RE-HUMANIZING THE COMMERCIAL CORE:

A MASTERPLAN FOR CHICAGO'S CENTRAL LOOP

A Thesis

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by

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Finally, I give my strong love and appreciation to Lindsay, whose compassion and support have brought excitement, comfort, and such tremendous meaning to the end of this long journey.
With the rapid industrialization of the early 20th century, the American city found itself on the verge of a dramatic transformation. No longer was it understood primarily as the physical embodiment of the civil society which created and inhabited it; no longer were age-old concepts such as public space and human scale upheld. Instead, in an age of industry where buildings were increasingly thought of as machines, fit to and designed by a very specific function, the city had become by extension a sort of factory. Expediency was the new rule, and it governed everything from the laying out of streets down to the articulation of the buildings that framed them. The idea of a “city made beautiful” – that had been promoted by late 19th century designers like Daniel Burnham, Frederick Law Olmsted, and others – was slowly being swept aside, leaving in its stead a new anti-urban habitat that was unlimited, fragmented, and harsh.

This thesis intends to study the nature and problems of the American city’s commercial core and – by an extension and adaptation of the principles of traditional urbanism – produce a new masterplan for the central business area
and lakefront of Chicago. Special attention will be given to the relationship of open public space within the urban fabric, as well as the correlative relationship of monumental buildings within open space. Ultimately, this plan will show how, through a process of defining and developing public spaces, establishing a hierarchical network of buildings and streets, and better addressing the notion of human scale, one can begin to re-humanize the American commercial core.
INTRODUCTION

A MORE CIVILIZED METROPOLIS

“To love and render service to one’s city, to have a part in its advancement, to seek to better its conditions and to promote its highest interests – these are both the duty and the privilege of the patriot of peace”

-Daniel H. Burnham

Since the dawn of civilization, the physical character of the human built environment has always constituted a direct reflection of the community that created it. A society’s religious beliefs, political structures, cultural attitudes, and socio-economic aspirations are manifest in the bricks and boards that make up the city, from the most modest house to the most magnificent cathedral. As Edmund Bacon explains, “the form of [one’s] city always has been and always will be a pitiless indicator of the state of his civilization… determined by the multiplicity of decisions made by the people who live in it.”

What, then, does the modern metropolis – whose glistening office buildings dominate the skyline,

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rising high above the spiritual, political, and cultural institutions below – have to
say about this society? Or indeed, what ought it say?

For thousands of years before the explosion of industry in the 19th century,
the city had grown and developed organically, with mixed-use, self-sufficient and
well-defined neighborhoods growing in close proximity to one another. Most
people lived within convenient walking distance of their respective places of
worship, work, commerce, education, and recreation. The proliferation of public
spaces – both indoors and out – over time was in response to the needs of the
citizens that depended upon them, and the design of buildings was a clear
expression of the traditions, common beliefs, and aspirations of the community,
recognizable and meaningful to all. This system of natural growth and
development kept the form of cities in a humane balance with the cultures that
inhabited them.

With the rise of automated vehicular transportation, the formation of large
commercial corporations, and the development of the skyscraper, however, the
urban setting was drastically transformed. The central area of the modern city is
still often the social and cultural hub of the community, but its principal function
is now commercial. Soaring land values have forced the city center to grow
upward, often to astonishing heights, and we are left with a downtown choked
with towering monuments to private interest, a city that lacks adequate public
space, fails to develop a sense of hierarchy and order, and altogether ignores the importance of human scale in the built environment. The heart of the city is no longer a rich, organic entity, but rather a machine for business, where ideas like efficiency and expediency have deposed ideals of beauty, propriety, and above all sustainability.

Even if one is to accept the reality of the mono-functional central business district and the dominance of the modern skyscraper – the quintessential monument to private interest – the continuing deterioration of the quality of the built environment would compel us to make some effort to bring order and humanity back to the streets, squares, and buildings of the American metropolis. Rather than rejecting the humane, traditional tenets of architecture and urbanism in favor of an industrial aesthetic that proclaims the triumph of the commercial, these principles must again be acknowledged as the appropriate instruments for the re-humanization of the built environment. And upon these foundations a more balanced, gentle American city can be built anew, developing over time into a rational urban paradigm and ensuring that clarity, dignity, and beauty once again become the guiding forces of urban design.

This thesis examines the planning and development of the American city, assesses the current condition of its commercial core, and proposes a new masterplan for Chicago’s central Loop and lakefront. Chicago has for many
years been at the forefront of architectural and urban design and provides an exceptional environment for the application of the principles illustrated here. It has spawned some of the most insightful and inspiring urban plans in the history of the American city, and yet one still finds great areas of unrealized potential; its rich history offers many unique lessons, yet the aggressive, modernist attitudes of its professional mainstream create a multitude of challenging conditions.

Above all, it is a city that would appear “untouchable,” too densely built and entrenched in its modern ways to accept the kind of formal visions that once guided its growth and development, giving it what civic qualities it has today.

While it is true that in an urban setting as highly developed as the Loop, the potential for drastic new interventions is limited, Chicago nevertheless provides excellent opportunities for an alternative approach to urbanism. Despite such tight parameters, a successful masterplan for Chicago may accomplish its objectives in few, concise (if limited) steps. These moves must be conceived of as paradigmatic examples of how to re-humanize even the most heavily built commercial core. Then, following Chicago’s lead, cities with more freedom of growth and design will be prompted to adapt and expand these examples to their particular circumstances.

The sheer scope of such an undertaking requires that this present masterplan focus primarily on formal solutions. It is not the intention of this
proposal to seek resolution of the countless associated technical aspects of city planning. Rather, its objective is to illustrate a broader system by which the American metropolis can begin to re-humanize its commercial core. Of greatest importance is the creation and formal definition of public spaces, the delineation of a clear hierarchy of streets, blocks, and buildings, and a renewed emphasis on designing to the human scale. Some of the gestures illustrated in this thesis are grand and general and others relatively specific, but the end goal is to provide a coherent and rational vision for the character of downtown Chicago, one that will ensure the development of the city over time as a harmonious, unified, and humane built environment.

It is time to shape a city that no longer affirms the temporal and monumentalizes private interest, but one that embodies the timeless and serves the ends of the common good.
CHAPTER ONE

DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN CITY

1.1 The Gridded American City

The American city has always found itself in a unique position by contrast with its older European counterparts. Where the European model typically benefits from a long history of growth that has allowed it to develop a rich, organic fabric, the American city was in most cases founded and expanded over the course of a relatively short time. This accelerated development – driven by the rush of new immigrants, the acquisition of large amounts of “unsettled” land, and the influx of industrialism – would produce a type of city whose reliance on the efficiency and simplicity of the grid would forever dominate the mindset of urban design in America.

The Earliest settlements in North America were Spanish colonies, such as St. Augustine, Florida (1565) and Santa Fe, New Mexico (1609). Later, the French and British would also begin to colonize America, but only the British colonies of New England – and related ones, such as Dutch New Amsterdam (New York) – would have a large-scale, lasting impact on the growth of America. A. E. J.
Morris attributes this to the English “establishment from the outset of permanent agricultural settlements.”¹ This gave the English an advantage over the smaller missions and trading posts of the Spanish and French, ensuring a strong hold on American soil, especially along the eastern shores of the continent. From very early in American history, these British towns and cities would provide the most prevalent model for growth throughout the new settlements.

This early American model of urbanism often followed a pattern that Morris describes as “controlled organic growth.”² In the initial development of cities like Boston and New York, growth occurred as in the medieval European city, through simple extension of the streets and blocks as they were required to meet the needs of the individual inhabitants. This organic type of growth eventually took the form of a gridiron pattern that conformed to site conditions and topographic situations. It is worth noting in the early plans of Boston (Figure 1.1) and New York (Figure 1.2) how the ordered nature of a grid system conforms to its geographic context. Peculiar conditions are created where the various axes collide, but these are translated as interesting moments within an otherwise clear and structured urban fabric.

² Ibid. p.333
Figure 1.1 Plan of Boston, 1640: This plan of Boston shows the more organic layout of the oldest part of the city; the blocks are still mostly rectilinear, but their orientation changes to adapt to the local topographic context (image from A. E. J. Morris. *History of Urban Form: Before the Industrial Revolutions*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994. p.331)
Other cities developed within a gridded system as well, but did so as part of an effort to define and idealized, prototypical approach to urbanism. In *Design of Cities*, Edmund Bacon describes the 1567 plan of an ideal city, drawn by
Pietro di Giacomo Cataneo under the inspiration of the writings of the ancient Roman architect, Vitruvius. This ideal plan consists of a gridiron framework, broken by a symmetrical distribution of large streets and public spaces (Figure 1.3). To what extent this plan had a direct effect on English and American city planning is uncertain, but authors like Bacon, John W. Reps, and A. E. J. Morris have illustrated the similarities that the plans of American cities like Philadelphia and Savannah have with several English plans for London’s reconstruction after the fire (especially that of Richard Newcourt – Figure 1.4) and the Cataneo plan of the 16th century.

