



**Parks, People,
and Places: Making
Parks Accessible
to the Community**



COVER: *Cloud Gate*, a sculpture by British artist Anish Kapoor in Chicago's Millennium Park, at 66 feet long by 33 feet high (20 meters by 10 meters) is among the largest of its kind in the world. Inspired by liquid mercury and forged of a seamless series of highly polished stainless steel plates, the work's surface reflects the city's famous skyline and the clouds above.

(Photo: Millennium Park, Inc.)

N U M B E R 4

Parks, People, and Places: Making Parks Accessible to the Community

The 2005 ULI/Charles H. Shaw Forum on
Urban Community Issues

September 22–23, 2005

Prepared by Deborah L. Myerson

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ABOUT ULI

ULI—the Urban Land Institute is a nonprofit education and research institute that is supported by its members. Its mission is to provide responsible leadership in the use of land to enhance the total environment. ULI sponsors educational programs and forums to encourage an open, international exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences; initiates research that anticipates emerging land use trends and issues, and documents best practices; proposes creative solutions based on that research; provides advisory services; and publishes a wide variety of materials to disseminate information on land use and development. Established in 1936, ULI has more than 29,000 members in over 80 countries, representing the entire spectrum of the land use and development disciplines.

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**ABOUT ULI COMMUNITY
CATALYST REPORTS**

ULI is influential in the discussion of and debate on important national land use policy issues. To encourage and enrich that dialogue, the Institute holds land use policy forums that bring together prominent experts to discuss topics of interest to the land use and real estate community. The findings of these forums can guide and enhance ULI's program of work. They can also provide ULI district councils, ULI members, and others addressing land use issues with information that they can use to improve quality of life, advance community values, and—in the words of the ULI mission statement—“provide responsible leadership in the use of land in order to enhance the total environment.” *ULI Community Catalyst Reports* are intended to make the findings and recommendations of ULI land use policy forums relevant: accessible to and useful for practitioners at the community level, where land use decisions are made and their consequences most directly felt.

ULI Community Catalyst Reports can be downloaded free of charge from ULI's Web site (www.uli.org) or ordered in bulk at a nominal cost from ULI's bookstore (800-321-5011).

In Memory

CHARLES H. SHAW, SR.

(March 1, 1933–January 4, 2006)

ULI gratefully acknowledges Charles H. Shaw—former ULI chairman; chairman of the Shaw Company; and developer of Homan Square, a mixed-income neighborhood on Chicago’s west side—for his endowment of the annual ULI/Charles H. Shaw Forum on Urban Community Issues. The forums seek to bring issues related to the viability of urban neighborhoods to the forefront of ULI programs.

Charlie Shaw was a leader in the truest sense of the word. He had a tremendous influence on ULI’s transformation into an organization that has successfully expanded at both a global and local level. Few in the industry could match his energy, his enthusiasm, and his ability to keep coming up with good ideas. He packed a lot of experiences into a very full, rewarding life.

Richard M. Rosan
President

Contents

Introduction	vi
Principles for Making Parks Accessible to the Community	
Make No Small Plans	1
Ensure Effective Community Involvement	2
Design for the Place and Its Users	3
Support Parks through Public, Private, and Nonprofit Partnerships	4
Create Programs for Diverse Users	6
Manage Well and Cultivate a Constituency	8
Make Maintenance Consistent	9
Finagle Funding	9
Forum Participants	13

Introduction

At their best, urban parks play many roles for people of all ages and backgrounds: an aesthetic experience for some, a recreational one for others; a place for casual relaxation or for organized team sports; a site for arts, music, or other community events; a place to people watch or a place to enjoy solitude.

Parks are hubs that bring people together—not only by attracting residents and visitors, but also by drawing community members to participate in park programs or to volunteer their time, perhaps as members of advisory boards or as park ambassadors. Businesses recognize the value of parks, too, whether they benefit from a location on the economic perimeter of a park or demonstrate corporate stewardship by sponsoring park activities or facilities.

