

## Cityscapes

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# How to correct Chicago's open space shortage: 10 ideas that could help city's park-poor neighborhoods away from the lakefront

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Ideas are bubbling that can help Chicago fix the dismaying lack of open space away from its park-rich lakefront.

New York is closing lightly trafficked local streets and turned them into temporary playgrounds. San Francisco is taking parking spaces and transforming them into permanent mini-parks. In Chicago, transportation planners are quietly plotting how to weave abandoned railroad lines and disconnected strips of riverfront parks

into a network of trails that would rival the city's heavily used lakefront bike path.

Residents of Chicago's most park-poor areas, meanwhile, haven't been waiting for City Hall to bring more green space to them. They've been holding rallies and marches. And they're starting to get results.

In spite of Chicago's massive budget deficit, such examples reveal that Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the people of his city have plenty of creative, cost-efficient weapons at their disposal as they seek to transform the city's "park deserts."

Those weapons include big pots of federal money that can create bike trails and make it easier to walk or bike to the city's existing parks. Designers also can be enlisted in the battle for better parkland, recognizing their ability to craft imaginative landscapes that make even the smallest parks powerful magnets (above, a new park alongside the future Bloomingdale Trail).

For a video about Chicago's Henry C. Palmisano Park, [click here](#).

For a video about Chicago's park-poor Brighton Park neighborhood, [click here](#).

For a video about PARK(ing) Day in Chicago, [click here](#).

Read [part one of this series](#): Half of the city's 2.7 million people live in park-poor areas; lakefront's parkland disguises severe shortage in many areas. For a web gallery, [click here](#).

The open space shortage is pervasive, with 32 of 77 community areas, home to half of Chicago's 2.7 million people, failing to meet the city's own modest requirement of two acres of open space for every 1,000 residents. And the stakes associated with relieving it are huge. Parks can help the city's neighborhoods attract and retain residents, promote public health, boost real estate values and draw together people from different walks of life.

"Open space is not just an amenity. It is one of the most vital institutions in enhancing urban life," said Sally Chappell, professor of art history at DePaul University.

Although Emanuel has thrown his support behind a grab bag of open space initiatives, such as boathouses on the Chicago River and a new park in an unused area of Rosehill Cemetery, he has yet to produce the visionary plan he promised in his transition report.

In the absence of such a vision, here are 10 ideas that show what architects and the architects of public policy can do to relieve Chicago's chronic open space shortage:



### 1. Make better use of existing parks

Chicagoans who want their parks to live up to the city's official motto, "City in a garden," might begin by acting on the city's unofficial slogan, "Where's mine?"

That's what residents of Brighton Park, the city's most park-poor neighborhood, did in August. More than 350 of them attended a public meeting that launched a campaign for better facilities at the area's lone large

park, the 7-acre Kelly Park (above), a mile south of the Stevenson Expressway.

Public officials, including one of the area's two aldermen, George Cardenas, 12th, quickly got the message. They've promised to push for funds to back such improvements as an artificial-turf soccer field. Chicago Park District officials have also met with community leaders.

"Now that we have tackled the schools, because of overcrowding, now we come to the issue of park space," Cardenas said.

There's a broader lesson in this story: Rehabbing existing facilities won't add acreage, yet it will improve the quality — and capacity — of Chicago's parks. An artificial turf field, for example, won't turn into a mud puddle after it rains. And the best way for residents to ensure that existing parks get upgraded? It's to make their voices heard.

"Equity comes from the grass roots," said Patrick Brosnan, director of the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, which organized the August meeting.



### 2. Improve access to open space

It's an asphalt jungle out there on Chicago's roads, with more traffic and less law enforcement than there were decades ago. Little wonder, then, that many parents are afraid to let their children walk or ride bikes to parks. "In general, there's that sense of incivility," said Luann Hamilton, a deputy commissioner at Chicago's Department of Transportation.

In response, members of 10 Chicago community organizations, many in

park-poor areas, have been fanning out in recent weeks and asking questions: How fast do the cars and trucks drive? Do barriers protect pedestrians from vehicles? Are the sidewalks cracked?

The effort is part of a \$5.8 million program, called Healthy Places, that is funded by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and seeks to encourage healthy eating habits and urban design that encourages exercise. It's run by the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children, in a partnership with the Chicago Department of Public Health.

