

Center for City Park Excellence



Millennium Park, Chicago

Urban Parks are Making a Comeback

by Peter Harnik, October 2008

In January 1954, in an orange grove far outside Los Angeles, ground was broken for Disneyland. Fifty years later, in July 2004, on top of a railyard in the heart of Chicago, the ribbon was cut for Millennium Park. Two very different parks, each caused an enthusiastic uproar; together they may well serve as the cultural landscape brackets of the Baby Boom generation.

From the moment Disneyland opened it became the new paradigm of a park experience—corporate, programmed, extravagant, rural, flawless, and electrifying. It was not a coincidence that after Disneyland opened, the old urban park systems—unprogrammed, democratic, unpredictable, and free—began grinding down relentlessly everywhere from Franklin Park in Boston to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. There was something completely new in the air and it was exciting: The park experience could be sanitized! Social classes could be segregated! Suburban backyards would meet most of the old city park needs, and Disneyland—or the concept of Disneyland—would pick up the rest.

Now, those original Disneyland children have gray hair, aching backs, and worn-out knees. The thrill of spending \$400 for a family day trip to an amusement park has faded. The backyard has become a hassle and the stairs to the second floor tedious. A condo downtown might be a lot of fun, particularly if it's near . . . that fabulous new Millennium Park. No thrill rides (thank God!), but their more mature equivalents: eye-popping sculpture, wonderful fountains, concerts every week, a sumptuous garden that changes with the seasons, theater, bicycle parking, ice skating in the winter (do you think we can still skate?), two restaurants, a serpentine bridge that will wow visiting relatives, a constant stream of interesting humanity to watch, and, finally, a sense of being back in the center of things.

Millennium Park has exploded onto the American urban park scene with an impact not felt since Central Park was unveiled in 1873. Numerous wonderful parks opened in the interim, but the Millennium phenomenon is due to a “perfect storm” of location, artistic luminosity, politics,

*The Trust for Public Land
conserves land for people to enjoy
as parks, gardens, and other natural places,
ensuring livable communities
for generations to come.*

and controversy, all greased by fantastic sums of money and fanned by the extraordinary publicity machine of America's most competitive city.

There won't be another Millennium Park—not for another 50 years, at least—but its psychological and political impact will continue making waves for quite some time. Millennium Park is a line drawn in the sand. It's a commitment by Chicago to itself as a city. By extension, it's a commitment to all cities as places that have relevance and importance. Suddenly many cities are vying to make their marks in the "Welcome to a Great and Green Downtown" sweepstakes—Houston (with Discovery Green), Santa Fe (Railyard Park), Los Angeles (Los Angeles State Historic Park), Boston (Rose Kennedy Greenway), and even Oklahoma City (Core-to-Shore Park). Frankly, there is hardly a city worth its salt not considering some kind of new green gathering spot around which to design a swinging downtown. Disneyland might technically still be fun, but it no longer rules.

Ironically, artificial Disneyland has many of the elements that real downtowns strive to provide: walkability, wonderful forms of transit, even boat rides reminiscent of the San Antonio Riverwalk.

Ironically, artificial Disneyland has many of the elements that real downtowns strive to provide: walkability ("Main Street Disneyland"), wonderful forms of transit (from trolleys to cable cars to monorails), even boat rides reminiscent of the San Antonio Riverwalk. But mayors and city councils are now realizing that they can set a comparable stage downtown and let the energy and ingenuity of individual entrepreneurs—rather than a single company—meet the public's many needs and desires.

The stage they set downtown is nearly always a park. For city park advocates the iron is now hot. From Millennium Park on down, we have a stream of shiny new symbols as powerful in the urban realm as an Empire State Building, a Camden Yards stadium, a Golden Gate Bridge, a towering Los Angeles freeway interchange, a Washington Metro system, or a Rock and Roll Museum. There are hugely powerful economic and social forces at work in our cities, and we can proudly assert ourselves among the biggest of them. We've got the beautiful and animated space around which they can build their structures, house their residents, welcome their workers, lure their tourists, and provide a destination for their transit.

Park lovers have struggled through decades of bad politics, missed connections, lost opportunities, and fading beauty. But we're now finally in a place where our ideas—and our parks—can shine.

Peter Harnik is director of the Center for City Park Excellence of The Trust for Public Land and is the author of *Inside City Parks* (Urban Land Institute, 2000). This editorial was adapted from a piece in the *Journal of Urban Affairs* and appeared in the September 2008 issue of *Parks & Recreation* magazine.

Contact:
Peter Harnik
Director, Center for City Park Excellence

The Trust for Public Land
660 Pennsylvania Ave., S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.543.7552
peter.harnik@tpl.org