

# Infrastructure of Urban Play

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## Introduction

Each person learns to play within specific times and places. Think of the variety of places you used as a child hiding, chasing, exploring, swimming, jumping, climbing, throwing, catching and on and on. In your early years careful parents would warn you to avoid playing in the street or the stream. Alleyways proved more accessible. Climbing utility poles was unacceptable. The pickup games among neighborhood peers introduced complex environmental negotiations marking out fields, arenas, courts or other spaces for legitimate action in an empty field or lightly traveled street. Scripting the complex interactions among dolls, trucks, soldiers, guns and costumed actors turned yards, sand boxes, basements and places of every sort into playgrounds. Making processions and parades for resistant pets and toddlers. Making music and dancing in fantasy studios. The imaginative repertoire of childhood play adapts to the spaces that adults create mostly for other purposes; some explicitly laid out as official rules and others embedded as traditional conventions.

We understand play in the US in vivid contrast with work. The various meanings for play anticipate the free and spontaneous movement of the body for exercise, sport, pleasure, entertainment and delight. Play describes the conduct of these sorts of actions within specific contexts and settings. These include gymnasiums, auditoriums, theaters, pools, halls, studios and fields. Places for play in modern post-industrial societies rely upon an often taken for granted institutional and physical infrastructure.

In the United States responsibility for the infrastructure of play includes public and private institutions. These institutions share authority for the construction, creation and management of places for play. The plans and policies these institutions adopt and implement shape the contours that guide what and how people play. This essay classifies how the most salient institutions exercise their responsibility and how this influences the social and spatial organization of play for people. I offer a framework that analyzes the type of play in relation to sponsorship. A quick overview of the demand for different types of play introduces an overview of some problems and opportunities in the current spatial organization of the infrastructure for play. I offer examples from Chicago to illustrate. The conclusion describes innovations that may improve future infrastructure policy and investment.

## Reformers Lay the Basic Infrastructure for Modern Play

The United States is obsessed with work as the measure of individual achievement and social value. Leisure distracts from the demands of labor and what jobs accomplish. It must be earned and then put to good use purchasing entertainment that provides stress relieving fun. The concept of play as its own reward; an action contributing to a more complete self and a better world must be a hobby or a self-improvement project. The various meanings for play anticipate the free and spontaneous movement of the body for exercise, sport, pleasure, entertainment and delight. Play describes the conduct of these

sorts of actions within different contexts and settings. These include gymnasiums, auditoriums, theaters, pools, halls, studios and fields. These places for play in modern societies rely upon an often taken for granted institutional and physical infrastructure that emerged to cope with the excesses of industrial urbanization.

### Nature and the Built Urban Environment

The industrial revolution fused the powers of the engineering sciences with the limitless ambition of capitalist accumulation. Just as Darwin's conception of evolution undermined belief in a transcendent human nature, the architecture of human purpose claimed the bounty of nature as a resource for ever expanding economic and population growth. The infrastructure for agriculture, mining, manufacture, transport and consumption overwhelmed the compact spatial form of prior human settlements. Urbanization expanded at an unprecedented rate grafted loosely onto the physical fabric of established cities or morphing tiny hamlets into sprawling settlements within a single human generation.

As economic markets for capital, labor, goods, services and land proliferated and spread across the world, so too did the dramatic increases in wealth and the hierarchical segmentation and segregation of human populations into social classes, racial clusters, ethnic enclaves and cultural niches. The modern urban settlements that encompassed and reinforced these changes did not behave with the predictability of the technical processes and institutional conventions that built them. Social conflicts and environmental problems emerged whose causes were unclear and solutions unknown. Reform efforts focused on these problems combining knowledge from the sciences, humanities and arts to comprehend the causes and solutions trying out contested conceptions of a public good.

### Resistance from the exploited

The prominence of industrial agriculture and manufacture transformed the lives of workers. Disciplined by the organized sequence of repeated tasks squeezed into a twelve-hour day people did not learn a craft, but performed a job. The manufacturing process generated exponential increases in the production of goods at the expense of the autonomy and competence of the individual worker. People embraced factory labor because they had few other alternatives. Most suffered from the physical and social exhaustion of the relentless pace of production. Many resisted fueling the emergence of labor unions whose members collaborated to protest the speed and danger of production and hold the threat of going on strike. The relentless imposition of labor discipline and the squalid density of slum dwellings left few places for play. Adults squeezed into what private open spaces they could find, men frequenting saloons, billiard halls and gambling dens. Children made do with streets and vacant lots.

### Assistance from the reformers

Even as the workers resisted, a growing cadre of upper and middle class civic reformers selectively attended to different aspects of social distress and environmental damage. These included those like Jane Adams sympathetic to the plight of immigrant labor who proposed physical improvements to the urban places where these people lived that would recreate and restore the humanity lost to labor. Some focused on the housing stock, but others focused on parks that included fields, gardens, greens, ponds, fountains that offered places for repose and recreation. Others embraced a top down civic benevolence that envisioned the provision of public places for the working masses that would civilize the unkempt and unclear. The compassionate and the benevolent activists fueled what was the progressive reform

movement that included the provision of public improvements dedicated to improving the plight of the working classes while generating wholesome beautiful places that everyone would enjoy.

The reformers set in motion institutional changes that stimulated public support for specialized public places and facilities designed to remedy urban ills, improve public health, foster recreation and inspire civic uplift. I offer only a few highlights of the many initiatives that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to remedy the excesses of industrial urbanization and that laid the infrastructure for play.