Figure 1.3 Cataneo’s Ideal City: Pietro di Giacomo Cataneo’s plan of an ideal city, published in 1567, is based on Vitruvius and may have been the inspiration for later plans in England and America. (image from Edmund Bacon. Design of Cities. New York: Penguin Books, 1974. p.216)

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Wherever their origins lie, the plans of both Philadelphia (1683) and Savannah (1733) represent a compelling approach to city planning in America. Both sought to establish an efficient and orderly system for urban growth, but did so with a full understanding of the need for public spaces and a hierarchical network of streets. The gridiron system here is being used, as Morris describes, purely as means to an end, not as an end in itself. Growth occurred through the addition of repeatable units, each with the provision for common space within the urban fabric (Figure 1.5). Soon enough, however, the escalating demand for
“new land” to the west would force American expansion to follow a less inspired model of urban growth.

Figure 1.5 Growth of Savannah, 1733-1856: This plan shows the growth of Savannah by means of a repeatable unit; note also the similarity between each unit and the plans of Cataneo and Newcourt. (image from John W. Reps. The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965. p.201)

After winning the War of Independence, the United States was under great pressure to both ensure structured growth into the open territories to the west, as well as recover some of the new government’s expenses from the war. Seeking to accomplish both simultaneously, the Land Ordinance of 1785 was passed which illustrated a regularized model for all future land sales in the new
territories. It projected a rectilinear over the land, expandable and efficient, that would allow for the rapid transfer of property which was easy to locate and had carefully defined borders. Eventually, however, the speculative nature of the new American economy overpowered the wisdom of traditional urban design.

New townships were to be laid out in square partitions, 6 miles on each side, further divided into 36 sections of one square mile, each including provisions for a public school and government buildings. But the partitions were projected without consideration of any geographic conditions they encountered, thus suppressing any ambitions of urban designers to explore the adaptive possibilities of city design (Figures 1.6, 1.7). John W. Reps explains:

Perhaps the rectangular survey pattern for the west was the only system that could have resulted in speedy settlement and the capture of a continent for the new nation, but its results in city planning were dullness and mediocrity.  

While some architects and urbanists see the American grid as a powerful symbol of the infinitely free and equal nature of the country’s democratic heritage, its negative effects on the future of urban planning were irreversible.

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Figure 1.6 American Speculative Grid: This image represents a surveyor’s map from the first townships laid out in Ohio according to the Land Ordinance of 1785; note the way no effort is made to conform the planning pattern to local geographic conditions. (image from John W. Reps. The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965. p.217)
1.2 Rise of Industry and the Central Business District

The grid network was only the beginning of the “modern” city, though. By the middle of the 19th century, the United States was wrapped up in the
Industrial Revolution, the impact of which would entirely reshape not only the physical form of the city, but the American attitude towards the built environment more generally. As the labor force began to shift from agriculture to manufacturing, there was a marked need for the efficient transportation of commercial goods to other markets. This need was met by the rapid proliferation of rail lines throughout the country, and certain cities, like Pittsburgh and Chicago, owed their growth and success to their advantageous position along those lines. As A. E. J. Morris emphasizes:

> The effect of railway construction on the location, form, and function of urban America cannot be over-emphasized. For an established settlement it meant certain growth. The existence of the lines themselves led to inevitable track-side development. To be bypassed meant stagnation, if not effective commercial death.\(^6\)

Quickly, the heart of the American city – especially in the flourishing Midwest – became a sort of factory, its veins and arteries the rail lines and waterways that fed it. Businesses were forced to cluster around these transportation networks, and before long, the already dense center of the American city was being transformed into a denser urban core, whose form was predominantly dictated by big businesses and the services that they depended upon. In Chicago, for example, valuable land along the shore of Lake Michigan was given to the Illinois Central railroad, isolating the city’s fabric from its

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shoreline, a decision that still disrupts any attempt at unifying the lakefront Grant Park (Figure 1.8).

Figure 1.8 View of Chicago, 1892: This aerial view of Chicago shows the extent to which the city had built up along the grid over the course of the Industrial Revolution; note also the importance of water and rail transportation to the city as a railroad yard occupies the central lakeshore. (image from John W. Reps. *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965. p.303)

The city core was undergoing a massive physical transformation, but perhaps more importantly, it was the change in attitude toward the city that would have the greatest lasting impact on the American metropolis. The concept of a city’s center as its cultural heart was being suppressed to make way for the growing importance of the central business district. Factories and businesses
were taking precedence over civic spaces and institutions; escalating land values were breaking down the mixed-use neighborhoods of old and replacing them with a city center devoted to capitalist enterprise. As Lewis Mumford points out, “The city, from the beginning of the nineteenth century on, was treated not as a public institution, but a private commercial venture to be carved up in any fashion that might increase the turnover and further the rise in land values.”

1.3 Burnham’s Big Plans for Chicago

The evolution of the American city wasn’t always so bleak, however. In 1893, the city of Chicago hosted the World’s Columbian Exposition, an event the planning and construction of which would not only forever change the face of Chicago, but also become the driving force behind a wave of large-scale city planning projects throughout America in the City Beautiful movement. The Exposition saw the accomplished Frederick Law Olmsted as its landscape architect, and local architects Daniel Hudson Burnham and John Wellborn Root as supervisors of the design and construction of the buildings, just south of downtown in Jackson Park. What they created – together with the talented associates they hired – was a masterpiece, an elegant ensemble that brought

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Beaux-Arts classicism and an interest in masterplanning to the forefront of architectural and urban design in Chicago.


Some of Chicago’s finest civic buildings are either directly or indirectly indebted to the Exposition for their construction (the University of Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Science and Industry). More important, perhaps, was the influence of the fair on the collective mind of the city

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and its designers. Working to establish itself as a true center of culture in the
Midwest, Chicago was making its mark with the construction of grand new
public buildings and the establishment of new civic institutions, and the
planning and execution of the Columbian Exposition sparked a serious interest
in the long-term, unified planning of downtown Chicago. The fair’s success sent
a signal to the city that would eventually bring about one of the greatest and
most visionary city plans the American city has ever seen.

Daniel Burnham – working with Beaux-Arts architect Edward Bennett
and assisted by numerous committees and organizations throughout the city –
created a new urban plan to guide the growth and development of Chicago.
Aware that the city sat on the brink of major expansion, he thought that an
ordered and rationalized, yet artistically inspired, framework would be the only
way to ensure both civic beauty and commercial efficiency. Drawing precedents
largely from Paris and the work of Haussmann, he created a remarkable vision
for Chicago, one that organized transportation systems and integrated park
networks – but, most importantly – one whose ordered beauty and civic elegance
would make Chicago one of the great cultural centers of the world (Figure 1.10).
And while much of Burnham and Bennett’s 1909 Plan of Chicago was,
unfortunately, never realized, its lessons and ideas still guide and inspire the
growth of America’s Second City.
Figure 1.10 Chicago Civic Center: This image depicts a new civic center proposed for Chicago in Burnham and Bennett’s *Plan of Chicago* in 1909; this building is evidence of the classical grandeur the two architects were attempting to bring to Chicago’s civic institutions. (image from Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett. *Plan of Chicago*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993. plate CXXI)

1.4 Private Interest and Sub-Urban Retreat

The City Beautiful movement, however, did not last; by the middle of the 20th century, functional zoning was the new dominant force in urban planning.

Instead of self-sufficient and interconnected neighborhoods of mixed uses, the
various “zones” of urban life (residential, commercial, industrial, etc.) were increasingly being isolated from one another, preserving a sort of artificial order within the city. The intent seemed good, to cluster similar uses together so that the system can be more easily planned, serviced, and controlled. The result, however, was the accelerated over-commercialization of the urban core; people were moving (or being moved) out of the heart of the city and bigger and bigger businesses were filling their place.