Thus, it is important to view parks not in isolation, but as integral parts of the community fabric. Parks are places for fun, recreation, and being close to nature, but they often play a pivotal role in community vitality and renewal. A derelict park with broken playground equipment and graffiti-covered benches reflects one image of a neighborhood and its city; an attractive, actively used park reflects a very different image. When a park is well maintained and hosts a range of programs that attract residents and visitors, the park is not only an asset in itself, but may also offer compounded benefits: drawing more customers for local businesses, helping to increase property values in nearby neighborhoods, and fostering greater civic involvement.

Participants in the 2005 ULI/Charles H. Shaw Forum on Urban Community Issues examined many strategies for successful parks, considered how to make parks accessible to the community, and identified a number of essential principles for parks, people, and places. Planning, active community participation, good design, and diverse programming are all key ingredients in a successful park system. Equally important are public, private, and nonprofit partnerships to support park programming and facilities; good management and maintenance; and dependable funding strategies.

Principles for Making Parks Accessible to the Community

Make No Small Plans

Parks embody a city's public realm. In many ways, how a city embraces its recreational open spaces and their diverse users reflects its sense of community and its quality of life.

A great parks system starts with a vision and a plan—both of which require periodic updates. The vision sketches the park's role in the community from the present into the future, describes the park's assets, and indicates how the park can serve diverse residents and visitors. To keep sight of the big picture, the park system should also

THE VALUE OF PARKS

According to David L. Fisher, executive director of the St. Louis–based Great Rivers Greenway District and former superintendent of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, there is no question that parks offer tremendous value to a community—from health and educational benefits to strengthened social connections, physical access, and safety. Positive environmental outcomes include the restoration of land, the preservation of open space, awareness of nature, improved water quality, and beauty. Economic returns can be realized through increased property values, opportunities for reinvestment, greater recreational opportunities, and enhanced commercial uses.

Established in November 2000 with the successful passage of the Clean Water, Safe Parks, and Community Trails Initiative in St. Louis City, St. Louis County, and St. Charles County, Missouri, the Great Rivers Greenway District is leading the development of a regionwide system of interconnected greenways, parks, and trails—known as the River Ring—in the greater St. Louis metropolitan area. As part of its regional mission, Great Rivers Greenway collaborates with its Illinois counterpart, the Metro East Park and Recreation District, in Madison and St. Clair counties. In addition, the district works in partnership with numerous municipalities and governmental and public agencies, and with private and nonprofit organizations. When complete, the River Ring will join the states of Missouri and Illinois and cover an area of 1,216 square miles (3,149 square kilometers).



CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT/CAROLINE OBOYLE

The 2.5-acre (one-hectare) Lurie Garden is a tribute to Chicago's motto, *Urbs in Horto* (*City in a Garden*), which refers to Chicago's transformation from a flat marshland to a major metropolis.

have its own master plan, which will reflect both the anticipated neighborhood uses and how the park fits into the larger municipal park system. The plan should:

- Consider who the park users are (by activity, age, gender, etc.);
- Identify the range of needs;
- Be adaptable to social, economic, and environmental changes.

Regularly revisiting the master plan provides opportunities to reexamine previous assumptions and to adapt to changes in demographics or park usage.

THE PRUNING TEAM: BALBOA PARK, SAN DIEGO

When city budget cutbacks eliminated one of its gardeners, the Inez Grant Parker Memorial Rose Garden—which features 2,400 rosebushes in 180 varieties—faced a challenge. In response, the San Diego Rose Society established the Rose Garden Corps, a group of volunteers who visit once a week to help prune the rosebushes and to provide other support for the garden.

PARKS IN NEED: COLUMBUS, OHIO

City parks that need cleaning up are publicized on “Parks in Need,” a page on the Columbus Volunteer Office’s Web site. Through the Volunteer Office, the city arranges for citizens, groups, neighborhoods, civic associations, and businesses to participate in cleanup projects to benefit the parks.

