3 ACRES ON THE LAKE:
DuSable Park Proposal Project

essays by
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proposals by
64 participants

Introduction to the Project LAURIE PALMER

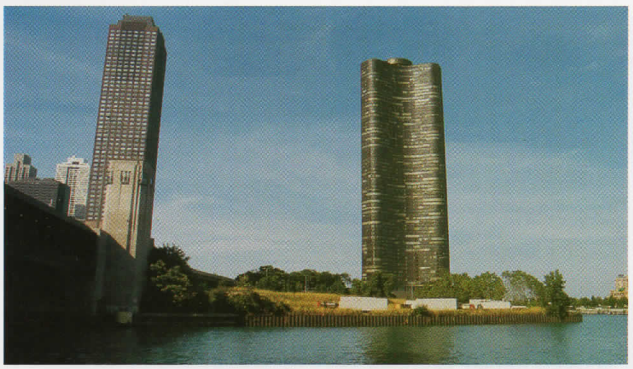
3 Acres on the Lake: DuSable Park Proposal Project developed in response to the claustrophobic climate of increasingly privatized urban space and the dwindling of habitats and haunts for opportunistic plants and curious persons. It was also a response to the discriminatory and devastating effects of city policies favoring high-income development. The project invited, without city sanction or authority, speculative proposals for how a small plot of public land in Chicago might be used. There was no jury, no winner, and no prize. It was an invitation to irony, fantasy, and utopian imaginings but also an attempt to pry open city planning processes for public scrutiny and participation.

The project began with a personal fascination with the site, which I passed every day for years as I biked to work. The land caught my attention because it rose as a hill from under a bridge—most of Chicago is flat—and the meadow reflected seasonal changes and, over the years, ecological succession, in sharp contrast to the frozen perfection of highly maintained public parks. The apparent wildness of this spot—and its inaccessibility—in the midst of prime downtown real estate created a nest of contradictions and possibility.

I thought about this meadow's odd abandonment for at least seven years. Every time I rode past, I thought to, but didn't, swerve off-course, and the continual act of riding over this untested possibility became a grooved denial, a pleasure-in-reserve. The pleasure wasn't about going there but about there being somewhere to go, a pleasure delayed and therefore preserved, intact and unpunctured. Public access and all that goes with it—safety, maintenance, functional design, and universal access—would destroy what attracted me to the meadow: its isolation, neglect, and opportunistic possibilities.

The land's development, however, was clearly inevitable. Rather than propose one idea for how this land should be used, I invited a crowd of proposals, so that multiple possibilities could exist simultaneously. The purpose was not to select the best proposal but to generate many. Public space is ostensibly available to everyone, but someone is always excluded: the person who wants to sleep on the bench a little too long, set up camp for several weeks, dig in the dirt, have sex in the tall grass, make loud noises, plant vegetables, roast a pig, roar her dirt bike in circles around the toxic hill, or have the whole place to himself for an ecological experiment. I hoped the speculative nature of the invitation might draw impractical, outrageous, and seemingly "private" desires into a discussion of "public," defined as plural and presuming conflicting needs and ideas. This was an opportunity to consider alternatives to homogenized planning decisions, which give priority to safety and access, and to elicit creative ideas from those not normally asked about the use of public land. The one stipulation was that the proposals should maintain the land's dedication to Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable.

An exhibition at Temporary Services in Chicago in the fall of 2000 introduced the project, and the call for proposals went online in February 2001. That spring, I solicited proposals by direct mail and email, using mailing lists from Chicago-based art, gardening, neighborhood planning, or housing activist groups. I held two public design charrettes in May. By the August deadline, sixty-six proposals had arrived. Gallery 312, a nonprofit exhibition space in Chicago directed by Paul Brenner, presented the project in September 2001, and the Chicago Architecture Foundation exhibited it again in March 2002.