Also at this time, the advent of faster means of transportation made it highly attractive for city dwellers to escape the increasingly oppressive living conditions in the dense commercial core. The idea of living outside the urban confines in which one worked was not a new one, but a multitude of new residential suburbs were emerging that offered their inhabitants a chance to live more affordably in a natural setting, each with his own home and plot of land, and simply commute to work. The increasingly dense, expensive, and often unsafe areas adjacent to the core, known as the “inner city”, were abandoned by anyone who could afford to. Roads and rail lines emerged to help the people who had just left the city find their way back to work every day, and the cycle continued, slowly draining the urban centers of their citizens as it turned control of the core – both physically and conceptually – to the private corporation.
Big businesses had been a part of the American city for generations, but with technological advances in constructional steel and the high-speed elevator, the city was able to grow upward as quickly as it was growing outward.

According to Lewis Mumford:

What holds true for the horizontal extension of the commercial city in the nineteenth century and later, holds true equally for its vertical expansion by means of the elevator... If fast transportation made the horizon the limit for urban sprawl, the new methods of construction made the ‘sky the limit,’... Apart from any functions it might better serve by piling one floor upon another, the high rise building became a symbol of ‘modernity’.9

And more than just standing as symbols of modernity, the modern skyscrapers of the mid- and late 20th century became monuments to private interest. They were the perfect physical manifestation of capitalism, and their dominance of the city skyline served to undermine any civic character that the city’s image may yet hold.

With this final phase of development, the American commercial core was left much as it is today. In most major cities, the heart of the urban fabric has been almost entirely surrendered to the towering structures of big businesses (Figure 1.11). The civic components of the city have been eroded and the new image of downtown is one of a constantly changing commercial “machine.” Mumford points out the destructive effect that this holds on the collective consciousness of the city:

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The city itself becomes consumable, indeed expendable: the container must change as rapidly as its contents. This [attitude] undermines a main function of the city as an agent of human continuity. The living memory of the city, which once bound together generations and centuries, disappears: its inhabitants live in a self-annihilating moment-to-moment continuum.10

Figure 1.11 Aerial View of Chicago: The dominance of the modern commercial skyscraper over the city of Chicago’s skyline is clear in this aerial photograph looking north; note that only the freestanding public buildings (those in the park) can be clearly identified from the masses of private commercial structures. (image from Robert Cameron. Above Chicago. San Francisco: Cameron and Company, 1992. p.15)

10 Ibid. p.545
The steady decline of the American city has been an understandable and direct consequence of the forces which have shaped this country from its conception, but if the city is to recapture the civic integrity that it once had, its commercial core must again be nurtured with the traditional values of urban design that have guided the design of cities for millennia.
2.1 Reemergence of Traditional Urbanism

The modern city is not a necessary evil. As early as the 1960s and 1970s architects, urbanists, and other critics were examining the problems that plagued the city, engaging in a discourse that challenged the post-WWII conception of urban life in America. Among these were Jane Jacobs and Vincent Scully, Aldo Rossi and Léon Krier. There was, and still is, great disagreement about exactly what the problems were and precisely how to solve them, but the need for change was indisputable. But despite their varying approaches, there was a common call by these critics to reexamine the time-tested urban design principles of old and restore dignity and humanity to the city.

One of the most influential of these thinkers was Léon Krier, a native of Luxembourg and staunch proponent of the traditional foundations of architecture and urbanism. Many of his theories and design projects are collected in the book, *Architecture: Choice or Fate*. Here, he enumerated countless faults of the modern city, from its alienating architectural aesthetic to its
ecologically devastating sprawl. Through a series of written arguments, provocative diagrams, and detailed exemplary projects, he illustrates the destructive effects of modern city planning and calls for a renewal of the traditional rationalism that produced the marvelous historic cities of Europe and the rest of the world. Krier states:

There are forms of high risk mega-developments which produce mega-profits and mega-failures. There are others based on individual talent and enterprise which stimulate civilised competition, and lead to humane and agreeable towns. The traditional city performs the miracle of allowing contrasting and competing ambitions, the most modest and greatest of talents to strive and thrive as neighbours; to build in harmony. That is the definition of urbanity and urban civilisation.¹

Central to his argument is a focus on the negative impact of functional zoning and, in turn, the sub-urban flight that ensued (Figures 2.1, 2.2). Krier argues that the socially and ecologically balanced traditional city was a city of discrete, yet interdependent, urban communities. Each community was self-sufficient and its size and scale were determined by pedestrian relationships. In the traditional city, each citizen is afforded the right to work, play, shop, and worship, all within a reasonable walk from his home. Thus, a true balance is achieved.

¹ Krier, Léon. *Architecture: Choice or Fate*. Windsor: Andreas Papadakis Publisher, 1998. p.86
Figure 2.1 Urban Overexpansion: Léon Krier’s diagram illustrates the “vertical and horizontal ‘overexpansion’ “ of the modern city; here he contrasts that expansion with a natural growth by means of creating new, self-sufficient quarters. (image from Léon Krier. *Architecture: Choice or Fate*. Windsor: Andreas Papadakis Publisher, 1998. p.88)
Figure 2.2 Suburban Attack: Krier’s cartoon shows the destruction of the mature city at the hands of suburban development. (image from Léon Krier. *Architecture: Choice or Fate*. Windsor: Andreas Papadakis Publisher, 1998. p.91)

Other authors have argued the virtues of traditional design as well. Carroll William Westfall offers an approach that begins on a political level, citing the relationship that the built city must have with its citizens, bettering their individual lives and ennobling their collective spirit. Then, his discussion focuses on the component elements that make up such a city for the common good, listing six principal building types (Figure 2.3). Each of these is representative of the political function it supports – the temple (celebrating), tholos (venerating), theater (imagining), regia (governing), dwelling (dwelling),

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and shop (sustaining) – and he argues it is only in the harmonious composition of all the appropriate types that the humane city can be achieved. From the works of Hegemann and Peets to Léon Krier, Camillo Sitte to C. W. Westfall, the theoretical framework and guidelines are once again available for the appropriate redesign of the modern city; what were missing until recently are the built projects that could impel such a renaissance.

![Diagram of six building types](image)

Figure 2.3 The Six Building Types: This diagram depicts Westfall’s six principal building types and their essential forms. (image from Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall. *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. p.160)

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2.2 New Urbanism and its Objectives

Over the past quarter century, a new movement has been gaining momentum which seeks to adapt the traditional principles of urban design to a contemporary standard and framework of living. Inspired by the arguments of Léon Krier and others, and promoted by architects and urbanists such as Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Peter Calthorpe, this collective commitment to the design philosophy of the traditional community has been coined the “New Urbanism”, and its rational approach to urban design has gained world recognition. While mostly focused on the design and development of new outlying towns, New Urbanism’s claim is that the same principles of design – such as the definition of edges, relationship to the human scale, and hierarchy of components – can be readily applied to the built environment at every level, from the dense urban core to the suburban context. Only their application changes.

Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk have proposed that “the fundamental organizing components of the New Urbanism are the neighborhood, the district and the corridor.” In this new urban model, the district is a specialized urban zone within the city (designed around a specific function, though not exclusively) and the corridor is the “connector and

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that promotes circulation throughout the components. The most critical of the three elements, though, is the neighborhood, for it is in here that all the various functions of city life come together. If the neighborhood promotes an appropriate mixture of functions and a positive sense of community, be it more rural or more urban, then the neighborhood succeeds; if it does not, then the system collapses around it.

To effectively design the prototypical neighborhood, then, Duany and Plater-Zyberk have outlined several very specific objectives:

1. The neighborhood has a center and an edge.

2. The optimal size of a neighborhood is a quarter mile from center to edge.

3. The neighborhood has a balanced mix of activities – dwelling, shopping, working, schooling, worshipping, and recreating.

4. The neighborhood structures building sites and traffic on a fine network of interconnecting streets.

5. The neighborhood gives priority to public space and the appropriate location of civic buildings.7

This system of guidelines is a direct extension of traditional concepts that have guided city design for millennia, one that aims at making places where citizens engage in, and take pride in, the civic realm that supports them. Though more

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6 Ibid. p.xx

7 Ibid. p.xvii-xix
readily applied to new developments, the same system holds for the re-design of the densest metropolis, for in the New Urbanist way of thinking, the metropolis is but a collection of smaller neighborhoods.

Urbanist Peter Calthorpe also applies a similar logic to urban design, arguing that New Urbanism’s goal is to create a city that is well-designed, both in the parts as well as the whole, applying the same rational and humanist logic throughout the entire composition. He states:

The American metropolis should be designed with much the same attitude as we design a neighborhood: There should be defined edges… the circulation systems should function for the pedestrian… public space should be formative rather than residual… civic and private domains should form a complementary hierarchy… and population should be diverse.8

Similar to the work of Duany and Plater-Zyberk, his objectives seek to advance the entire spectrum of the built environment, from the most rural to the most urban, according to the same principles. His work, however, tends to focus on the regional aspects of the modern city, such as the proper integration of transit systems. In so doing, he addresses the larger problems of the American metropolis, but are the guidelines focused enough to reclaim the heart of the city?