Ensure Effective Community Involvement

Community involvement makes the park more meaningful to local residents. Active residents, in turn, help ensure good stewardship, meaning that the park will remain an attractive place for active and passive recreation. Area residents can be involved in a wide range of ways: they may serve in an advisory capacity; participate directly in the planning process; help develop park activities; or simply provide general oversight, insisting on accountability and high standards of management.

Many city parks engage community volunteers in park projects and programs. Involving local residents in park planning and programming helps to cultivate support and an active constituency. Collaborative activities with the school district, such as environmental education programs, also attract children and their families to parks.

MANAGING AND MAINTAINING PARKS FOR THE LONG TERM

Landscape management, a multifaceted field that seeks to integrate human activity and landscape resources, includes the management of visual resources, recreational assets, natural and scientific areas, and cultural and historic resources; it also involves the reclamation and restoration of degraded landscapes. Robert Megquier, director of land preservation for CorLands, in the Chicago area, knows about the key role of consistent management and high-quality maintenance in ensuring that parks are safe and welcoming to the community. Megquier believes that effective landscape management and improved maintenance can make parks more accessible and inviting.

Megquier employs the ELM (elevated landscape management) system, a consistent approach to site management that improves the appearance of the park, addresses the health of the landscape, responds to community uses, and diversifies the landscape elements. Landscape elements include both natural features (streams, trees, and fields) and facilities (play equipment, tennis courts, swimming pools, ball fields, picnic areas, restrooms, parking areas, and grassy areas suitable for informal games).

An affiliate of Openlands Project, a national nonprofit conservation organization, CorLands is dedicated to helping communities in northeastern Illinois increase the quantity and quality of open space. Since its founding, in 1977, CorLands has used a variety of conservation tools to help local governments and private landowners save more than 10,000 acres (4,047 hectares) of open space, valued at more than \$400 million. CorLands provides technical assistance to communities and local governments, helping with land acquisition for parks and recreation, acquisition planning, conservation easements, and wetlands protection.

Design for the Place and Its Users

Design has an enormous impact on how users experience a park. Good, responsible design yields a beautiful, green, safe, clean park that will exert a strong positive influence on the community. The design of the park should be integrated with surrounding uses and should be accessible and appealing for users with a wide range of ages, backgrounds, interests, and abilities. Features such as lighting, seating (both movable and fixed), restrooms, and food and beverage sales all contribute to the comfort and appeal of a park. Aesthetic considerations should not stop at the park's boundaries: the perimeter of the park and the adjacent sidewalks are gateways, and are also an important part of users' experience.

It is critical for park design to remain current and to accommodate diverse users. Design options should respond to changes in community needs and in recreation trends. For example, adaptations in park design can address changes in fitness trends or in the demand for facilities such as dog runs or skate parks.

Support Parks through Public, Private, and Nonprofit Partnerships

Parks can benefit from many sources of support to fund staffing, maintenance, management, and programming. While a public agency is typically the lead source of support, contributions from the private sector are often crucial. In some cases, where a public agency is underfunded, understaffed, or mismanaged, private interests step in to revitalize a public park.

Private sources of support, however, are likely to be more prevalent in higher-income neighborhoods. Local governments should consider ways to distribute as equitably as possible the additional features and programs that are frequently available in parks in more affluent areas.

Partnerships for parks can take many forms and may vary widely in scale. At a neighborhood park, the local parks department may maintain playing fields while a private nonprofit organization organizes team sports. Local businesses may contribute to a “corporate cleanup day,” sponsor sports teams or playing fields, or underwrite special events. “Adopt-a-park” groups may help

In a small development in Berkeley, California, several homeowners decided to buy the last lot that came up for sale to create Greenwood Common, a shared open space with views of San Francisco Bay.

KATE HERROD/COMMUNITY GREENS, AN INITIATIVE OF ASHOKA: INNOVATORS FOR THE PUBLIC



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MERGING BACKYARDS TO CREATE COMMUNITY SPACE: CHANDLERS YARD, BALTIMORE

To make the block more attractive to potential homebuyers, developer Bill Struever carved a tree-shaded courtyard out of the backyards of 11 narrow rowhouses in the Chandlers Yard neighborhood in Baltimore. The neighbors of Chandlers Yard enjoy private yards and a pleasant green view from their homes.