Large urban parks provided pastoral open spaces surrounded and populated with stands of trees, ponds, fountains, field houses, meeting halls, gardens and playing fields. Smaller specialized parks scattered across neighborhoods provided playgrounds, fields for sports and landscaped paths for strolling. Parks offered places for protection and recovery from the physical ills of the industrial city. Public health initiatives focused on improving hygiene for adults and the development of children through the provision of public baths and dedicated playgrounds. Supporters of the playground movement not only hoped to improve the safety for child play, but contributes to improved learning and moral health.

Municipalities funded and provided space for parks in response to the dramatic expansion of industrial cities. They offered an antidote to urban ills, a place for active recreation, a vehicle for public hygiene and a resource for civic identity (Bachin 2003). The pastoral landscape created by the English Gentry was transformed into an urbanized nature by 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape planners like Frederick Law Olmstead whose Central Park offered a regional park that met all these goals. Best of all for the champions of real estate proximity to parkland offered a resale premium. The land adjoining Central Park enjoys much higher value than similar parcels just a few blocks away. Integrating nature into the spatial fabric of prosperous residential communities followed the class contours set by the rural gentry, merging the pastoral landscape with the myth of the yeoman farmstead fueling the dream of a single-family home in a garden. Developers produced these places for prosperous upper and middleclass households. But what about the growing crowds of people squeezed into the tenement districts of industrial cities like Chicago?

Reformers envisioned the provision of places dedicated exclusively for different kinds of play. State legislatures created park districts as places dedicated for play. Initially, these efforts continued to expand the provision of regional parks that catered to suburban elites and new middleclass homeowners. Radical planning reformers like Ebenezer Howard envisioned garden cities constructed on the suburban periphery that could tame the beast of industrial production and integrate the working-class residents within a garden landscape that unsettled the dominance of capitalist growth. Moderate reformers envisioned physical improvements that clad parkland and garden landscapes onto the underlying industrial system. Burnham's Chicago plan used parks and parkways to break up the massive grid and turn a squalid industrial Lakefront into a pastoral parkway.

Museums, Theaters and Concert Halls were built for the entire city; large buildings prominently positioned in accessible locations to house events offering practical education and civic enlightenment for the public. The growing ranks of the urban and suburban middle class proved the most frequent users. The working classes showed up for periodic events, but remained sequestered in low rent districts using vacant and abandoned sites to play ball, picnic and socialize. The working class frequented privately sponsored saloons, amusement parks, dance halls, gambling joints, burlesque clubs and boxing arenas. The inexpensive availability of such places challenged the moral sensibilities of many reformers

who turned to the power of public regulations to spatially constrain and even outlaw these places. These efforts never completely succeeded as working people resisted and with their increasing participation in the electorate the norms for public activity expanded to include gambling and boxing.

City beautiful proponents designed garden landscapes that used the spatial organization and location of plants, trees and grass to cultivate places offering the experience of organic natural harmony to offset the excess of industrial urbanism. Reformers believed in public moral improvement through the tactile experience of natural environments tailored to the purposes of re-creation and repose. Inspired by conceptions of civic unity the practical effects of these improvements catered to the sensibilities of social elites and aspiring middle class households. These civic minded elites confident in the powers of industrial might and national expansion organized massive public fairs to celebrate the march of progress. The crystal city concept first developed in London inspired the Columbia Exhibition in Chicago designed by Burnham and Olmstead. The millions who visited the Chicago Columbian Exhibition walked the pastoral promenade, gazed upon the grand civic architecture and peeked inside to witness the industrial tools on display. Once edified they then escaped to the adjoining Midway for food, drink, entertainment, distraction and play. The social differences separated and celebrated in the civic order of the White City coexist as a riot of exotic juxtapositions among magicians, dancers, musicians, actors and other players plying their trade among the promoters, hucksters, vendors and assorted entrepreneurs selling food, drink, amusement and more.

Play became not only a respite from toil, but an important contribution to human fulfillment and even citizenship. Jane Adams Hull House used organized play not only for immigrant children, but the adults as well. The successful provision of public schools provided an institutional beach head for pragmatist inspired pedagogical innovations that incorporated play into the mix of experiential learning. Doctrinal education began a long strategic retreat that continues even to this day.

Increased prosperity among the urban working and middle-class households made it possible to support the creation of public gymnasiums, professional sports teams, organized school sponsored sport leagues, intramural sports associations and the provision of public and private facilities, fields and equipment. Playgrounds that were at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century exceptional had by the end of the 1920s become routine equipment for elementary schoolyards and neighborhood parks.

### The New Deal legacy and Chicago at mid twentieth century

The refinement of play into increasingly specialized arts, sports and cultural activities incorporated the social inequalities of the marketplace and politics. Places for play were carved out in growing cities based on differences tied to social standing within class, race and ethnic hierarchies. New Deal public works efforts included the construction of public facilities for play at an unprecedented scale. The federal initiative built on the efforts of progressive reformers, labor unions, corporate managers and social scientists studying leisure. Unemployed workingclass workers built the physical infrastructure for play in urban and rural areas while middle class white collar workers performed, taught and promoted a diverse array of organized leisure activities. The great depression put a halt to urban expansion and the creation of new parks. But the New Deal Works Progress Administration included recreational facilities as an important product of publicly funded construction work. Much of the funding went to improve national and state park facilities, but some ended up funding construction of park and recreational facilities in metropolitan regions like Chicago.