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2.3 The Limitations of New Urbanism

New Urbanism understands the city in terms of its “transect” (Figure 2.4), or a rural-to-urban continuum that extends from the unbuilt natural setting (T1 – Rural Preserve) to the dense city center (T6 – Urban Core). Each division of the transect contains similar elements that serve similar functions (i.e., a community in the Sub-Urban zone may have roads and lanes while an Urban Center would utilize streets and alleys). And as mentioned before, the New Urbanism holds that all of the design concepts apply to each of the six major zones of the city, though generating different physical results. The unfortunate disparity, however, is that the overwhelming majority of successful New Urbanist projects have been realized in the more rural (read “sub-urban”) zones of the transect, and that the more densely built core of the city has remained relatively untouched.

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Figure 2.4 The Transect: This diagram, by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., illustrates the New Urbanism’s concept of the transect, the spectrum of urban conditions from the most rural to the most urban. (image from Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. *The Lexicon of the New Urbanism.* n.p.: n.d. p.A4.2)

Some of this resistance is purely economic. Residential – or primarily residential – developments have always had success marketing the “traditional” home, and developers have recently discovered that New Urbanist communities are popular and profitable. The American citizen has reacted favorably to new traditional towns, and the developments are turning large profits. To enter the
downtown of a major city, however, and propose the aforementioned measures seems, in most cases, too unrealistic to the local governments and agencies. There is simply a great deal of inertia behind contemporary planning practices and, to the modern government, a New Urbanist proposal would require a massive overhaul of the fabric (and planning policy) of the city. Basically, New Urbanist interventions in the suburbs *make* money quite quickly while New Urbanist interventions in commercial cores seem, at least within immediate sight, to only *cost* a great deal of money.

Another reason for the lack of success in the core, however, has to do with the strategy itself. There is no doubt that a truly traditional city, neighborhood, or development would respect all of the principles enumerated by Krier, Duany/Plater-Zyberk, or Calthorpe, but these are more easily applied as a proactive strategy than a reactive procedure. One can see that the particular circumstances that have created the extra-ordinary condition of a heavily built commercial core are not easily reversed. To tear down every skyscraper, redistribute the urban density, and re-inhabit the heart of the city with mixed-use neighborhoods of a pedestrian scale is entirely unfeasible for the immediate future. It is precisely because the American city’s downtown is such a unique anomaly that a related, but very specific set of guidelines must be introduced that will deal exclusively with the problems of re-humanizing the commercial core.
CHAPTER THREE

ADDRESSING THE COMMERCIAL CORE

3.1 Problems of the Commercial Core

The goal of this thesis is to generate a simplified and direct strategy that will allow the modern city to engage in the first, most important steps of re-humanizing its commercial core. The approach here is not a new one; it is an extension and adaptation of traditional concepts already forwarded by movements such as the New Urbanism. The approach is not exhaustive; it takes the standpoint of a primarily formal prescription for enhancing the civic realm through design. Finally, the approach does not represent a final destination; it intends, rather, to provide an immediate and positive impact on the character of the city, one that will allow further change and development to occur within a rational framework of tradition and culture. The ultimate destination is – and should be – for a mixed-use urban center of appropriately scaled buildings and humane spaces. But this study takes the first step in uncovering the fundamental problems that must be resolved first, if ever the city is to arrive there.
First, one must understand the unique challenges that the commercial core presents in order to appropriately select the criteria for a more humane modern city, and foremost among these is the troubling scarcity of adequate public spaces. In examining the ground floor plan of Chicago’s Loop, for example, one would find a complete lack of designed public spaces within the fabric. This deficiency is only compounded by the extraordinary density created by the high-rise structures that now characterize the area. In such a setting, the human condition demands more public spaces, not less, to effectively offset the overbearing nature of the fabric that surrounds them. In the traditional city, every citizen lived within a short walking distance of a public space; so too, in the heart of the modern metropolis, should every citizen have easy access to open space, from the largest public plaza to the small lunchtime park.

Furthermore, what few spaces do exist are given relatively little aesthetic consideration. As Peter Calthorpe suggested, public spaces should be formative, not residual; the spaces themselves should feel like products of artistic and civic intent, not property waiting for eventual development. In the dense construct of the commercial core, beautifully articulated spaces are a necessity, and their development and design ought to be the chief concern of the contemporary urban designer.
A second problem that needs immediate attention is the collapse of urban hierarchy within the core. Traditionally, hierarchical systems governed the design of streets, the definition of blocks, and the articulation of buildings. These systems bring clarity to the design approach and an instant legibility to the city. In modern times, however, public institutions have been eclipsed by private ones, and are increasingly being built like them. If a stranger were to examine the skyline of Chicago, for example, he would have no idea which are the important civic buildings in the Loop.

A second mandate of the re-humanization of the core, then, ought to be proper articulation of a civic hierarchy within the loop. For generations, the classical language of architecture infused buildings with the timelessness and permanence needed to convey their civic importance, all while remaining in balance with the traditional structures that framed them (Figure 3.1). Since the advent of modernism, though, where every structure need only be self-referential in its importance and meaning, the concept of civic priority has been lost. One need not look further than Chicago’s Daley Plaza for a prime example of this undoing: contrast the self-evident civic quality of the City and County Building (1907, 1911) with the ambiguous and sterile articulation of the Richard J. Daley Center (1965). For the city to again vest itself with a clear and cohesive...
vision, attention must again be given to the virtues of urban hierarchy and civic priority.

Figure 3.1 Civitas: Léon Krier’s diagram depicts how “the True City” is achieved through a careful balance between monumental civic buildings and the private realm that supports them. (image from Léon Krier. Architecture: Choice or Fate. Windsor: Andreas Papadakis Publisher, 1998. p.30)

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A third failing in the design of the contemporary commercial core is the utter denial of the human scale. Apart from simply destroying any sense of hierarchy and legibility within the city, modernism has also slowly lost sight of the pedestrian. Contemporary office towers stack floor upon floor, too often with no appropriate articulation of the way the building meets the ground, or how it meets the sky. As Edmund Bacon explains, “Today with the towering dimensions of so many structures, the designer must devise new means for establishing a connection between the building he creates and the people on the ground.” Failing to recognize this relationship, especially in a district that has grown so overbearingly tall, only serves to dehumanize the urban experience and isolate the city’s architecture from its people.

Even early modernism recognized and respected the traditional approach to designing each building with a base, middle, and top, for not only did this tripartite division give a natural harmony to the building’s composition, but it also provided an opportunity for design at the level of the pedestrian. Where private towers rise high above city streets, the pedestrian seeks some emotional connection with the lowest levels of the building, some architectural focus within his visual range that allows him to actively engage the built environment around him. A fitting example occurs near the southern terminus of LaSalle Street, where two bank buildings include classical bases that help relate the otherwise
tall buildings to the pedestrian while giving a more human scale to the spaces they frame (Figure 3.2). This attitude needs to be promoted again throughout the core, from the smallest mixed-use building to the largest public plaza; the needs of the pedestrian must again be recognized by the designers of the modern city.

Figure 3.2 The Human Scale: The two bank buildings at the end of LaSalle Street establish a comfortable relationship with the pedestrian by having well-designed bases. (image from Chicago Central Area Committee. *Chicago Central Area Plan.* Chicago: Chicago Central Area Committee, 1983. p.61)
There are numerous other facets of the commercial core, both large and small, which will need attention in the years to come. Of chief importance, though, are the three aforementioned guidelines:

1. the appropriate provision for, and articulation of, public spaces
2. the establishment of a clear civic hierarchy
3. the attention to design at the human scale

Together, these principles can begin to bring a unified, civic character back to the American commercial core and again restore the humane qualities of the traditional city to the built environment.

3.2 Applying the Principles

Through the framework of these three fundamental principles, then, one can begin to envision a new character for the modern city. But in an urban center as heavily built up as Chicago, the development of that character is a daunting undertaking. In order to best address the entire central Loop and lakefront, then, a strategy of progressive focusing has been employed on two fundamentally different – though tightly related – challenges, the creation of public space within the urban fabric and the articulation of a freestanding public building with its surrounding open space. Each scheme springs directly from an overarching
masterplan and then works, in several steps, from the larger urban scale to the smaller architectural one.