The program has made \$800,000 in grants to the 10 community organizations to evaluate the "walkability" of areas around local parks and schools. Working with the Healthy Places program and the Chicago Park District, city transportation officials next year will release a citywide plan that seeks to improve pedestrian and bicycle access to open spaces. "You shouldn't have to drive to a park," Hamilton said.

The effort will build on the city's "road diet" program, which slims the curb-to-curb width of streets, adds bike lanes and introduces amenities like trees and lighting. Another model can be found in San Francisco's "living streets" program, which puts benches and a variety of greenery on expanded sidewalks (above). Both initiatives show that getting to the park is as important as the park itself.



### 3. Bring life to the boulevards

Chicago treats its boulevards, those extra-wide roads with grassy medians that make a 31-mile circuit around the city, as strips of green that are meant to be seen rather than used. Yet the boulevards can be tweaked to provide active play space, as a playground at Palmer Square Park reveals. Streets around the narrow, rectangular park connect Humboldt and Kedzie boulevards.

Chiefly designed by Thompson Dyke & Associates landscape architects and artists Roman Villarreal and Phil Schuster, who worked under the Chicago Public Art Group and the Chicago

Park District, the Northwest Side playground consists of a winding path flanked by soft-surfaced play areas (above). The play spaces are adorned with sculptural elements, like fiberglass seats that resemble tree stumps and rabbits carved from limestone that were inspired by the classic children's story "The Velveteen Rabbit."

The low-slung design simultaneously quelled neighbors' fears that an oversized, brightly colored playground would mar the park's openness — "Eyesore on the Emerald Necklace," screamed one news outlet's headline — and introduced features that are perfectly scaled to small children.

"I like it — it's like a little getaway," said Venesa Seija as her son enjoyed the playground.

Erma Tranter, president of Friends of the Parks, suggested other steps to make the boulevards more people-friendly, such as installing running trails that would take advantage of their long, narrow swaths of green. She even proposed that control of the boulevards should revert to the Chicago Park District from the city, which has run them since 1959. Officials at the cash-strapped district respond that they lack the funds to run the boulevards, but support the trails idea.



#### 4. Turn city streets into 'play streets'

This summer, New York City closed to traffic 13 little-used streets in neighborhoods like the South Bronx, turning the roads into temporary "play streets." The closings, which lasted a few hours a day, created an atmosphere like a block party, except the play streets were devoted to exercising, not eating. Children rode scooters and bikes, played with hula

hoops and jump ropes, ran races, or cavorted on temporary basketball and tennis courts.

Coordinated by New York's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in cooperation with schools and community groups, the play streets were based on a simple idea: If kids prone to obesity aren't going to the playground, bring the playground to them. The program had the desired impact.

In interviews afterward, parents told officials that their children "would have been inside or watching television had it not been for the play streets," said Karen Lee, who heads the Health Department's built environment program. "On average, they were out there for more than an hour to 2 1/2 hours."

In contrast to the years it can take park districts to acquire and develop land, the play streets offer a quick, inexpensive way to expand open space. But they have yet to flourish in Chicago, where transportation officials have unsuccessfully sought funding for them.

In 2008 and 2009, the nonprofit Active Transportation Alliance ran a one-day event called Sunday Parkways, which closed parts of the city's West Side boulevards. Cyclists, joggers and strollers flocked to the streets. They took in ethnically flavored exercise programs, like a salsa aerobics class, in nearby parks. Yet last year, the event wasn't held because organizers couldn't raise enough money.



#### 5. Turn rails into trails

With options for carving out new green space in densely built neighborhoods severely limited, city planners are turning to another idea: Transform the industrial infrastructure of the past into the linear parks of the future. It's no pipe dream, as a vote Wednesday by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning showed.

The agency green-lighted the release of millions of dollars in federal funds to

the proposed Bloomingdale Trail, a nearly 3-mile-long public park and bike trail that will be built on a dormant elevated rail spur through four neighborhoods, including park-poor Logan Square and Humboldt Park (above).

State and local matches are expected to bring the total funding for the project's first phase, which the city aims to complete by late 2014, to more than \$46 million. The federal cash comes from the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement program, which supports efforts that lower pollution and provide relief from traffic congestion.

But you don't have to wait three years to see what a difference the trail might make. A small park that will provide access to the trail opened last summer at 1805 N. Albany St. Designed by JJR landscape architects with artist Schuster, it has a whimsical spider theme. Visitors scramble over its bright red climbing feature, which resembles a spider's web.