As a selling point for an infill redevelopment project, a developer created Chandlers Yard, an inner-block park completely surrounded by the homes in a Baltimore neighborhood.

draw in volunteers for projects. “Friends of the park” groups can help to organize programs or to raise funding for new facilities, such as picnic benches or playgrounds.

In cities including Baltimore, San Francisco, and Oakland, neighbors have created “community greens”—shared open spaces that are established when residents of existing blocks merge portions of their backyards or convert unused alleyways into green corridors. Developers can also incorporate community greens into new residential projects.

INDIANAPOLIS: TREES FOR TOMORROW

Since 1990, nearly 12,000 trees have been planted in Indianapolis through Trees for Tomorrow. The goals of Trees for Tomorrow are:

- To significantly increase plantings of public trees in and around Indianapolis;
- To provide care to existing trees to enhance their longevity;
- To educate the public about the importance of trees to quality of life;
- To plant the right tree in the right place.



INDY PARKS

The curvilinear road in Indianapolis’s Brookside Park is one element of the Indianapolis Park and Boulevard Plan—the creation of George Kessler, an early-20th-century landscape architect active during the City Beautiful movement.

Trees for Tomorrow began in 1990 as a partnership between Indianapolis Power & Light Company and Indy Parks. Keep Indianapolis Beautiful, Inc., joined the partnership in 1998.

CHICAGO'S MILLENNIUM PARK

The stunningly beautiful Millennium Park, the most recent addition to Chicago's extensive lakefront park system, features gardens, ice skating, outdoor concerts, restaurants, festivals, fountains, and interactive public art. Created on what was once the site of commuter-rail lines, a parking lot, and neglected parkland, the 24.5-acre (9.9-hectare) park was developed with funding through a public/private partnership and had its grand opening in July 2004.

To finance the \$430 million park, the city contributed \$270 million, of which \$175 million came from construction bonds and \$95 million was allocated from tax increment financing bonds. Private efforts raised \$160 million for the park's amenities—and, in a separate campaign, \$60 million for the Harris Theater for Music and Dance.

Create Programs for Diverse Users

Park programs offer community members an opportunity to enjoy parks as a common space, creating social and civic ties. Programs for children and teenagers can help them develop life skills and experience positive social interactions. When residents participate in park programs, they have a greater stake in their parks and in their neighborhoods.

Programs—which can include a wide range of activities, such as nature walks, musical or theatrical performances, swimming lessons, and community gardening—are an opportunity to draw a wide variety of users. The key to excellent park programming is to create a range of activities for different ages and interests throughout the park. A periodic review of park users and their needs helps ensure that the park adapts its activities to changing populations.

The Joan W. and Irving B. Harris Theater for Music and Dance in Chicago's Millennium Park was designed by the architectural firm of Hammond Beeby Rupert Ainge, Inc. Lauded for its excellent sight lines and acoustics, the 1,525-seat venue has become the city's prime indoor performance space for medium-sized arts organizations.



MILLENNIUM PARK, INC.



CITY OF CHICAGO/MARK MONTGOMERY

Wrigley Square, in Chicago's Millennium Park, is anchored by the Millennium Monument, a graceful semicircular row of Doric-style columns that rise almost 40 feet (12 meters). The monument is a nearly full-sized replica of a structure that stood in the same location from 1917 to 1953.

BRINGING PROGRAMS TO THE PARKS: PARKWORKS, CLEVELAND

ParkWorks is a private, nonprofit organization focused on forging links between community and economic revitalization and park rehabilitation; downtown beautification and green-space development; recreational opportunities for all citizens; environmental education and improvement; and citizen involvement, technical assistance, and stewardship.

Based in Cleveland, ParkWorks encourages meaningful park programming and events to help residents come together to enjoy their local parks. Through its Small Grants Program, ParkWorks provides direct funding to community development corporations and other groups that undertake park programming and development.