Chapter Four deals directly with the problem of creating space within the fabric, and isolates the most important civic plazas as an example for future development. It begins at the urban level, calling attention to the urban “spine” that runs through the Loop, including Daley Plaza, Bank One Plaza, and the Federal Center. It then jumps to the architectural level, where a new multiphase project is proposed for Block 37, a currently undeveloped site adjacent to Daley Plaza (Figure 3.3). This project, which includes a new civic building and several mixed-use buildings, will show how the architecture of the urban fabric can be used to appropriately contain a public space.
Figure 3.3 Daley Plaza and Block 37: This aerial photo shows Daley Plaza and the currently undeveloped Block 37 above; Block 37 will be studied as part of this proposal. (image from Robert Cameron. *Above Chicago*. San Francisco: Cameron and Company, 1992. p.43)

Chapter Five discusses the challenge of creating a large, open public space and the freestanding public building contained therein. Attention is given to the design of Grant Park, Chicago’s lakefront park that is currently underused, due largely to its incoherent design and fractured layout (Figure 3.4). The study then focuses on the design of a monumental building in the park, the Chicago Heritage Museum, which is intended to help to activate and physically anchor
the southern half of the park. This proposal, in relationship with the fabric-oriented development discussed in Chapter Four and several smaller studies of individual problem areas in the Loop, will provide a description of a new character for the modern city, a vision that is simultaneously comprehensive and focused.

Figure 3.4 Grant Park: This view shows Grant Park, facing north; Buckingham Fountain is in the foreground and the streets and sunken railroad tracks that fragment the park are clearly visible; Millennium Park has since been added to the area that appears at the far corner of the park. (image from Robert Cameron. *Above Chicago.* San Francisco: Cameron and Company, 1992. p.17)
3.3  A Vision of Unity

When Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett completed the Plan of Chicago in 1909, it was not a detailed description of specific buildings and blocks in the city; nor did it solve every technical aspect that the massive plan entailed. Their plan, rather, was a vision of the future character of Chicago. Using numerous and powerful illustrations, the 1909 plan was more concerned with rationalizing the structure and image of the city, and in so doing was one of the most influential and inspiring city plans in American history. It was a proposal that illustrated how a city that grows carefully over time – if it develops in line with a comprehensive masterplan – can project a clear, coherent image of itself which improves the city’s efficiency, enhances its civic character, and enriches the lives of its citizens.

This thesis project aims to accomplish those very same objectives. The particular conditions within Chicago have changed radically over the past century since the “Burnham plan,” but the importance of having a coherent vision of future growth has never been lost. This masterplan specifically studies the nature of the open space within the urban fabric, the free-standing buildings that sit within open space, and the essence of the connections between the two. By proposing a new image for both the fabric of the central Loop as well as the lakefront Grant Park, this project illustrates the importance of both solid and void
in the proper formation of the modern city and how a renewed commitment to
the development of public spaces, an understanding of hierarchy, and attention
to the human scale can again bring a vision of unity back to the future planning
of Chicago.
CHAPTER FOUR

PUBLIC SPACE WITHIN THE URBAN FABRIC

4.1 Chicago’s Urban “Spine”

One of the most unfortunate qualities of the modern commercial core is its utter lack of human-scaled, pedestrian-friendly open spaces. Amid the crowded city streets, bordered by countless office towers, it has become extremely difficult for the pedestrian to find points of relief from the overbearing density; no point within the Loop should be further than a comfortable ten minute walk from the nearest open space. Grant Park provides a unique opportunity to escape the urban density, but its situation along the easternmost edge of the Loop puts it out of easy reach for many of the city’s workers. In order to adequately provide for the basic needs of the multitudes who work downtown, a network of open public spaces must be created, including both public plazas and small parks, all of which will together enhance the pedestrian’s experience within the Loop.

The most significant existing public squares are Daley Plaza, Bank One Plaza, and the Federal Center. Together, they form an urban, north-south “spine” within the Loop, but individually, none of these three spaces is
adequately developed to serve as a major civic square. Daley Plaza lacks urban
definition, Bank One Plaza lacks formal clarity, and the Federal Center simply
lacks appropriate size and articulation. If these spaces could be redeveloped in a
manner befitting their civic importance, they would provide a more appropriate
visual and psychological break for pedestrians making their way though the
business district as well as an “image,” a memorable human moment in the
experience of Chicago that will allow the individual a chance to relate to his role
within the city.

4.2 Daley Plaza and Block 37

Daley Plaza, the largest open and accessible space within the heart of the
Loop, is recognized as the most prominent square in downtown Chicago.
Bordered by Randolph, Washington, Dearborn, and Clark Streets, it is the site of
several of the most important civic buildings in the city. The Richard J. Daley
Center occupies the northern half of the plaza, while the City and County
Building overlooks the space from across Clark Street to the west, on a site that
was once home to Chicago’s Courthouse Square (Figure 4.1). The State of Illinois
Center is situated one block to the northeast and the plaza is overlooked by the
First United Methodist Church and the Chicago Title and Trust Building from
the south.
Unfortunately, Daley Plaza lacks formal definition along its eastern edge, as the notorious Block 37 remains undeveloped. This block – bounded by Randolph, Washington, State, and Dearborn Streets – has been a controversial topic in the planning and development of Chicago’s downtown for decades. In his book *Here’s the Deal*, explaining the corruption and neglect that have wasted the site, Ross Miller states, “Here on only three acres, private fortunes were made and lost, public reputations risked and squandered. Winners got in early and
closed out fast. A public purpose was never served.”¹ Today the only things occupying the site are a Commonwealth Edison electrical substation and Gallery 37, an open-air art festival that takes place during the warmer months of the year (Figure 4.2).

![Figure 4.2 Daley Plaza Facing Northeast](image)

Figure 4.2 Daley Plaza Facing Northeast: This view of Daley plaza shows the Daley Center to the left and the mostly vacant Block 37 beyond the flagpoles; the electrical substation is the large structure immediately beyond the flagpoles.

In this study, Block 37 serves as the prime example of how to appropriately frame a public space within the fabric of the core. Urgently

needed here are two things, an urban block that can lend definition to the eastern edge of Daley Plaza, and a more humane treatment of all the component elements of the space, from the paving and public art to the massing and details of the buildings that surround it. Redesigning the space with these two criteria in mind will ensure the creation of a civic plaza that has the dignity and beauty to speak for the whole of the city; the re-introduction of a human scale will meanwhile allow it to establish a relationship with the individual. A great city deserves both beautiful buildings and grand spaces, and the proper design of Block 37 is the first, most critical step in re-instilling Chicago with the vision that once had it at the forefront of American urban design.

The project for Block 37 is composed of three separate buildings, the construction of which will occur in two phases over the next 20 years. Phase I calls for the addition of two mixed-use buildings with commercial/retail spaces at the street level and offices or residential units on the floors above within the next 10 years. Both are to be designed in a traditional manner that relates to Chicago’s architectural heritage, and will adjoin at the northeastern corner of the site, forming an L-shaped building mass that opens to the existing Daley Plaza. Building A will also house the relocated electrical substation within its western wing, which can be constructed first to allow for the proper transfer and adjustment of the equipment/wiring from the original substation.
Building B will be built second and is to include an open-air galleria, similar in character to (but significantly smaller than) the successful Italian examples of Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan and Galleria Umberto I Naples. This element is to occur along the east/west axis created by the entrances of the City and County Building across the plaza to the west, and the Marshall Field and Company building to the east, establishing a pedestrian link through the block that connects the civic realm of Daley Plaza with the commercial realm of State Street. This gesture is both practical and emblematic, serving as a symbol of Chicago’s close historic identification with her commerce. Gallery 37, the summertime exhibit that currently uses the empty lot, will be moved to one of the smaller city parks also being also being developed in this thesis (most likely the new park located at the fork in the Chicago River).

Once the mixed-use buildings are in place and revenues from their owners and tenants have started to return, Phase II (the 20-year projection) will commence with the refinishing of Daley Plaza — including new paving and several commissions for new works of civic art — and will end with the construction of a new municipal building in the space still vacant on Block 37. This public building is to be designed in a neoclassical manner to agree with other grand civic buildings in Chicago and will rise to a height of approximately 11 stories, so that a “consensus scale” is established with the City and County
Building opposite the plaza. This building will stand free on all sides, emphasizing the building’s monumentality and opening a generous commercial promenade outside the galleria. Once completed, some of the courts and offices currently housed in the Richard J. Daley Center can be relocated to the new building, in preparation for Phase III of development.