Another hint of what the trail has to offer can be found in the mile-long Valley Line Trail in the Northwest Side neighborhood of Sauganash. Built on an old railroad embankment, the well-maintained trail takes visitors past a variety of native plants — goldenrod, milkweed, Queen Anne's lace — and across two muscular, exposed steel bridges designed by the TY Lin International Group, the engineers for the \$1.8 million project. Ramps lead to adjoining

neighborhoods and a nearby park. Bikers, joggers and strollers enjoy this urban escape.

The trail's weakness is its paltry length and lack of connections to other trails. To close such gaps, the Chicago Department of Transportation is preparing a [trail](#) master plan that should be ready by year's end. That plan will propose a major expansion of Chicago's off-road trail network beyond the current 42 miles, according to Brian Steele, a department spokesman. It also will provide a chance to join existing trails, especially along the North Branch of the Chicago River — a key open-space priority of Emanuel's.



## 6. Turn old industrial sites into new parks

Its critics call Chicago's Henry C. Palmisano Park (left) a cover-up — a way for former Mayor Richard M. Daley to bury memories of the city's scandal-plagued Hired Truck program. Landscape architect Ernest Wong's response? His park is a beautiful cover-up.

In Daley's ancestral Bridgeport neighborhood, the \$12.85 million park turned a former limestone quarry —later, a Hired Truck dumping ground —into a 27-acre post-industrial showcase. There's a fishing pond rimmed by the old quarry walls, a sloping artificial wetland that drains into the pond, a lawn that doubles as a soccer field, and a sledding hill with spectacular views of the downtown skyline. A boardwalk leads visitors over the wetland to the pond.

"The entire experience is about discovery," said Wong, who heads the Site Design Group. As he and city officials point out, the park could have been nothing more than a conventional, grass-covered "Mount Trashmore."

Can Chicago turn other abandoned industrial sites into parkland? A test will come in Little Village, part of the South Lawndale community area that ranks as the city's second-worst for open space. There, in the shadow of the Cook County Jail, is the 24-acre site of the long-shuttered Celotex asphalt factory at 31st and Albany streets. A chain-link fence surrounds the property, a federally designated Superfund site.

For years, members of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization pressed for the contaminated site to be capped — and once it was, they pushed for it to be turned into a park. In 2009, the group took its fight downtown, marching at Daley Plaza. "We have a lot of adults and young people who have absolutely no access to open space whatever," said executive director Kim Wasserman.

In September, the effort finally paid off. The city bought the site for \$8 million. Gia Biagi, the Chicago Park District's planning and development director, said the district will hire a designer this fall and aim to open the park's first phase in 2013 or 2014.



## 7. Turn parking spaces into 'parklets'

In the every-little-bit-helps department, San Francisco is turning parking spaces along its commercial streets into mini-parks called "parklets." Twenty-five of the mini-parks have been built, including one near a tumbler for the city's cable cars. San Franciscans have taken to the parklets quickly, using them for dining, schmoozing and reading their laptops.

There has been some grouching about the loss of parking spaces and tie-ins to adjoining cafes, but not enough to kill the program. In fact, city officials are reviewing plans for an additional 30 parklets.

Here's how a parklet works: Two parking spots are closed and a platform is built over them, extending the sidewalk's level beyond the curb. The platform is outfitted with benches, planters, landscaping, bicycle parking, tables and chairs. The builder — typically, a business, nonprofit group or local improvement district — bears the cost, up to \$20,000 per parklet. The installations are permanent and open to the public.

"If you buy coffee you can sit there, but if you don't buy coffee, you can go and sit there, too," said David Alumbaugh, a senior urban designer in San Francisco's Planning Department [@](#).



The concept has spread to Chicago, but only on a temporary basis, through the international event called PARK(ing) Day, which promotes the conversion of metered parking spaces into parks. Last month, six pop-up parks appeared in Chicago, including one in the 3500 block of North Southport Avenue. Architect Matt Nardella and his wife and business partner at Moss Design, Laura Cripe, paid the meter, laid down 20 rolls of sod, surrounded the grass with

donated shrubs and set down a table and chairs (above). That afternoon, they shared tea and cupcakes in their temporary oasis.

"This is public space," Nardella said. "It's been dedicated for the longest time to automobile storage. We'd like to explore ways for it to be a multifaced and sustainable part of the city."