Programs are also a prime opportunity to engage volunteers in organizing events. Local businesses and foundations are often enthusiastic supporters of special events such as concerts or movies.

Manage Well and Cultivate a Constituency

Strong park management not only yields day-to-day benefits, but also builds a long-term constituency to support public parks. However, parks departments, like other public agencies, may be subject to management decisions that are based on politics rather than sound practice. In other cases, park management may struggle between relying on the revenues generated by privately sponsored park events—which may bring in funds, but may compromise public access to the park—and serving the public interest.

To address these potential problems, some cities have created a permanent advisory group, such as a parks board, that serves as a “policy buffer.” The goals of the advisory group are to help keep the parks department accountable, to mitigate political influences, and to help maintain a reasonable balance in the public/private relationship for

park support. In some cases, the advisory group is also responsible for hiring decisions, to help ensure that park employees are hired on the basis of qualifications and not political ties.

A well-managed and appealing park system creates a high value for users, but only if they know about it. Marketing a city’s parks and programs—that is, ensuring that residents and visitors are aware of these tremendous public assets and use them to their fullest—is an important step in the creation of a successful park system.

AN ELECTED PARKS BOARD: MINNEAPOLIS

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB), a public entity founded in 1883 by legislative authority, oversees nearly 6,400 acres (2,590 hectares) of land and water, including 49 recreation centers and over 170 parks. Run by an elected board of directors, MPRB is an independent governing body, separate from the city of Minneapolis, that manages the city’s nationally recognized park system.

The MPRB involves the community widely in decision making, particularly in the case of capital projects. For each planning or construction project, the MPRB designates a citizen advisory committee composed of active neighborhood residents. The MPRB’s planning committee then presents the committee’s recommendations at a public hearing.

Make Maintenance Consistent

Park maintenance is closely linked to security: without proper care and maintenance, an urban park can quickly degenerate from a valued community asset to a fear-inducing safety hazard. Outcome-based maintenance and management standards for all parts of the park system can help to keep parks safe, clean, and welcoming.

What does good maintenance include? Pleasant, well-trained, and uniformed maintenance staff and park officials in clearly marked vehicles create a sense of careful oversight. Welcome signs that include the name of the park manager reinforce the idea that the park receives personal attention. Rigorous enforcement of rules (prohibitions against radios or open alcohol containers, for example) cuts off disorder at the lowest level, discouraging the potential for violent crime. Clean restrooms, regular trash removal, and prompt repair of broken equipment are important factors in making a good impression.

Finally, “eyes on the park”—in the form of park staff, visitors, or nearby residents—help to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere. In some communities, volunteer members of a “park watch” or an ambassador program regularly stroll or bike through the park wearing readily identifiable shirts or jackets.

Finagle Funding

For all the benefits that community residents enjoy in public parks, municipal park systems cannot always depend on reliable sources of funding. For example, parks often compete against essential services such as education and public safety. Many park systems find themselves facing high demand, high use, and plenty of parkland—but no dedicated revenues. Sometimes a large, high-profile park draws support and funding at the expense of more modest neighborhood parks.

A strong parks system needs a predictable, dedicated source of funding that is exempt from budget negotiations; at the same time, the funding source should not reduce—or appear to reduce—funding for other municipal services. Although private funding can be invaluable, excessive reliance on corporate sponsorship may risk transforming a public park into a private playground, with access by invitation only. A variety of options, stretching along a continuum from the purely public to the purely private, can produce a dedicated stream of funding.

“PARK HERE”: POST OFFICE SQUARE, BOSTON

Boston’s Post Office Square is home to a 1.7-acre (0.69-hectare) park that sits atop an underground parking garage. The design and construction of the park and garage were financed by a public/private partnership. Garage fees are designated to repay capital costs and to fund park maintenance.

**A HOTEL TAX FOR A PARK:
COOLIDGE PARK, CHATTANOOGA**

To finance Coolidge Park, a new downtown riverside park that is part of Chattanooga’s 21st Century Waterfront Plan, the city increased its hotel tax and solicited private donations. The park features a restored carousel, a pavilion, an interactive play fountain, and lots of open space.