The final phase of the Daley Plaza development will include the temporary re-housing of the remaining offices in the Daley Center and the construction of a new civic building on the same site. The new structure will have a footprint size similar to that of the current building, but will sit further north on the site to allow for a larger open space. With some of the facilities being transferred to the new building on Block 37, the 31-story Daley Center can be replaced with a lower building that relates more sensitively to the new scale of the plaza. With the completion of this third, 50-year phase, the Daley Plaza will reach its final projection, a grand yet humanly scaled open space that asserts the city’s importance to the world as well as the individual citizen’s importance to the city.

4.3 Bank One Plaza

Bank One Plaza, located two blocks south of Daley plaza, is unique in that most of the open space is sunk below the surface of the street. Like Daley Plaza,
the space occurs on the southern portion of the site, with a large skyscraper occupying the northern half. The plaza itself occurs at several different levels, with access to each individual “terrace” from large stairs on every side. This provides for an interesting experience when one visits the space, but the complex way in which the different levels of the plaza are configured makes the true volume and character of the configuration unreadable (Figure 4.3).

![Figure 4.3 Bank One Plaza: A view north into Bank One Plaza reveals the multiple levels that make up the open space.](image)

This study proposes a new design, where the sunken nature of the plaza is preserved, but where a clearer, more figural composition allows the entire space
to be appreciated and understood. By the end of the masterplan’s second phase, the current haphazardly shaped plaza would be replaced with a semicircular space that allowed any visitor to perceive and understand the entire volume at once. The numerous stair entries to the lower plaza – popular places for workers to sit and enjoy lunch during warmer months – would also be preserved, but like the plaza itself, these would occur in a more formal, visually appreciable manner. There would also be a street-level component to the plaza, where the furniture and ornament of the open space would help celebrate and delineate the threshold between the two planes.

4.4 The Federal Center

Furthest south along the proposed “spine” is the Federal Center, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. It consists of the 30-story Dirksen Building, 43-story Kluczynski Office Tower, and the single-story Post Office, all of which exhibit the same lack of civic qualities that characterizes the Richard J. Daley Center five blocks north. Even worse, the low, sprawling Post Office occupies considerably more space than is necessary, leaving only a small portion of the plaza to be utilized by the pedestrian. Even the civic art within the space, Alexander Calder’s Flamingo makes no attempt to bring a human dimension to this sterile, crowded space (Figure 4.4).
The proposed redesign focuses on a new Post Office building to replace the existing structure. The new building will be designed to rise to several stories in order to simultaneously provide more space and more adequate enclosure for a new, larger plaza. Also, the smaller building footprint will move further west on the site toward Clark Street, helping to open up the space even further. Its architecture will be classical, like that of the new civic buildings.
proposed for Block 37 and Daley Plaza, in order to help bring a sense of human scale, civic dignity, and timelessness back to the Loop.

4.5 Other Plazas and Parks in the Loop

But the proposed urban “spine” is only the beginning; it is merely the central organizing feature in a larger network of open spaces that will be integrated in the Loop. Some of these spaces will be significant in size – if not necessarily civic in character – like the one proposed along Franklin street, between Randolph and Washington Streets on a currently vacant site (Figure 4.5). This square, along with a new square to replace the existing Metropolitan Correctional Center, will help further break down the fabric that extends to the west and the south of the “spine”. Their character may not be as formal as those of the “spine” plazas, but their role is just as vital in providing moments of refuge from the otherwise oppressively dense urban fabric.
Figure 4.5 Potential Plaza: This vacant site, located along Franklin Street between Randolph and Washington Streets offers one of several opportunities to create new secondary plazas.

There are also proposed numerous smaller, “lunchtime plazas” throughout the downtown. Often taking advantage of existing vacant lots, these smaller spaces will be the most common type of square within the Loop. They will provide pedestrians, especially those working downtown, with an opportunity to rest and eat lunch without necessarily having to walk to the larger squares. They are the smallest component of the network, the least formal of the spaces, and as such, the easiest to add, subtract, or edit architecturally. Due to
their size, the proper development of such sites can be easy to overlook, but they are of great importance to the blocks that surround them in providing easily accessible, comfortably scaled and detailed spaces to relax with the urban core.

Several parks are also proposed within the urban fabric, which are of equal importance to the paved plazas, but whose green character makes for an entirely different sensation of space. The largest of these smaller parks will occur along the Chicago River, at Congress, between Madison and Adams, and at the fork in the river. The park that is to be developed at the junction of Congress Parkway and the Chicago River is particularly important, as it is to replace what is currently a traffic cloverleaf, used to speed traffic from the lower street levels onto Congress and either west to the expressway or east towards Columbus Drive. In this masterplan, that cloverleaf is removed, partly so that its unattractive sweeping paved surfaces can be replaced with a well designed and comfortable natural setting. It is just as important, though, that the traffic on Congress be calmed. The proposed park, along with the development of a tree-lined boulevard down Congress, will help to re-integrate Chicago’s South Loop with the Central Loop by making Congress a more humane, easily traversable street (Figure 4.6).
Figure 4.6 Congress Parkway: The Central Loop is currently severed from the South Loop, due largely to the high traffic of Congress Parkway; this photo illustrates the area of the cloverleaf, which is virtually impossible for pedestrians to cross.

Another key site that is to be developed is at the fork in the Chicago River. This location, because of the unique way the land pushes out into the River, is a focal point and visual terminus for all river traffic moving west along the north edge of the loop or north along the western edge. Currently, it houses only a parking lot for the adjacent (and very unsightly) office building (Figure 4.7). In this study, the entire area is reclaimed as a city park whose monumental civic art can more appropriately terminate both axes of the river and whose beautiful
scenery can serve as a wonderful destination for the end of the proposed riverwalk.

Figure 4.7 Potential Park: This prominent site along the Chicago River is currently occupied by parking facilities and an unattractive building; if this site could be redeveloped as a public park, it would provide a great destination and terminus to the riverwalk that would proceed east (right).

Other, smaller green spaces are proposed for vacant lots. Like the “lunchtime plazas,” these are intended to provide a more intimate setting for the downtown. This collection of green spaces begins to create a system of its own, one that links back to Chicago’s larger lakefront parks via a completed riverwalk (along the east/west leg of the Chicago River) and the landscaping of several
wide boulevards, such as Congress Parkway. This green system will work alongside the network of plazas and together, they will help to break down the urban congestion of downtown Chicago and provide humanly scaled spaces that allow the citizens of Chicago to identify with, and take pride in, their great city.
CHAPTER FIVE

PUBLIC BUILDINGS WITHIN URBAN SPACE

5.1 The Importance of City Parks

In addition to the proper formation of public plazas and parks within the dense fabric of the commercial core, this thesis examines the proper relationship between a city and its parks. Throughout history, the park has been one of the most important components of a healthy and cultured urban context, its landscaped open spaces providing a home for recreation, its natural setting helping to preserve local wildlife and vegetation. The park becomes the city dweller’s immediate connection with nature, a necessary refuge from what Daniel Burnham referred to as the “drudgery”\(^1\) of the dense urban surroundings of the core. And most importantly, the park – like the open plaza – is the domain of every citizen, young and old, rich and poor, of every race and religion; it is a shared treasure where all can gather and collectively engage in the civic life.

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Today, where the extreme density of Chicago’s urban core has driven the city upward, it is even more important to preserve and enhance whatever green spaces one can. For a city of Chicago’s size, proper design and maintenance of parks is a necessity. One needs look no further than the elegant and refined parks of London and other European cities to see the value of the urban park to both citizens and visitors. Thus, one must treat public parks not as a luxury, but rather as a necessity for a good urban life.

5.2 A New Approach to Grant Park

Much like the adjacent Loop, Chicago’s Grant Park has a rich history. In 1847, a small strip of land east of Michigan Avenue was dedicated to the people as Lake Park (later to be renamed in honor of Ulysses S. Grant) and the citizens had to fight for the land to be preserved as public grounds. After Chicago’s Great Fire in 1871, the site was used as a dump site for debris, a practice that continued into the early 20th century, which had the advantage of extending the park further into Lake Michigan. In the times before and immediately after the Columbian Exposition of 1893, debates raged about whether or not to allow building within the park; businessman Aaron Montgomery Ward was strongly against the idea, while the great plans of architect Daniel Burnham envisaged great civic buildings here. Ward’s argument won in the end and Chicago’s
lakefront Grant Park has since remained mostly open, occupied only by the Art
Institute and more recent Millennium Park additions.²

The tragedy of this otherwise magnificent space, however, is its
fragmentation by the sunken Illinois Central railway, several large streets, and its
conception as a series of unrelated, landscaped rooms within the park (Figure
5.1). Author Alan Tate points this out quite directly:

It is the dissection of Grant Park by highways that shatters its unity. The
layout looks beautifully balanced on plan and stunningly sharp from
surrounding skyscrapers. It works well through a vehicle windscreen…
But for pedestrians it is an ordeal. Apart from the few festival days when
highways like Columbus Drive are temporarily closed to traffic, it is
impossible to walk between any of the salles or cabinets without having to
wait for traffic lights. Most days of the year Columbus Drive and Lake
Shore Drive are like freeways. This discomfort is compounded by the fact
that the park has relatively few benches.³

In general, Grant Park seems more like a loose collection of six or seven smaller
parks than the magnificent waterfront experience it has the potential to become.