For instance, Chicago Mayor Cermak commissioned construction of the Grant Park bandshell in 1931. But it was the efforts of James C. Petrillo, President of the Chicago Federation of Musicians who convinced Park District officials and in 1935 the first series of summer public concerts was launched (Cremin pp. 127-29). These events attracted tens of thousands of listeners who enjoyed the free entertainment provided by publicly funded musicians. This tradition continued until the 1950s when television and suburban outmigration dampened demand for downtown gathering. It reawakened with Mayor Jane Byrne who in 1981 opened Grant Park for a one-week food festival showcasing local restaurant faire while offering music events and dance. A City office of cultural affairs organized public venues sponsoring events in public parks, buildings, plazas and streets throughout the year. These combined city funds with private philanthropy and volunteer efforts among citizens seeking places and venues for different types of play. The institutional infrastructure for cultural events planned and coordinated the physical use of public facilities and places across the urban landscape.

The New Deal efforts to preserve and celebrate regional culture offering publicly funded support for music, art, dance and crafts proved short lived and largely unnecessary in the boom years following the second world war. Rising disposable income fueled the expansion of leisure into tourism and new forms of cultural consumption. Consider for example the Olympics. Revived in 1896 to inspire the celebration and promotion of amateur athletics (just as professional athletics was taking off), the modern Olympics linked the sports competition with a different host city. The focus on the event remains amateur sport, but the economic and cultural impact has shifted to emphasize the economic impacts and physical legacy of the public investment host cities make for local infrastructure improvements. In 1992 expenditures for the sporting events accounted for only 17 percent of total Olympic costs. In recent decades the Olympics committee has found it difficult to find cities in democratic societies willing and able to shoulder the burden of financial risk as the public effect of legacy effects becomes less evident.

The opening of Disneyland in 1954 turned the garden city dream of a beautiful place offering playful organic balance between town and country; home and work into an engineered park on a grand scale.<sup>1</sup> He integrated what the Columbian Exhibition had separated: the edification of modern technology and the pleasing amusement of the midway carnival. Increased prosperity and mobility encouraged the proliferation of specialized places designed to attract visitors. The tourist industry advertised and promoted experiences unique to a specific locale. Las Vegas also came into its own as a destination for illicit adult play. Dell Webb designed residential retirement communities as exclusive places for leisure and play for the elderly. Single family suburban homes transforming urban landscapes across the US included increasingly sophisticated appliances providing more time and space for leisure and play. The private purchase and use of toys, games, sports equipment, tools, craft accessories and other leisure objects exploded.

The ubiquity of human play like the ubiquity of the natural environment succumbed to the clever and relentless penetration of market relations. Supermarkets and fast food joints that offered plenty of popular cheap food fifty years ago, today pose a public health hazard. The popular embrace of toys and video games advertised on TV and the internet faces scrutiny today as people recognize how they distract children (and even adults) from active physical play. Massive cruise ships transport tourists to visit destinations where buses and trams shuttle thousands of visitors to popular but ill prepared

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<sup>1</sup> Disney had grand urban design ambitions for what later become Epcot Center. He had no inkling of the irony that his development success had wrought.

historical sites. Leisure as passive consumption of manufactured, goods, services and experiences displaced active play. The results not only damaged individuals, but generate enormous collective costs on places and society. Public health problems emerge (e.g. diabetes) as obesity reaches epidemic proportions. Popular tourist destinations suffer physical decay and environmental pollution from excessive levels of use. The commodification of play has perhaps gone too far.

### Contemporary demand for play

According to the United States Statistical Abstract employers increased revenues in all areas of leisure between 2000 and 2010. Spectating accounts for the largest share. Attendance at sports and entertainment performances accounts for an increasing share of spectating. Museum and amusement park attendance lag. Gambling dramatically increased its share of leisure revenue. Expenditures for active recreation overall diminished even as revenues from fitness center membership increased. Table X below breaks out the industrial sectors showing revenue growth and the different rates for a 17 year interval.

Table 1 United States Arts and Entertainment Employer Revenue by Subsector				
Sectors	Growth Rate	Employment in millions		
		2015	2007	1998
Arts, Entertain, Recreation Overall	1.11	272,324	215,705	128,290
Performing Arts, Spectator Sports & Related	1.31	132,450	98,339	56,647
Museums, Historical Sites & Similar	.87	15,297	13,384	8,356
Amusement, Gambling & Recreation Industries	.92	124,595	103,982	63,287

### Active and Passive Play Among US Adults

The demand for passive enjoyment of places and events outpaces purchases that involve active play. Despite the rapid increases in gambling and fitness revenue, revenue of other forms of active amusement lagged. Participation in spectating leads revenue growth in the leisure industry. This squares with data on attendance data for public parks. A third of the largest 100 cities reported park-hosted events surpassing 100,000 attendees. Among the largest were San Diego’s Fourth of July celebrations, Forth Worth’s Mayfest, the Oklahoma City Spring Arts Festival, the Taste of Chicago and San Francisco’s Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival (Trust for Public Land 2011).