### 8. Use urban agriculture to plant seeds of revival

Vacant lots don't have to stay vacant. Look at City Farm (left), a one-acre plot at Clybourn Avenue and Division Street. The former vacant lot is like a piece of Iowa set down at the foot of Chicago's skyline, with a little red chicken coop, rows of tomato plants, beds of collard greens, and hoop houses that grow superhot peppers for such noted restaurants as Frontera Grill.

The farm, which operates on city-owned land, creates only four jobs per acre and is essentially an interim land use, a placeholder until something more valuable comes along. But it draws hundreds of volunteers for weeding and other chores. And it provides fresh produce to people who might otherwise lack access to it.

"It's a way for a blighted neighborhood to return to a desirable place to live," said Ken Dunn, of the Resource Center, the nonprofit that operates the farm.

Hundreds of small urban farms have sprung up amid Detroit's vast expanses of vacant lots — along with controversy spawned by more ambitious plans. Neighbors and community groups are using words like "plantation" and "sharecropping" to object to a nonprofit foundation's plan for a \$220-million farming project that proponents say would bring fresh food and thousands of jobs to the city's devastated near-east side.

Now, urban farms are gaining traction in Chicago, touted by city planners as a way to bring new life to the vacant lots that stretch across the city's South and West sides. The City Council last month voted to relax size limits on urban farms, as well as parking and fencing rules for the farms in business and commercial districts. Chicago could someday have as many as 30 urban farms, planners predict, citing their ability to serve as hubs for a variety of food-related activities, from growing produce to providing a site for food pantries.



### 9. Use parks to create commercial hubs

Parks often inspire a certain wariness over the people they attract. In the city, people fret about gangs, drug-dealing and violence — and what such things do to property values.

Carlos Nelson, executive director of the Greater Auburn Gresham

Development Corp., cites those fears when a visitor asks whether the vacant lots lining the area's commercial streets should become parks. He sees another role for parks: As a way to create thriving business hubs — urban planners call them "nodes" — amid the often-chaotic conditions of the inner city.

An example: Renaissance Park at 1300 W. 79th St. The park, designed by Wong's Site Design Group, forms a forecourt to the Gothic architecture of St. Sabina Catholic Church, headed by the Rev. Michael Pflieger.

Derelict commercial buildings once occupied the land, Nelson said. Now, the park is a vision of order, surrounded by an imitation wrought-iron fence, with traditional light poles, neatly clipped hedges and a sculptural fountain by artist Jerzy Kenar that celebrates African-American heroes including Martin Luther King. Complementing the bustle of Auburn Gresham's lively cluster of stores at 79th Street and Racine Avenue, the park is a prized amenity, one that lends the neighborhood order and dignity.

"This is the Times Square" of Auburn Gresham, Nelson said, pointing to 79th and Racine.



## 10. Make new plans for new realities

So much has changed since the publication of Chicago's last open space plan 13 years ago that park advocates are calling for a new plan, one that is tailored to the different needs of different neighborhoods and unites the disparate efforts of various city agencies behind a single vision.

True, the Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Park District and the Public Building Commission have cooperated to turn more than 270 acres of

pavement around city schools into playgrounds. But with so many arms of city government now working on open-space issues — parks, transportation, housing and economic development, health, the schools, the building commission and others — advocates say it is essential to set shared goals, lest the city squander the limited funds it has available.

"There's an absolute need for coordination," said Tranter, of Friends of the Parks,



Although Kathy Dickhut, the city's deputy commissioner for open space, believes the old plan remains an effective tool, she acknowledges that it can be tweaked to meet today's neighborhood-specific needs. It pains her that Logan Square boasts an edgy skate park (left) beneath the Kennedy Expressway while nearby Avondale has barely any new parkland. Park planners need to widen their focus, she said, from individual communities to the wider clusters of park-poor

neighborhoods on the Northwest, Southwest and South sides.

After years of being overlooked, then, Chicago's inland parks finally are edging their way onto the public policy radar screen. If the creation of a continuous chain of lakefront parks was Chicago's great public works project of the 19th and 20th centuries, then the uplifting of their off-shoreline counterparts offers a comparably grand goal for the 21st.

Now it's up to Emanuel to ensure that the city's backyard no longer takes a back seat to its front yard.

(Tribune photos by Brian Cassella; Tribune photo of Southport Avenue parklet by Jason Wambsgans; photo of San Francisco "living street" from San Francisco planning department; photo of San Francisco parklet from Peopling Places; photo of New York "play street" from streetsblog.org; Renaissance Park photo from City of Chicago; photo of Chicago River trail from The Burnham Plan Centennial.)