**HELPING CHICAGO PARKS:
PARKWAYS FOUNDATION**

Parkways Foundation was created in 1994 to provide private support for the Chicago Park District (CPD). Because of the size, scope, and vision of the CPD, stretching taxpayer dollars to cover every priority is a challenge. Working in conjunction with the CPD, Parkways Foundation raises money to fund the redevelopment of specific parks and landmarks within the CPD.



MILLENNIUM PARK, INC.

**SUPPORTING INDY PARKS:
INDIANAPOLIS PARKS FOUNDATION**

The nonprofit Indianapolis Parks Foundation (IPF) secures private funding to support the Indianapolis parks system; helps Indy Parks and Recreation by providing funding for land acquisition, park programs, capital improvements, and maintenance; and advocates for high-quality parks and greenspace in Marion County. Since its founding, in 1991, IPF has received more than \$6.4 million in financial support from individuals, corporations, and foundations.

Designed by Frank Gehry, the 925-foot (282-meter) BP Bridge connects Chicago’s Millennium Park to Daley Bicentennial Plaza to the east, providing excellent views of the Chicago skyline, Grant Park, and Lake Michigan.

Typical public sources include the following:

- Bond revenues conveyed to public agencies;
- Dedicated yields from a sales tax or hotel tax;
- A tax allocation district or community-based assessment that produces an area-specific source of funding;

Federal TEA-21 funding, which can be used to support pedestrian and bicycle projects in parks. (TEA-21 stands for the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century.)

Private examples of park funding include the following:

- Business improvement districts with revenues designated for park management and maintenance;
- Asset-linked parks, which are funded by a profit-generating entity;
- A parks foundation, a private nonprofit that raises money for parks;
- Business sponsorships of park events or facilities, which are often granted in exchange for naming rights or other privileges.

TAXING AUTHORITY: MINNEAPOLIS PARK AND RECREATION BOARD

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) has taxing authority—and therefore has a dedicated revenue stream that pays for Minneapolis parks. The \$176 per resident that Minneapolis spends annually on its parks is one of the highest rates of per capita parks spending in the country. Approximately 70 percent of MPRB’s operating budget comes from a levy collected via local property taxes. Additional funds are generated through local government aid and on-site revenue sources.

BRYANT PARK RESTORATION CORPORATION: NEW YORK

The Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC), a private, not-for-profit management company and business improvement district, was formed in 1988 to restore Manhattan’s historic Bryant Park. The park reopened in 1991, after four years of renovation. BPRC is the largest effort in the nation to apply private management, backed by private funding, to a public park, and it has been a success with the public, the press, and nearby institutions. BPRC shares its management team with the 34th Street Partnership, a business improvement district (BID) established with the goal of maintaining safe, clean, well-lighted streets in the neighborhood in order to create an attractive and welcoming retail environment.

A DEDICATED SALES TAX: THE GREAT RIVERS GREENWAY DISTRICT, ST. LOUIS

The Great Rivers Greenway District, in metropolitan St. Louis, is funded by a 1/10th of 1 cent sales tax in St. Louis City, St. Louis County, and St. Charles County. It generates \$10 million annually to develop the River Ring, an interconnected system of greenways, parks, and trails. Greenways are open-space connectors that link parks, residential areas, nature reserves, commercial areas, civic amenities, cultural institutions, and historic sites.

COURTESY OF THE GREAT RIVERS GREENWAY DISTRICT



Bicyclists pedal along the River des Peres Greenway, a four-mile (6.4-kilometer) trail completed in 2005 that follows the River des Peres, in St. Louis. Future plans call for the trail to be extended to the meeting point of the River des Peres and the Mississippi River.

Mixed public/private strategies include the following:

- Developer exactions (in the form of cash or land), which are dedicated to parks when a new development is built;

- Linkages, in which a developer is required to build a park as part of obtaining approval for a project (the park is then maintained by the public parks department);

- Acquisition and conveyance by a private organization to a public agency.

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