The 2013 US Statistical Abstract reports on a 2010 national survey detailing what adults do in their leisure time. Away from home activities overwhelmingly included passive spectator attendance at performances and sporting events. A few, like playing a musical instrument or chess, could happen in a public place, but most play people reported doing happened at home. Missing altogether was mention of participation in sports, fitness related activity or other forms of social group activity. More recent data from the annual time survey conducted by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that among all

people 15 years or older leisure and sports activity accounts for about five hours of the day. Most of this included sedentary activity: people on average spend 2 hours and 43 minutes watching TV, 19 minutes relaxing & thinking, 17 minutes reading, 14 minutes gaming, 10 minutes on the computer, 4 minutes on arts, and 40 minutes socializing, two minutes spectating sporting events. This left 19 minutes for active sports play and exercise. Most adults do little or no active play. Among the 21 percent who do, the average was about 90 minutes of active sport or exercise (mostly walking) per day. Surprisingly adults work for only 3 hours and 36 minutes and spend an hour and 10 minutes traveling - most sitting in cars<sup>2</sup>. A comparison with 2006 data revealed very little change over time.

There is some evidence that working adults spend more leisure time in motion. A recent study collected data for U.S. workers in the National Health Interview Survey. Leisure Time Physical Activity was categorized as sufficiently active (moderate intensity,  $\geq 150$  minutes per week), insufficiently active (10–149 minutes per week), and inactive ( $< 10$  minutes per week). Prevalence trends of “sufficient” LTPA significantly increased from 2004 to 2014 (45.6% to 54.8%;  $P < .001$ ). (Gu et al 2016).

### Children and Play

A report prepared by the National Physical Activity Plan Alliance in 2016 details youth activity levels across the US. The report compiles survey results from several national data sources. They report that in 2005-06 about 43 percent of children 6-11 years old were physically active 60 minutes a day for five days of a week, while only eight percent of middle school and five percent of high school students reported meeting that standard. Sedentary activity was prevalent among all three, but highest among teens seventy percent of whom reported spending more than two hours a day watching a screen.

Schools play a prominent role shaping not only what children learn, but how they do it. Nine of ten elementary schools continue to provide recess for children. Although many fewer offer formal physical education classes. About half the adolescents in the US attend at least one PE class a week.

The US Department of Health and Human Services set out to track physical activity for all people, including children. They started tracking elementary and secondary school support for physical education as part of increased attention to active play as an important contribution to improved public health. The results showed some increasing efforts by districts across the United States to require physical education but at very small percent values. Elementary schools are increasing required recess even as they are proving less generous in sharing facilities for physical activity after school hours.

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<sup>2</sup> Forty five percent of the adults reported working on average 8 hours per day.

Table 2 US Department of Health & Human Services Increases in Share of Physical Activity in Schools				
	Actual Years			Goal
	2000	2006	2014	2020
Increase share of elementary schools requiring daily PE		4.4	3.6	4.8
Increase share of junior high schools requiring daily PE		10.5	3.3	11.5
Increase share of high schools requiring daily PE	5.8	2.1	4.0	2.3
Increase share of adolescent daily participation		30	30	37 (2007,2015)U
Increase share of districts requiring elementary recess		57	59	63
Increase share of districts that allow physical activity use after school hours	35	29	26	32

Data from USHHS 2017

Demand for active play has increased among adults and for small children in recent years. However, people spend more time alone engaging in mostly private at home sedentary activity. More households have increased spending on spectator activities than spend time and money on active play with others.

Private provision currently dominates the infrastructure for play. This reflects the prosperity of the US economy and the cultural focus on independence and autonomy. A robust leisure industry has grown and diversified developing ways to fill adult leisure time with profitable pursuits. Mostly these include products, places and events that entertain and amuse. The promotion and production of fitness has fueled expansion in health clubs and exercise gear, but mostly for niche segments.

### Emerging Problems for Play

Play accompanies childhood contributing to learning the practical arts of adult living. Play happens as part of social and spatial settings. Play embeds each developing child within a nexus of traditions, habits and techniques encountered as simulations, models and tools for understanding, manipulating and otherwise conceiving the world. Play not only integrates children into a household, neighborhood and society; but also provides the ensemble of tacit skills for self-development. The promise of modernity anticipates the provision of social and political freedom sufficient to support the continued articulation of each person. Each person must learn to become a responsible individual able to integrate the multiple roles of worker, parent, citizen, and more. This proves difficult to do finding a role in the labor market, creating a family, maintaining a home, caring for kin and the other demands of independent

adulthood. Play provides crucial experience for learning how to manage and juggle these roles into a coherent self.<sup>3</sup>

Making places for play that can meet this challenge fueled the ambitions of civic reformers over a century ago and continues to inspire the efforts of those building pathways to human fulfillment that make room for play. Private provision currently dominates the infrastructure for play. This reflects the prosperity of the US economy and the cultural focus on independence and autonomy. A robust leisure industry has identified and exploited spatial niches for consumption accelerated and complemented by internet communication and interaction. But market infrastructure for play also contributes to problems that the market cannot solve.

### Social differences generate uneven access and use

The diversity, depth and range of places for play varies with the class, gender and age of people. The sweeping egalitarian impulses that inspired the reformers a hundred years ago had to adapt to the demands and expectations of elite institutions and expectations. The basic playgrounds that became standard fare for public schools were no match for the expansive grounds at elite private schools. The recognition of child's play as serious business enriched manufacture of mass produced playground equipment purchased by school districts and municipalities, even as park districts in wealthy areas provided hand crafted private and semi-public playgrounds and recreational facilities.