From the Call for Proposals

SITE DESCRIPTION

Heading south on the sidewalk bike route on the lower level of Lake Shore Drive, just before you cross the Chicago River, you can look over the railing and down on DuSable Park. The park extends to Lake Michigan from underneath the bridge. It is the end of a short peninsula that separates the Chicago River from Ogden slip, a quarter-mile inlet for docking boats. The park is a half-hill, its high side backed up to the highway, its slope rolling down toward the water. When you stop at the sidewalk railing, you are close enough to identify the flowers and grasses growing below (Queen Anne's lace, dogbane, black-eyed Susan, goldenrod, sumac, bouncing Bet...). If you throw a stone, you can hear it hit dirt (if it's not drowned out by trucks shifting gears behind you). But you can't get to the meadow, unless you lower yourself by rope. The enclosed stairwell leading down from the bridge operator's office is padlocked. Access inland, where the peninsula attaches to land at McClurg and North Water, is blocked by a new condo complex surrounded by construction fences. You can look down at the meadow from the bridge, or across the water from the pristine parks to north and south or from Navy Pier to the east, but you can't physically get there.

In late summer, the meadow seethes with weed flowers, yellow butterflies, and brown songbirds that nest in the grasses and light on the low bushes on the crest of the hill. I know of only one other hill in Chicago, and its closely mowed turf is trampled bald by runners and dogs. This meadow seems cut out from somewhere else—somewhere bucolic, slow, and unpressured by finance—an import unplugged from the flows all around it. Cars, boats, bikes, skaters, and streams of pedestrians thread through arched underpasses, exits and on-ramps, walkways and waterways, circulating in a lubricated network of recreational opportunities. The meadow, however, is a dead end, virtually an island, surrounded on three sides by water and on the fourth by the highway's thundering shadow.

LOCATION AND STRUCTURE

Latitude and longitude: 41° 53′ N, 87° 37′ W
Northern boundary: water, approx. 260 ft (Ogden slip)
Eastern boundary: water, approx 420 ft (Lake Michigan)
Southern boundary: water, approx 420 ft (Chicago River)
Western boundary: elevated highway, approx 460 ft (space under the highway is owned by the State of Illinois)

TOPOGRAPHY

The plot rises gradually from east to west to a height of about twenty feet, then drops abruptly before meeting the lower level of Lake Shore Drive. This mound was built from earth excavated from nearby construction projects. The underlying land is made up of silt deposited by lake currents in the 1860s after a jetty was built just to the south. Before that, the area was under water.

ACCESS AND EASEMENTS

An existing paved road extending approximately thirty feet into the park is not legally acknowledged. The enclosed stairway down from lower Lake Shore Drive is kept padlocked. (A fence was erected across the western boundary of the park in late summer of 2002.)

The development company that owns the adjoining property west of Lake Shore Drive holds right-of-way and the easements allowing it access to repair utility lines, access to launch boats, the right to lease a portion of the park to construct and operate a restaurant selling alcoholic beverages, and the right to buy back the property twenty years after the date of its dedication by the Chicago Park District (1987) if the Park District doesn't complete its obligation to develop a park.

The Park District claims that the concrete and corrugated-steel seawall needs massive repair, at a cost of between $700,000 and $4.4 million. Friends of the Chicago River argues that vegetated banks, built of dirt, offer a cheaper and more ecological alternative, providing for "streambank stabilization, better water quality, and increased aquatic and terrestrial habitats, contributing to biological diversity" ("A Handbook of Bank Restoration Designs for the Chicago River and other Urban Streams," Friends of the Chicago River, 2000).

ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Temperature: average annual extremes (last 50 years): low 20° F, high 73° F; historical extremes: −27° F, 104° F
Snow: average monthly high: 10.8 inches; extreme: 38 inches
Growing season: late April through early October
Trees: hackberry, hawthorn, Russian olive, cottonwood, sumac
Flowers: mallow, milkweed, loosestrife, thistle, dogbane, goldenrod, bouncing Bet, black-eyed Susan, blue-eyed grass, yarrow, Queen-Anne's lace
Animals: rabbits, butterflies, birds (sparrows, swallows, gulls, ducks, redwing blackbirds, red-tailed hawks).

