

Pomp vs. People: The Meaning of Millennium Park

By Rutherford H. Platt

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Among the world's great urban streetscapes, there are few rivals to Chicago's Michigan Avenue where an escarpment of landmark buildings faces a collage of parks and the Chicago Art Institute, with Lake Michigan beyond. Dedicated in 1836 to remain "forever open, clear, and free," the lakefront between Randolph Street and Roosevelt Road is shared by Grant Park and Millennium Park--two Chicago icons that bookend the past century.

Grant Park, a showcase of the "city beautiful" rage of the early 1900s, exudes an "old order" focus on how a park (or a city) *looks*, especially to persons with the right taste and pedigree. Millennium Park--the \$470 million signature legacy of former Mayor Richard M. Daley and the park's impresario Ed Uhlir--reflects a "new order" that is guided by how a park (or a city) *feels* to the general populace and *serves* their diverse needs. (Those needs will be further served by Maggie Daley Park to be connected by pedestrian bridge to Millennium).

One hot July afternoon, I strolled through both parks and--like the yellow taxi in Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris"---I warped across time and social change. I wandered around Grant Park's mosaic of manicured lawns, hedges, and gardens along walks punctuated by statues, monuments and Buckingham Fountain surrounded by its marble nymphs and bronze dolphins.

On this summer afternoon, however, few people were in evidence. The immaculate gardens and lawns were cordoned off by dense hedges and barriers. Buckingham Fountain was fenced and posted against wading--not exactly "open, clear, and free."

I bought a cold drink and looked for a shady place to sit, but all benches beneath trees had been removed. I located a break in a hedge and plunked down on a forbidden patch of shaded lawn. Moments later, a homeless man dragging a pink suitcase did the same. I asked him why there were no shaded benches. His response: to discourage people like him from using the park. I gave him some money and watched him trudge off with his suitcase.

What a contrast awaited me a short walk up Michigan Avenue past the Art Institute. Millennium Park that afternoon was packed with people of every description strolling, sitting, wading, munching, clowning around the Cloud Gate mirrored sculpture ("The Bean"), or gazing at the ever-shifting faces on the digital towers of Crown Fountain--all on a 25-acre green roof above an underground parking garage and rail station!

Like the High Line in Manhattan, Millennium Park is thronged year-round. On a freezing December evening, I watched dozens of skaters stumbling around an ice rink to a Strauss waltz, free of charge like most of the park's attractions.

Millennium Park reinterprets "forever open, clear, and free" in many ways: 1) grass is meant to be sat upon; 2) a reflecting pond is to be splashed in or skated on; 3) its botanic garden is planted with native prairie species; 4) visitors may stay until late evening; 5) friendly security guards ride segways; 6) most signs describe park features and events rather than regulations; 7) no gates or walls separate the park from the city.

In short, Millennium Park radiates a new spirit of post-patrician humane urbanism--pluralistic, democratic, sustainable, uplifting, down-to-earth, and lots of fun.

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