Looked at in the aggregate the United States possesses an astonishing amount of public and private places for play. But the class disparities that diminished in the wake of the Great Depression have returned. The privatization of professional sports, the expanded popularity of gambling as a source of public revenue, the sprawling growth of exclusive unsustainable golf courses, the popularity of computer gaming, social media has channeled play into places that marginalize, exploit and exclude people based on differences in income, race, ethnicity, age, religion and gender.

This segmentation does not flow inevitably from the availability of increased time, new technologies, digital communication or other specialized tools for playing. In fact, the innovations offer new opportunities for enhancing and improving the possibilities for active interactive play that cuts across market and social divides. This requires purposeful effort and attention.

### Sedentary living and high calorie diets generate chronic health risks

The success of modern employment, housing, and transport systems has greatly reduced reliance on physical activity. People spend more time sitting than moving as they do their jobs, travel among destinations and live in their homes. Chronic illnesses and health risks once kept in check by the physical effort used making things, walking to work and actively maintaining a home have increased. Additionally, people enjoy access to more inexpensive food, much of it laced with high calorie sugar and fat that encourage addiction. These emerging health risks fall disproportionately across the population based on cultural eating habits and income level. The food industry advertising caters to paying clientele based on cultural tastes and buying power. Poor people purchase and eat familiar affordable high calorie low nutrition food and drink that

wealthier people will not eat. The incidence rates for obesity and diabetes that headline public health campaigns reach epidemic levels in poor neighborhoods. Changing what people eat and how they move becomes a target for publicly fostered reform. For instance, advocates have urged retail supermarket firms to locate stores in food deserts. What sorts of institutional and physical changes would improve the infrastructure for active physical play?

### Seeing instead of doing

Municipalities, park districts, tourist bureaus and other event planners build infrastructure that encourages large scale spectator events. Sports arenas and race tracks offer examples of publicly subsidized privately managed places for popular professional teams tied to a region or city. Hosting the Olympic games represents the pinnacle of massive publicly subsidized sports infrastructure provision. Across the globe municipalities and their national governments compete to attract the games and usually spend a decade building and improving facilities in a metropolitan region. The competition among elite amateur (sort of) athletes from across the globe attracts millions of visitors who offer billions of tourist dollars to the host country. The promised residual benefits of the construction funded by speculators and lenders rarely materializes. Millions of people watch and enjoy the competition as spectators and consumers eating, drinking, shopping and touring.

Burnham's famous 1909 Plan for Chicago was initially conceived as an expansive lakefront park inspired preparing for the Columbian Exhibition in the 1890s. Burnham was a civic booster who believed that public provision of beautiful parkways, plazas and parks would create places that not only eased congestion and stimulated investment, but house civic spectacles inspiring solidarity and pride. The Museum campus near the massively rebuilt Bear's football stadium was a catalyst for the reconfiguration of a large portion of Lakefront Drive and Roosevelt Road in the 1990s. The ensuing realignment opened up the South Side of the Loop for redevelopment while increasing access to these regional attractions.

The Chicago culture campus offers an excellent example of the tension between the passive spectacle of museum display and professional sport against the active engagement of public amateurs playing ball and hiking in a nature preserve. The campus improvements proved so successful that the site attracted the attention of George Lucas whose real estate team was scouting locations outside California for a museum showcasing and celebrating his epic movie making enterprise. Chicago's 'Friends of the Parks' successfully sued the Chicago Park District arguing that the private museum should not locate in prime public trust park land adjacent to Lake Michigan. Discouraged by the legal impediments and uninterested in other less prominent Chicago sites Lucas dropped the proposal. Much less contentious was the creation of the First Merit Bank concert pavilion on the northern half of Northerly Island (formerly Mieg's Field) that generated ticket sale revenue the Park District used to help pay for the reclamation of the 92 acre peninsula as a pedestrian and bicycle friendly nature preserve that combines seeing and doing.

### Gambling to the Rescue

The Las Vegas strip provides the consummate example of an urban space designed for mass leisure. Visitors travel from across the globe to gamble and periodically attend large scale entertainment events when otherwise not eating and drinking. Once outlawed in most states and reviled as a place of

immorality and crime, Las Vegas became a role model for public leisure. In the last fifty years states have approved casino gambling and statewide lotteries that generate substantial revenue for the state. Indian tribes entered the business as well creating casinos on reservations close to highways near metropolitan areas. Legalizing and taxing gambling does not remedy the addictive features of gambling that make it a controversial form of play. One 2002 study found that 80 percent of adults gambled at least once in the prior year (Welt 2002).

Exurban post-industrial suburbs encircling Chicago have built river boat casinos taxing the gaming revenues to support redevelopment in obsolete downtowns. The expected multiplier effects did not materialize as many hoped and the social costs remain untallied. Gambling has spread to online video gaming greatly decentralizing digital access to games of chance. A 2015 report by the video (gambling) gaming industry uses Illinois gaming tax revenue flows documenting how casino revenues are declining while revenues from machines located in almost a thousand Illinois municipalities accounted for 28 percent of Illinois gambling revenue in 2014. (Union Gaming Analytics, 2015). Ironically, promoting gambling as a revenue source promotes forms leisure time activity that foster types of play that do little to contribute to improved health or meaningful fulfillment.

States, municipalities, counties and special district authorities promote projects (e.g., stadiums) and policies (e.g., gambling) that encourage tourist and hospitality activity to expand growth in the post-industrial service sector fueling both economic growth and public revenues. These efforts contribute to problem play. Other public agencies, but sometimes the same ones, build and support infrastructure for play that struggles to promote active forms of play improving public health and supporting the growth and development of individuals.