Great Lakes fish were recently discovered to have high concentrations of toxic flame retardant in their tissues, a chemical released by the breakdown of plastics used in computers and circuit boards. Levels of mercury, chlordane, and PCBs in Lake Michigan fish (chinook and coho salmon, trout, carp, bass, whitefish, yellow perch...) are also notoriously high. Recommended consumption of Lake Michigan fish: one meal per month, max.
Soil: In December 2000, random surface soil samples showed uneven contamination with radioactive thorium, a material used in the production of gas mantles by the Lindsay Light Company, which operated at a nearby address until the 1930s. Contaminated soil was apparently dumped on DuSable Park from excavation of nearby construction sites. High thorium levels were previously detected at several other sites in the neighborhood. "Remediation" consisted, in part, of laying a minimum of six inches of concrete over the soil, a practically effortless solution for parking lots and high-rise buildings.

In the summer of 2000, the Chicago Park District proposed building a "temporary parking lot" on what had been dedicated as DuSable Park. "The park district could charge $100/day to park vehicles from nearby construction sites there—40 vehicles, $4,000/day" (quote from August 2000 community meeting). After public outcry from local condo and townhome residents, as well as community groups citywide, this plan was foiled; then in December the Park District announced the "discovery" of radioactive thorium on site. Thorium contamination was put forward as the primary obstacle to development of the park. Thorium's half-life is 14 billion years.

In October 2002, Kerr McGee, the company that inherited responsibility for the thorium contamination from Lindsay Light, dug five holes, each approximately four feet in diameter and eighteen inches deep, trucked off the dirt, and announced that the thorium problem was solved.

ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT

Lake Shore Drive, a two-story highway, speeds over the western boundary of DuSable Park. Navy Pier, a midwest tourist mecca including ferris wheel, shops, restaurants, and other entertainment, extends into the lake just north of the park on the opposite side of Ogden slip.

Lake Point Towers rises east of Lake Shore Drive and just north of DuSable Park. The construction of this luxury residential high-rise in the late 1960s spurred the drafting of the 1972 Lakefront Protection Act forbidding additional commercial development east of the drive. Before this legislation was enacted, two similar high-rise towers were planned for the three acres that are now DuSable Park.

Downtown is Chicago's fastest growing residential community. An area of sixty acres surrounding DuSable Park has been developed as new residential construction and commercial space in the last decade and a half, replacing industrial properties. Private townhomes line the north edge of Ogden slip. The first tower of Riverview Towers, a multiunit condo complex just west of the Drive from DuSable Park, was completed in 2000. Additional towers are planned to fill in the rest of the peninsula west of DuSable Park.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The El Presidente, docked at Ogden slip, just west of Navy Pier, is a magnificent yacht that allows guests to lounge in complete luxury surrounded by original Art-Deco style furnishings, a teak afterdeck and companionways and an elegantly-appointed main salon trimmed in teak and mahogany. This historic cruising yacht can be chartered by the hour, day, week or month ($650/hr weekdays, $850/hr weekends).

— ADVERTISING BROCHURE, 2000

In Chicago, a worker earning the Minimum Wage ($5.15 per hour) has to work 118 hours per week in order to afford a two-bedroom unit at the area's Fair Market Rent. Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a two-bedroom unit is $788.

— REPORT BY THE NATIONAL LOW INCOME HOUSING COALITION, 2000

Access to Chicago's lakefront has historically been a privilege based on wealth, and a problem for African American and Latino communities located west—far from the lake—or south, where lakefront park development has been neglected, and access is more difficult. The community area where the park is located—stretching west from the lakefront to include the Chicago Housing Authority's Cabrini Green (now in the process of being torn down)—has the highest median property values in Chicago and the greatest discrepancy between income levels. Although approximately 80 percent of the immediate neighborhood surrounding the park is white (2000 census), symbolic access to, and representation on, the lakefront for African Americans and other people of color would begin to address historic and ongoing inequities.

Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, the Haitian-French trader who was Chicago's first permanent non-native settler, happens to have been black. The only historical marker currently commemorating DuSable in a city full of extravagant historical markers is a small bronze plaque in a public plaza on Michigan Avenue. This plaque is flanked by others, of equal size, commemorating the first "Europeans" to spend the night—and the first "white child" to be born—in what would become Chicago.