³ Ibid. p.102
Figure 5.1 Dissection of Grant Park: The sunken Illinois Central rail lines (left) and high-speed roads such as Columbus Drive (right) are among the reasons Grant Park appears so fragmented and incoherent today.

It is clear that Grant Park lacks the integrity of a single design strategy, but the question often arises as to which direction to take in order to improve it.

After Daniel Burnham’s death in 1912, the park design was given to his co-author for the *Plan of Chicago*, Edward H. Bennett. Bennett’s design for the park attempted to create a collection of formal gardens, inspired by the French Renaissance ideals of landscape design.⁴ This scheme built upon the formal

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⁴ Ibid. p.10
framework outlined in the *Plan of Chicago* and set the axial framework that is still apparent in the park today.

The problem with this approach, however, was that the original design intent was, in fact, to situate here a cultural center comprising three large civic institutions, where the green spaces served primarily as garden backdrops for the built structure. When Grant Park started to emerge as an open space without the buildings, however, these formal gestures would eventually play out in an overscaled, monotonous division of the parkscape. If Burnham – or his colleague, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted – had ever intended the lakefront space to function as the *open* park that it does today, it doubtless would have been designed in a romantic, naturalistic manner similar to the other *open* parks of the plan (Figure 5.2).

![Figure 5.2 Burnham’s Picturesque Parks](image)

There are clear benefits to the romantic approach to open park planning. First, the organic planning requires no specific built structures to justify its design, the way a formal garden approach does. Further, the picturesque quality of the park provides for a significantly varied experience as one traverses the grounds, encouraging a movement throughout that enlivens both the entire park and the urban fabric around it. Also, such a plan provides real flexibility in the future re-design and re-use of the park. Finally, and most importantly, a romantic approach – similar to those employed in Chicago’s Jackson, Washington, and Lincoln Parks – emphasizes the natural qualities of the landscape, maximizing the park’s differentiation from its surrounding city and creating a true oasis from the “drudgery” of a dense urban fabric. If Chicago’s Grant Park is to remain the most important city park, a new romantic approach to its design is the best way to give it a sense of unity – and honor the spirit of Burnham’s vision.

Possibly the most compelling aspect of a romantic approach to Grant Park is the sense of escape to nature that it evokes, the illusion it creates that one has totally removed himself from the dense confines of the city’s fabric and returned to a more tranquil natural setting. The design proposal for Grant Park will emphasize that escape using a variety of different devices. One of the most critical of these is the reworking of the through streets that currently penetrate
and divide the park, Columbus Drive (north/south), Congress Parkway and Monroe, Jackson, and Balbo Drives (east/west) (Figure 5.3). The Congress axis will be open to pedestrians only and the four other roads will be replaced in Phase II with narrower, winding park boulevards, similar to the through streets that traverse Central Park in New York. In so doing, park traffic will be slowed down, making the park safer for the pedestrian while the narrower, tree-lined streets themselves seem less obtrusive in the natural setting.

Figure 5.3 Congress and Columbus: Congress Parkway and Columbus Drive slice through Grant Park, making it difficult – if not dangerous – for pedestrians to move throughout the entire park.
A more picturesque series of pedestrian paths is also to be coordinated with the planning of the new boulevards. Unlike the existing pedestrian network, the meandering paths will bring much-needed continuity to movement through the park. As much as possible, the paths will avoid intersecting the vehicular traffic; this is accomplished by a series of pedestrian bridges, vehicular underpasses, and pedestrian underpasses – similar to the path network Olmsted designed for Central Park in New York City. What results is a park design that allows the visitor to traverse the entire site, north to south, without ever having to wait for traffic.

Grant Park’s proposed new design will also employ a more picturesque arrangement of plantings to emphasize its natural qualities while masking and “softening” the edge where the park meets its urban surroundings. A planting scheme has been chosen that will allow for the more romantic, organic arrangement in the future while preserving as many of the existing trees as possible, especially in the areas surrounding Buckingham Fountain. In addition, an equestrian center with bridle path (Phase II) and a pond with boating facilities (Phase III) will be included to provide for outdoor recreational activities that take advantage of the natural setting and foster a healthy recreational atmosphere in the heart of the city.
5.3 Connecting the Park

Bringing a more natural and coherent quality to Grant Park is one of the long-term goal of this thesis, but in order to achieve such a drastic change, simpler and smaller steps must be taken in the meantime; a first phase would be to re-connect the various components of the park. In the first 10 years, one of the most critical moves would be the covering of the sunken rail lines that run parallel to Michigan Avenue (Figure 5.4) in order to restore to the park a continuous ground level. A similar intervention has already been effected in the recently completed Millennium Park, which sits in the northwestern corner of Grant Park, between Randolph Street, Monroe Drive, Columbus Drive, and Michigan Avenue. Unfortunately, everything about Millennium Park – from its avant-garde architecture to its independent name – serves to isolate it from the rest of the Grant Park system.
Figure 5.4 Sunken Tracks: The Illinois Central rail lines create a large rift in Grant Park; in the distance, the open end of the Art Institute can be seen; an enclosed courtyard is proposed for this site.

The restored park ground level will provide several unique opportunities. The first of these is a new, picturesque design for the southwest corner. This design can proceed in accordance with the eventual, long-term design for the park, but can also function independently, “planting the seed” for the future patterns of design. Covering the rail lines also creates some interesting possibilities for the Art Institute, as the building will then address the park not as two separate wings isolated by a trench, but rather as a unified civic building.
that can be appreciated as a free-standing object in the round. New wings can be added to the Art Institute that will enclose the new open spaces on either side of the current bridge between the old and new wings, creating two outdoor sculpture gardens to serve the museum. Also, these new courts would receive civic façades so that the north and south elevations of the Art Institute can better address their surroundings.

5.4 Addressing the Lake

A principal concern in the new design for Grant Park is the way in which the park relates to the shoreline across the heavily congested Lake Shore Drive (Figure 5.5). This shoreline is important, as it serves as the connection between Grant Park and the linked park systems around the Loop, which were originally proposed by Burnham in the Plan of Chicago. Currently, there is only one path to cross Lake Shore Drive without waiting for traffic, which at the south end of the park adjacent the Museum Campus. In Phase I, this proposal prescribes the addition of several pedestrian bridges along the eastern edge of Grant Park to further facilitate access to the shore and harbor. And by the end of Phase II, a section of the park will extend out over the road at the level of Buckingham Fountain, creating a bridge (with traffic tunnels below) that allows easy and direct access to, as well as stunning views of, the lakeshore.
Figure 5.5 Lake Shore Drive: Currently, the only way to safely access the lake shore from the park is either at one of several crosswalks or using a pedestrian tunnel at the extreme south end of the park.

Also part of Phase II is the development of a new peninsula defining the northern edge of the harbor, mirroring the southern one that extends out to the Adler Planetarium. This proposed symmetrically sweeping, curved breakwaters, take as their precedents the open “arms” extending into the lake in Burnham’s 1909 scheme (Figure 5.6). Together, along with a new marina center at the end of the northern arm (Phase III), these breakwaters will create a larger Central Harbor that can accommodate greater amounts of marine traffic along Chicago’s
shore. Formally, they will also enhance the strong axial quality of Chicago’s Loop that runs through Congress and Buckingham Fountain, extending the city to the lake and bringing a formal dignity to the shore of this great metropolis.

Figure 5.6 Grand Harbor: This image, taken from the Plan of Chicago (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993) shows the extending “arms” of Burnham and Bennett’s harbor design. (image from Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett. Plan of Chicago. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993. plate L)

5.6 A New Museum for Chicago’s Heritage

While Aaron Montgomery Ward’s mission to keep the park free and clear for the citizens of Chicago was well intentioned, he failed to understand the broader vision of Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham. City parks need buildings. Park buildings not only help to attract people and animate the park,
but they visually anchor the open space. They display a formality and order that help the natural setting of the park stand out in contrast; they project permanence on the site; they engage with the rest of the built environment around, so that the park feels more closely integrated with the design tradition of the rest of the city.