## Supplying Public Infrastructure for Play

Local park provision proliferated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a functional department within municipal (and urban county) bureaucracies. These departments provide the primary public infrastructure for play across the United States. Their efforts are complemented by elementary and secondary school districts. School districts concentrate on education in classrooms and laboratories, but they also provide an astonishing range of facilities and structures for informal and formal play. Today both offer passive and active places for play. The playground equipment and sports equipment industries now help fund and promote the public agencies that continue to champion public parks and playgrounds.

### Parks

The Trust for Public Land collected data on public park land in the 100 largest cities in the United States for 2015. The 2016 report identified 22,493 city parks serving 62 million urban residents with a wide array of facilities, including 419 public golf courses, 569 dog parks, 9,633 ball diamonds, 11,678 playgrounds, and 14,415 basketball hoops. A survey of park and recreation agencies of all sizes across the country uncovers an even larger network of park provision in suburbs, exurban and rural communities (NRPA 2017). The median agency administered 25 facilities on 491 acres. Playgrounds, courts and fields were the most common facilities.

Park districts provide the primary public institution offering infrastructure for play. Like school districts most park districts obtain operating revenue from property taxes. This introduces disparities across a metropolitan region. Districts that encompass prosperous communities can fund more and better

facilities than those located in poor communities. The uneven funding of place based taxation generates disparities in local access to facilities for play. Additionally, the upper and middle-class households enjoy more leisure time than working and poor households. They mobilize and leverage access and use of public district facilities and programs; coordinating a wide range of child focused events.

**Figure 3** **Outdoor Park and Recreation Facilities**

Outdoor Facility	Agencies Offering this Facility	Median Number of Residents per Facility
Playgrounds	90.0%	3,633
Basketball courts	82.4%	7,080
Tennis courts (outdoor only)	71.5%	4,375
Diamond fields: baseball - youth	68.4%	6,453
Diamond fields: softball fields - adult	64.9%	12,468
Rectangular fields: multi-purpose	64.9%	12,468
Diamond fields: softball fields - youth	60.1%	8,500
Swimming pools (outdoor only)	52.7%	33,040
Dog park	52.1%	42,500
Diamond fields: baseball - adult	49.2%	19,226
Totlots	46.4%	12,195
Community gardens	44.8%	31,000
Rectangular fields: soccer field - youth	44.8%	6,199
Rectangular fields: soccer field - adult	41.0%	12,226
Rectangular fields: football field	37.0%	26,250
Diamond fields: tee-ball	34.5%	15,439
Multiuse courts -basketball, volleyball	32.5%	15,250
Ice rink (outdoor only)	17.1%	16,572
Multipurpose synthetic field	10.9%	34,242
Rectangular fields: lacrosse field	10.3%	27,332
Rectangular fields: cricket field	8.5%	147,500
Overlay field	5.1%	10,820
Rectangular fields: field hockey field	3.7%	20,340

NRPA 2017, p. 6

Indoor facilities were less common, but the most popular included recreational centers and gyms.

**Figure 4** **Indoor Park and Recreation Facilities**

Indoor Facility	Agencies Offering this Facility	Median Number of Residents per Facility
Recreation centers	58.2%	27,591
Gyms	56.2%	28,856
Community centers	50.7%	29,227
Senior centers	40.1%	48,822
Fitness center	37.0%	40,946
Performance amphitheater	27.0%	48,000
Nature centers	24.8%	105,000
Stadiums	15.3%	77,129
Ice rink	15.3%	30,642
Teen centers	10.5%	51,448
Indoor track	10.3%	50,667
Arena	7.6%	57,300

**Note:** Some of these facilities may be included as part of another facility; for example, a fitness center may be part of a recreation center.

NRPA 2017, p. 6

### Schools

The creation of public schools in the United States laid down a powerful institutional infrastructure for human education and improvement. Elite reformers convinced reluctant peers that educating all citizens would not only improve the quality of labor, but also the political strength of the democratic republic. The efforts to promote playgrounds started out independent of the schools, but became part of the civic improvement reforms promoted by progressive reformers at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea that play contributes to improved learning remains to this day contested.

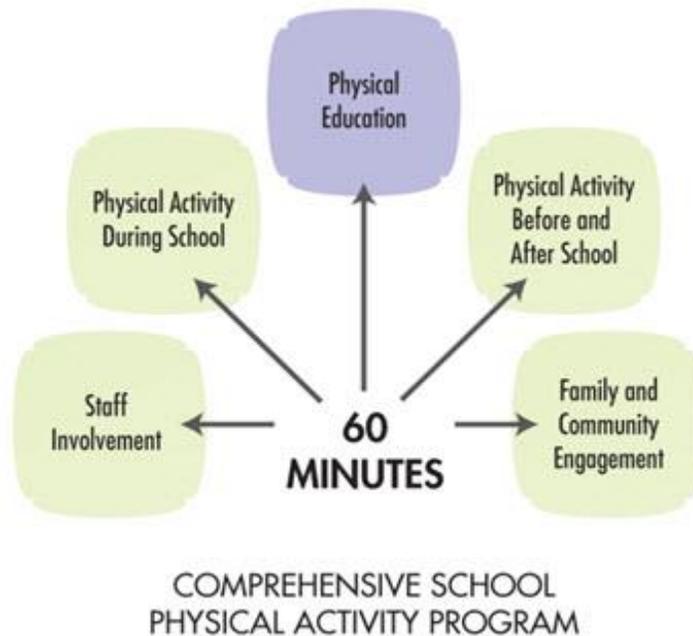
Public education has focused on teaching students to read, write, calculate and acquire the basic rudiments of American civic culture and history. Many progressive reformers promoted developmental conceptions of childhood that integrated play into organized education – ideas that later social and psychological research refined and elaborated. But while these inspired innovations in private education and specialized curricula mostly for prosperous middle-class families, the public systems continued to separate play on the grounds from learning in the classrooms.