TIMELINE

mid 1600s–late 1700s Members of the Potawatomie tribe live in the area that will become Chicago.

1772 Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, a Haitian-French settler, establishes the first permanent non-native settlement, at what was then the mouth of the Chicago River. He marries a Potawatomie woman named Catherine and eventually builds "a bakehouse, a smokehouse, a poultry house, a dairy, a workshop, a barn and two stables" (Chicago Public Library Municipal Reference Collection).

early 1800s–1850 New land is deposited east of Michigan Avenue by action of lake currents after a lighthouse jetty is built to the south. The mouth of the Chicago River moves east into the lake.

late 1800s The Chicago Dock and Canal Company is founded by William Ogden, who held ownership of most of the (new) land. Attorney Abraham Lincoln helps the company with legal issues involved in developing private land for a public purpose, namely, the creation of a shipping harbor (subsequently abandoned). Chicago Dock and Canal digs Ogden slip to connect cargo boats with railroads at North Pier, resulting in the creation of the point between slip and river, now DuSable Park.

1928 The National DeSaible Memorial Society (later changed to the Chicago DuSable League) is founded to push for the commemoration of Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable and for specific recognition of the contribution of the African diaspora to the founding of the city of Chicago.

1948 The Chicago Plan Commission passes a resolution opposing in principle any use of Chicago's lakefront for other than recreational purposes ("except such uses as may be requisite for harbor or terminal facilities of passenger and freight vessels between Grand Avenue and Randolph Street").

1964 Chicago Dock and Canal (reorganized as a real estate investment trust in 1961) leases land east of Lake Shore Drive between Grand and Randolph to developers of Lake Point Tower, a fifty-story high-rise apartment building. The Trust later options land south of Lake Point Tower to Centex Homes, to build two more high-rise towers on the point that is now DuSable Park.

1972 Mayor Richard J. Daley enacts the Lake Shore Protection Ordinance, forbidding private development of lands east of Lake Shore Drive. Centex Homes takes the city to court, and the city is forced to reimburse Centex for costs incurred. Chicago Dock and Canal holds onto the peninsula but promises not to build there.

1987/88 The three-acre parcel is dedicated as DuSable Park under Mayor Harold Washington's administration, although Chicago Dock and Canal Trust retains ownership of the land.

1997 MCL, a private development corporation, absorbs the real estate holdings of Chicago Dock and Canal Trust. MCL "gives" DuSable Park to the Chicago Park District and agrees to pay $600,000 toward its development as a park.

1990s The B. F. Ferguson Fund of the Art Institute of Chicago commissions sculptor Martin Puryear to create a commemorative piece for DuSable Park, but the commission is dependent on the park's completion. Puryear, an African American, presents a proposal that is nonrepresentational, which is described by a member of the Chicago DuSable League as "a cube with a feather on it." Members of the League call for a representational sculpture that is recognizable as a black man. There are no records of what DuSable actually looked like.

July 2000 The Chicago Park District announces plans to lease DuSable Park to Arnes Petrakis's development company to create a "temporary" parking lot, with berms and pavements and landscaping to minimize runoff from gas and antifreeze and to camouflage the cars—all of which would be dug up after two years. In theory, this temporary lease would raise funds toward eventual construction of the park.

September 2000 The parking lot plan is indefinitely postponed after energetic resistance from a coalition of groups that eventually names itself the DuSable Coalition.

December 2000 Radioactive thorium contamination is "discovered" on site, though the extent of the danger is unclear. The Chicago Park District promises a development plan once costs of the cleanup are determined.

Summer 2001 Donald Young Gallery holds a private viewing for the DuSable Coalition of a second sculpture proposal by Martin Puryear. This version is a representational carved stone relief showing a man in profile carrying an axe. Criticisms of this maquette include: "primitive rendering," "looks like he's coming in from the field," "not shown like the respectable businessman that he was," and "only half a man."

The African Scientific League holds a conference at the Field Museum in Chicago to discuss, among other things, the feasibility of disinterring the skull of DuSable to recreate his actual facial features using forensic computer technologies.