In the new design for Grant Park, a cultural institution was deemed important – one that would not only bring Chicago’s citizens to the southern half of the park, but also work as an attraction for tourists. As Chicago is a city known for its rich cultural heritage, it seems fitting to include a heritage museum in the park where visitors can learn about the city’s ethnic history and diverse cultures. Currently, all of the city’s historical and ethnic museums reside in separate institutions, scattered throughout the metropolis, but the proposed new Chicago Heritage Museum would provide a comfortable, and centrally located, home for exhibits relating to all of Chicago’s major ethnicities.

The museum experience would center around its galleries, which house the exhibits on the history of Chicago’s ethnic groups. The first – and largest – gallery intends to offer an overview on the cultural history of Chicago, arranged chronologically. Radiating from this room, then, are four smaller galleries whose entrances correspond with their occurrence in the history outlined in the main gallery. Each of the four spaces focuses on a major ethnicity within Chicago’s
history – European, African, Asian, and Latin American, and additionally, another large gallery that would be the home to any traveling exhibits special events.

With a mission to bring an awareness, appreciation, and respect to the various cultures within the city, the Chicago Heritage Museum would also host numerous lectures, movies, or small productions every month that focus on ethnic and cultural issues. For this purpose, a medium-sized theater (approx. 350 seats) is situated at the northern end of the building. It is accessible from within the Museum, but can also be entered directly from the outside, so that its functions can be managed independently. Also, the Museum would have a large café on the eastern side of the building, with views and entrances onto the park. This proposed café, which would serve ethnic food typical to Chicago – will help to promote an appreciation of the diverse cultures of the city. Together, the combination of the galleries, theater, and café would help activate the southern portion of the park and the adjacent neighborhoods.
CONCLUSION

A MODERN CIVIC IMPERATIVE

“Here, With a heightened consciousness of our past and a clearer insight into decisions made long ago, which often still control us, we shall be able to face the immediate decision that now confronts man and will, one way or another, ultimately transform him: namely, whether he shall devote himself to the development of his own humanity, or whether he shall surrender himself to the now almost automatic forces he himself has set in motion and yield place to his dehumanized alter ego.”¹

-Lewis Mumford

As man enters the 21st century, countless changes are reshaping his world. He has stepped uneasily into a new age, where the rapid proliferation of technology seems increasingly to consume his daily life, from work to recreation, and everything between. This new era – heralding promises of convenience, efficiency, and security – also brings with it the threat of further social and urban decline. The nature and structure of the built environment, therefore, must be carefully reexamined. A renewed, humane approach to the design of the commercial downtown is called for, and there is no better time to reclaim the heart of the city than the present.

This study opened with the assertion that the form of the city is essentially a reflection of its culture. In this light, one can clearly see how the rise of commercialization in the twentieth century, complete with its “big business” attitudes to the city, has ultimately ushered in a carelessly conceived and hastily built downtown, one whose towering skyscrapers are but constant reminders of the triumph of private interest over the heart of the American city. But with this new age of technology surely comes new ways of conceiving of and doing business, and the changing face of commerce will certainly and greatly impact the face of the city.

When the cities’ skylines were slowly overtaken by the skyscraper over the course of the past century, new methods and materials of construction made such transformation possible. But it was land values and the desire of corporate enterprise to house great numbers of employees conveniently under one roof that forced the city upwards. In the absence of an urban vision, this devolution of urban form was accepted as inevitable. Before the advent of electronic technology, meetings were most often carried out in person; work documents were exchanged hand-to-hand in hard copy. If large, national corporations were going to be a given and vital component of civic life, their desire to have the work done efficiently in one place was at least understandable, even given the often unfortunate consequences to the urban context.
Today, however, technologies such as the internet and wireless networking are changing the way business is done. Incalculable amounts of information are being communicated continuously – instantly and globally – and the result will soon be a business world where any person and any information can be easily accessed, from any place and at any time. It is debatable whether such changes will ultimately help or hurt corporate business, whether it will make it increasingly more efficient or, simply, less “human”. But what is certain is that it will provide great freedom for large companies to re-structure their offices. Workers no longer need to be in the same building to share information or even meet, and it is conceivable that, in time, the necessity for the large, towering office buildings of the contemporary city will disappear, and urban blocks can once again be occupied by mixed-use buildings of a more manageable, sensible, humane scale.

The high-density urban core is likely to remain a characteristic of the major American city, as there will always be value to the concept of a centralized commercial district. But perhaps, in time, the diminishing necessity for the tall office building – and, in turn, the host of problems that accompany it – may provide an opportunity to reform the core, using the traditional principles of architecture urbanism to bring an appropriate scale and a civic and cultural dignity back to the heart of the American city.
APPENDIX

FINAL PLATES AND DIAGRAMS

The following images have been prepared by the author as part of the design proposal outlined in Chapters Four and Five.

Figure 1 Urbs in Horto: This aerial perspective depicts the lakefront of Chicago’s Central Loop, including the changes prescribed in this masterplan; attention is focused on the formal treatment of the harbor and the new romantic quality of Grant Park; Chicago’s motto, “Urbs in Horto” (“City in a Garden”) reminds one of the important balance that the city’s built environment must find with its natural environment.
Figure 2 A New Masterplan: This rendering depicts the overall masterplan for Chicago’s Central Loop and lakefront (projected for 50 years) and illustrates the specific area of study for the proposal; a figure-ground drawing of the existing fabric is shown in the inset window.
Figure 3 The Urban Spine: The study of Chicago’s spine of public plazas demonstrates how to appropriately define space within the urban fabric; the development of this system is shown in three phases (10 years, 25 years, and 50 years).
Figure 4 Block 37: The proposal for Block 37 includes a new civic building and two mixed-use structures, one of which includes a ground-level galleria that allows pedestrian passage directly from Daley Plaza to State Street.
Figure 5 Daley Plaza (before): This image of Daley Plaza clearly illustrates the absence of definition along the space’s eastern edge, as well as the lack of civic character in the plaza’s principal public building, the Daley Center.

Figure 6 Daley Plaza (after): This proposal shows how the careful development of Block 37 is crucial to the proper completion of Daley Plaza; note how the new structures bring spatial definition, human scale, and civic dignity back to the plaza.
Figure 7 The Federal Center (before): This photograph of the Federal Center shows how the one-story Post Office and 43-story Kluczynski Office Tower neither display the civic quality of the space, nor appropriately address the human scale.

Figure 8 The Federal Center (after): A new proposal for the Federal Center illustrates how carefully articulating the buildings according to traditional principles helps bring a more humane quality back to the space.
Figure 9  Grant Park: The proposal for a new planning approach to Grant Park and the buildings therein demonstrates how to appropriately design both freestanding public buildings and the open spaces in which they sit; the development of the park is shown in three phases (10 years, 25 years, and 50 years).
Figure 10  Park Circulation (before): This diagram illustrates the existing pedestrian circulation systems in Grant Park; continuous paths (including bridges) are shown in yellow and pedestrian underpasses are in orange, while areas of conflict with vehicular traffic are indicated in red; note the fragmentation of the park, both by the traffic interruptions and the lack of a coherent design.
Figure 11 Park Circulation (after): This diagram illustrates the proposed pedestrian circulation system in Grant Park; continuous paths (including bridges) are shown in yellow and pedestrian underpasses are in orange, while areas of conflict with vehicular traffic are indicated in red; note how the proposed network not only brings a clarity to the design of the park, but also allows the pedestrian to traverse the entire park without having to cross traffic.
Figure 12 Chicago Heritage Museum: The masterplan prescribes the design of a new cultural heritage museum in the southern half of Grant Park; it will contain galleries that commemorate Chicago’s rich ethnic diversity; also, it will include an auditorium wing as well as a café and ballroom that will integrate more closely with the recreational activities of the park.
Figure 13  View in the Park (before): The above photograph shows the existing Illinois Central rail lines, sunk below the surface of the park; in the distance, note the “dead” façades of the Art Institute where the building crosses over the tracks.

Figure 14  View in the Park (after): In the masterplan proposal, the IC rail lines would be covered, bringing the entire park up to a continuous surface level; allowing the Art Institute to sit properly in the park as a freestanding building in the round.
Figure 15 Millennium Park (before): The current design of Millennium Park (and the Jay Pritzker Pavilion shown above) are works of individualistic expression that make no attempt to respect the neoclassical character of Chicago’s lakefront.

Figure 16 Millennium Park (after): A new design for Millennium Park will help integrate both its layout and its architecture into the broader design intent of Grant Park, respecting the tradition of Chicago’s lakefront architecture.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