The performing and plastic arts along with sports did become an increasing part of school experience throughout the twentieth century. As school districts consolidated they were able to build school facilities that included places for formal play: theaters, studios, stadiums, pools, arenas, fields and halls. Learning to play a musical instrument, baseball, swim or draw was ancillary or secondary to the basic curriculum and the commitment to preparing students for the labor market. The cultural organization of play happened as parents with the financial support of business and civic sponsors created theater

groups, sports leagues and other specialized entities to solicit and promote participation. These offered children opportunities to acquire and develop skill in different forms of play.

Schools still prohibit private play among students. But for more than a century local schools have organized play to fit purposefully into designed play grounds, theaters and gyms. The consolidated urban and suburban school districts build schools that include places to learn arts and sports. The same spatial segmentation accompanied secondary school organization but with larger and more specialized grounds and spaces including fields, courts and pools for informal play and formal games and sport. Today, students may elect to learn a musical instrument in band, a specialized position on a sport team, artistic drawing or perform on stage as dancer, singer, actor; perhaps all three. Each school or school district routinely provides places for the formal and informal conduct of such play.<sup>4</sup>

The connection between play, learning and overall health continues to gain scientific and public support. But finding the resources to provide facilities for all students remains a challenge. The increasing residential segregation by income, race and ethnic affiliation shows up in the local spatial organization of districts. Big city districts face large portions of low income minority students with shrinking property tax bases. The surrounding metro suburban districts fare much better. These disparities can make an emerging public health problem like the obesity epidemic among youth much more challenging to



prevent. As families eat tasty but nutritiously suspect processed food those with lower incomes make such foods a larger part of their daily diet. Sugar and fat laden foods prove addictive to many. High calorie low nutrition diets fuel fat formation unless offset by increased levels of physical activity. Public

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<sup>4</sup> The research evidence on child play at school supports the provision of physical facilities for active movement, even as some of these may be more useful than others. (Hyndman, Benson & Teleford 2016).

health advocates urge schools to offer more nutritious food and to encourage more physical activity during the school day. Play not only complements mental learning, but contributes crucially to physical health threatened by the addictive allure of junk food.

## Paving Pathways for Play in Chicago

### The Chicago Park District

The District conducted a study of the economic impact that the District assets had on the Chicago economy for 2013. The impacts included direct effects tied to revenues from park hosted events and the indirect impacts on the value of property near each type of park. The large magnet parks like Grant and Lincoln Parks along the lakefront provided the most direct revenue from tourism, while the other large regional, community and neighborhood parks accounted for revenue from sponsored events.

Park type	Count	Property value impact [USD m]	Special assets & tourism [USD m]	Non-tax revenues [USD m]	Enrollment <sup>1)</sup> [# people]	Average property value impact [%]	
Magnet	7	134	1,173-1,384	69	30,731	1.6%	Special Attractions 
Mini	141	335	-	0	492	2.8%	Mini-Parks 
Neighborhood	161	146	20	1	74,084	0.9%	Amenities Parks 
Community	117	68	-	7	215,217	0.6%	
Regional	46	43	-	5	164,938	0.9%	
Citywide	9	9	10	3	41,227	0.8%	Open Space Parks 
Passive	56	159	-	0	13,548	2.4%	
Unimproved	21	13	-	-	-	0.8%	
Nature preserve	3	2.6	-	-	-	2.0%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>909</b>	<b>1,180-1,391</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>540,237</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	

<sup>1</sup> Program & Event enrollment

### Chicago Park District, 2014

The Park District promotes events and programs that directly touch half a million people each year. But most visits to local parks and the activities people take remain unreported. People walk their dogs in and around these parks and children play on the grounds, but the total park space person remains relatively low in many residential neighborhoods. Visiting parks and contact with nature are associated with improved physical and mental health (Mowen et al. 2007; Shores and West 2008), including lower levels of obesity (Lachowycz and Jones 2011), reduced stress (Orsega-Smith et al. 2004), positive moods and psychological well-being (Ulrich 1979; Gobster and Westphal 2004) and positive feelings about place (Korpela et al. 2001; Clark and Stein 2003).

## Chicago Public Schools

The Chicago Public Schools located across the city offer grounds for children to play for recess and physical education. However, much of the space provided for such activity has changed over time. Recess was eliminated to assure more time was spent on academic instruction. PE classes were curtailed or eliminated. The playground space deteriorated or was covered with asphalt for parking or other uses. Additionally, the outmigration of many African American households from troubled inner-city neighborhoods and the influx of Latino households into other improving neighborhoods has put Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in a bind. Closing the low enrollment elementary and secondary schools in poor African American neighborhoods removes an important local resource, while expanding and building new facilities in Latino areas generates resentment. Undertaking efforts to use school grounds for more active play requires money and attention CPS cannot spare. But activists do not let that stop them.