March 2002 The DuSable Coalition and Friends of the Parks sponsor an exhibition and symposium at the Chicago Architecture Foundation to insist that the Park District develop the park. Scheduled speaker David Doig, Superintendent of the Chicago Park District, doesn't show up.

October 2002 Kerr McGee "takes care of" the thorium contamination.

November 2002 The Chicago Park District agrees to create a steering committee to discuss the development of DuSable Park but fails to include the park in its budget for the upcoming year.

PHOTO: DOUGLAS FOGELSON

NARRATIVE DIGRESSION

To find the title to a piece of land, you need an exact street address. The meadow has no address. At City Hall, the Recorder of Deeds sent me to the eighth floor, to "maps." Because of the city's residential housing boom—while low-income and affordable rental units evaporate—the lobby was frenzied with contractors, architects, and developers wielding calculators and plans, thick rolled blueprints leaning against walls and rolling across the floor under the feet of civil servants playing Ping-pong. The maps department, down a long hallway to the left, was strangely empty—a large open space with about twenty desks stacked with papers. Finally a guy arrived from a door somewhere in the back. He seemed exasperated. He told me the person I needed to talk to was Barbara, and he pointed to an empty chair. Barbara never materialized. Eventually the clerk got me a map. The meadow was represented as a blank spot—no signs, numbers, names, nothing, unlike all the properties around it. The clerk smiled for the first time. He said this is unusual—it appears that no one owns that land. It must be landfill. He chuckled.

On the way home from City Hall, I rode inland to North Water Street, where Riverview Towers had recently risen from piles of sand. I intended to bike through the new construction onto the park. It was noon. A hundred workers had spilled out from the building and collected around lunch trucks, and all of them, on break and with nothing better to do, turned and looked at me. Instinctively, I braked and reversed.

The bridge operator's office, which controls the raising and lowering of the Lake Shore Drive bridge to accommodate tall ships, is a small concrete room on top of the highway. This is accessed at the level of the bike trail by an enclosed concrete stairway going up. Another concrete stairway goes down to the meadow, but that one is padlocked. That noon when I returned to the biketrail I watched a worker enter the iron gate, just pulling it open. He turned and gave me a sharp look as he closed it behind him, feigning a click by knocking his steel-toed boot against the metal. I waited a few minutes, then locked my bike to the railing and followed him down. The interior of the stairway was covered with graffiti: the word "JUGS" and lots of spiral forms. Two workers sat on the bottom steps smoking dope.

The meadow grass was much taller than I expected—about eight feet. It wasn't familiar, a flowering stalk with perpendicular branches, tiny white flowers on all its radiating tips. Sweet-smelling but impenetrable. When I tried to walk into it, its multiple branchings tied slip knots around my legs and arms. After only a few steps I could no longer move forward but was held in a kind of suspension. I imagined all those condo eyes looking down on me stuck in a thicket. All I could do was back up and unknot. Someone else had stamped down a sort of path. It didn't lead up the slope, where I wanted to go, but down to the rocky bank of the lake and to a pile of empty beer cans. I found a flattened area and stood around for a while, not wanting to sit down in what felt more like a trap than a refuge. When I finally removed myself from the branching grass and climbed back up the concrete stairs, the dope smokers were gone and the gate had been padlocked from the outside, locking me in.

The creation of "enclosures," starting in England around the fourteenth century, marked a significant step towards the institution of private property. Land that had previously been open to public use was enclosed within fences, ditches, or hedges for the private use of landlords, for recreation or capital accumulation (agriculture, grazing). Tenants were expelled and had nowhere to make a home, nor any means of feeding themselves, resulting in "hardship, increased vagrancy, and social unrest." Penalties for trespassing or poaching were unreasonably severe; those caught were imprisoned or, often, put to death.

Locked inside the meadow, I felt less like a poacher than a person complicit with the private interests responsible for installing locks and gates. After all, I had wanted the meadow to myself—for fantasy purposes, but nonetheless as a kind of private property. Getting what you want is often disappointing and sometimes claustrophobic. The outside becomes the inside; there is no longer a somewhere else. As it turned out, none of the workers paid any attention when I walked under the highway and out between the open chain-link fences.