenings and on



weekends. This has brought community residents closer to the schools, both literally and figuratively, and that is vitally important when you are trying to generate support for public schools. We have already built one hundred campus parks, which added well over two hundred acres of open space, and we will complete twenty more campus parks by next spring.

Another program is called NeighborSpace. It is designed to help turn vacant lots and river edges into small parks and gardens. Many of these lots were tax-delinquent, or were taken over by the city after being abandoned by their owners. Since its inception, NeighborSpace has responded to the needs of many communities throughout Chicago. Currently, NeighborSpace is working with thirty-nine community groups to preserve and protect these unique community-managed open spaces, and is looking to establish another twenty in the near future.

Obviously, we cannot expect the Chicago Park District to manage all these little spaces. So we created a not-for-

profit corporation to take them over, add improvements such as fencing and running water, and provide liability insurance to community groups that manage them. So far, this program has acquired 21 acres of underutilized property and converted it into 72 community gardens and parks.

We have a long-range program to turn the Chicago River into Chicago's second shoreline, by acquiring land for nature trails, fishing areas, canoe launches, and other recreational assets. We've already acquired thirty acres of public open space along the river, and are working on more. In 1998 the city began requiring all new riverfront developments to be set back thirty feet from the river and to have a landscaped public path. Since then, through 36 private river developments, we have created more than seven miles of riverwalk.

Above: A riverwalk is becoming Chicago's "second shoreline." Photo courtesy of Chicago Mayor's office.



We are also preserving Chicago's native landscape through our largest park project, the Calumet Open Space Reserve: 4,000 acres of prairies, wetlands and forests, surrounded by an equal amount of industrial land on Chicago's far southeast side. About 1,200 acres already is publicly owned. The city and the state intend to acquire and clean up 2,600 acres. The first parcel, 117 acres, is being donated by the Belt Railway of Chicago as part of a mitigation requirement for filling wetlands in its suburban rail yard.

Whenever possible, we try to create parkland on the site of new developments. Not far from the Calumet Reserve the Ford Motor Company is building a new factory on a large brownfield site between two inland lakes. It will be surrounded with native plants, and an existing ditch will be turned into a meandering stream. Downtown, six acres of parkland and a new school are being created as part of the Illinois Center development.

We are doing all these things for the people of Chicago, not just to attract tourists or conventioners or suburbanites or new businesses. The nice thing is, if you improve

the quality of life for the people who live in your city, you will end up attracting new people and new employers. If you offer the quality of life that people desire, they will want to live in your city. It's as simple as that.

Getting Agencies in Gear

I am often asked to provide advice on how to transfer some of Chicago's successful programs to other cities. I am reluctant to do that, because every city is organized differently and has different financial and political considerations to deal with. So I prefer to make some fairly general recommendations.

First, as should be obvious by now, I believe you have to take a holistic approach. The programs I've described involve at least twelve city departments and agencies. Some of them are directly under the mayor's control; others are governed by separate boards. No department is concerned exclusively with quality of life and attractive public spaces — so all of them have to be. And it is the mayor's responsibility to keep them on the same page.

One of my strategies is to put talented generalists in charge of the agencies that deal most directly with quality-of-life matters. I wholeheartedly agree with the following statement from the 2000 Project for Public Spaces handbook *How To Turn a Place Around*:

The professionals responsible for activities that directly impact public spaces — such as planning, traffic and transit, recreation and education — have roles that are peripheral to those spaces.

Top left: Aside from helping green the city, a new City Hall roof garden is expected to save \$4,000 a year in heating bills. Photo courtesy of Chicago Mayor's office.

Top right: Congress Street median. Photo courtesy of Chicago Mayor's office.

Bottom left: Businesses will pay for flowers and landscaping in commercial areas. Photo courtesy of Chicago Mayor's office.

Bottom right: Bus-stop planters calm nerves in a hectic city environment. Photo courtesy of Chicago Mayor's office.

Therefore, when an idea stretches beyond the reach of an organization, people are often told, "It can't be done." But . . . often what they really mean is: "We've never done things that way before."

That describes my experience, in attempting to reform the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Park District. So I put outsiders in charge of both agencies. I named my budget director to head the school system. His successor has a degree in sociology from Harvard, but is not a professional educator. The current Park District Superintendent was formerly Deputy Commissioner of the city's Department of Planning and Development. The true professionals at both the Park District and the Chicago Public Schools strongly embraced our reforms. Many of them had been waiting for leaders who were willing to think outside the box.

The Park District's costs kept going up, but service wasn't improving. So we privatized a great many functions, ranging from parking to garbage collection, reducing the public payroll from 4,100 to less than 3,000. We shifted power from the downtown bureaucracy to the individual park managers, and insisted that they work with members of the community to create the programs people wanted.

This seems like something that should happen automatically, but we all know it doesn't. Too many administrators ask, "How will this program affect my department?" rather than, "How will this program improve the quality of life of the people in my City?" Our Campus Park program required ongoing cooperation and funding from the Chicago Park District, the Chicago Public Schools, and the city, each of which has its own governing board and its own bureaucracy. It worked because all the agencies were willing to view it as more than a school program and more than a park program. It was a people program.

I expect this kind of thinking from all my department heads. My Transportation Commissioner is responsible for street construction and repair, but the purpose of his job is not to run as many cars and trucks through the city as fast as possible. He's concerned, like everyone else, with quality of life. So the city's Department of Transportation is an active participant in our Greenstreets program, which works with the private sector, the state transportation department, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Morton Arboretum to bring more trees, plants, window boxes, and hanging baskets into the city.

It can be very difficult to get government agencies to set aside their turf battles and work together for the common good. But it can be done, if you can get the public behind you. All the programs I've been talking about have great

public support in Chicago. People want attractive, livable neighborhoods, with good parks and comfortable public spaces. They want those of us in government to provide them, and they don't have time to deal with arbitrary governmental divisions.

Footing the Bills

You're probably wondering, how do we pay for all of this? Fortunately, the Chicago Park District is comparatively well funded. It has its own governing board with the authority to levy taxes and create its own budget. The District also receives a lot of user fees — from the Bears and other groups that rent Soldier Field, from boaters who rent dock space, and from gourmet restaurants in the parks.

We've been able to tap a number of other private sources for help. The Cubs, White Sox, and Bulls have donated millions toward ball fields, batting machines, and basketball courts. Businesses and merchants associations often pay for flowers and landscaping in commercial areas. After all, their businesses benefit.

Like the suburbs, Chicago has imposed impact fees for park funding. They've raised \$10 million since 1998. Chicago's parks have benefited from the generous support of foundations, most notably the Wallace Fund, which contributed almost \$2 million toward the Garfield Park Conservatory, its children's garden, and other projects. The money was donated not to the Park District but ten community-based groups, furthering the public-private partnerships that are so necessary for successful parks. And it leveraged another \$4 million of public and private support.

We have received substantial private-sector contributions toward our 25-acre Millennium Park in downtown Chicago, just north of the Art Institute. About two-thirds of the cost will be financed through the parking garage, and the rest through private donations. So far, individuals and companies have pledged \$120 million, and we expect between \$25 million and \$30 million more. Chicago is fortunate to have such a public-spirited business community, but yours may be just as generous. It can't hurt to ask.

We believe our efforts to make Chicago attractive and livable are generating a big return on investment. That return can't always be measured in dollars and cents, but it helps build community pride, spirit and confidence.

This article is based on excerpts from Mayor Richard M. Daley's address to the "Great Parks, Great Cities" conference, July 31, 2001.