The Spaces to Grow initiative was conceived to help revitalize school grounds. First, the effort recognizes and supports the crucial role that active physical play contributes to student learning and health. Second, the initiative recognizes the need for green areas to absorb rain water in a city vulnerable to increased flooding. Third, many of these schools exist in low income minority areas where children face increased risk of obesity and diabetes, conditions that increased physical activity can diminish. Finally, these improved places offer additional playground park space improving access for underserved neighborhoods. Sponsored by government agencies: CPS, the Metropolitan Water District, the Chicago Department of Water Management; and a not for profit environmental organization Openlands and a health advocacy organization Healthy Schools Campaign.

Parks and schools remain the two primary public institutions responsible for play that can still provide practical hopes for the ideals of civic improvement through the practical support of individual development. Modest resources and shifting priorities has meant that efforts to improve facilities and programs for play requires collaboration among many agencies and actors. But the collaboration cannot rely on privatization, but must include purposeful strategies that assure that private involvement serves meaningful civic goals.

## Conceiving the Future Infrastructure for Play in Chicago

Chicago has taken efforts over the years to build places for play. Any strategy for future improvement must build on these prior efforts. The 2012 Cultural Plan for Chicago includes three primary objectives that implicitly recognize the contribution serious human play makes for the culture of the city and society:

- 1 Make beautiful objects, events and experiences that shape and express local identity & solidarity
- 2 Inspire innovative adaptive reuse for ordinary or obsolete places and things
- 3 Create and celebrate culturally distinct art, dance, food and landscapes

These plan objectives step around the deep class and ethnic divisions that persist in the segregation of housing and schools. The ambitious list taps the long history of progressive reform that tries to use the purposeful design of places to respond to larger social divisions and conflicts. The popular conception of

creative cities often focuses too narrowly on a few prosperous elite neighborhoods near downtown. This misses how the play people manage to conduct across the intrusion of cultural difference, social inequality and spatial complexity fuels creative possibilities. Violence, ignorance, subjection, discrimination, and other forms of destructive social conduct do not foster creativity. But many people who inhabit places where these conditions persist use practical cultural inheritance to weave family, food, friendship and worship into crucibles for creativity despite the obstacles. Current efforts to improve and expand the urban infrastructure for play can adapt the objectives of the cultural plan to recognize and guide important improvement.

## 1 Fill spaces with beautiful places

Tourism integrates institutional and physical infrastructure to attract and manage increasing flows of strangers who visit and experience sites and events in prepared venues. Theme parks planned, constructed and managed by private corporations now provide iconic places. Walt Disney, influenced by garden city plans conceived theme parks that integrated specialized landscapes as vicarious experiences scripted for mass consumption. He used the powers of modern engineering to bind together places for exhibition with places for amusement into thematic landscapes. These places combine ideas from garden city enthusiasts, park designers, civil engineers, entertainment providers and land developers. Disney developed and implemented alternative transit systems to move people across and around the park. Linking entertainment with functional movement made transit travel pleasant and so a more plausible alternative for travel in 'Tomorrow Land'.

Many theme parks do not offer the quality of integration that Disney set in motion. These planned places offer thematic amusements, especially rides on large mechanical devices designed to offer extraordinary physical sensations of speed, dizziness, weightlessness and disorientation. The fun and distraction of amusement for the most part takes visitors for a ride. They do not foster the kind of play that the public health advocates hope to encourage.

Municipalities coordinate with tourist bureaus to attract visitors to public stadiums, theaters and museums. The development of large regional parks can be undertaken to attract visitors. Chicago's Millennium Park completed in 2004 offers a prominent example of a large scale project that despite its expense and location on a huge underground parking structure offered a central place for active and passive play.

### Millennium Park

Millennium Park beautifully balances the powers of spectacle and pedestrian pleasure. Set back to back midblock the hall and stage anchor rather than dominate the park campus. The adjoining garden, field and Maggie Daley children's park offers places for restful repose and lively interaction; splashing in the shallow fountains, peering at contorted reflections of skyscrapers reflected on the massive bean, ogling a multitude of flowering plants or exploring playground. This uniquely urban place for play remains tied to the demands of suburban automobile access. The costly underground parking garage meant that public financing was insufficient and private philanthropy substantial. The donors enjoy prominent plaques and monuments memorializing their contributions throughout the park.

The Park District struggles to maintain the existing parks with the smallest parks receiving the least attention and revenue. The district has adopted art and music programs that sponsor events in the

larger parks and host annual events in the largest. The parks include hundreds of sculptures and fountains. The 2014 report documented the successful impact that large magnet parks contribute to tourist revenue and to local land values in nearby residential neighborhoods. But the crucial impact of parks as places for active play remains significant room for growth.

## 2 Inspire adaptive reuse

Harnik and Bloomberg (2014) detail the kinds of places where parks might find a toe hold in cities: landfills, wetlands, rail trails, wetlands and stream corridors, cemeteries, boulevards, and even reclaiming little traveled streets or the parking spaces on those streets. Chicago has already capitalized on two natural and manmade corridors.

### Chicago River: Playing with Nature

The early environmental plans for the Chicago river focused on water quality – reducing decades of industrial and residential pollution. The river had become a conduit for waste. The meandering streams that fed marshland hosting a vast diversity of wildlife two hundred years ago were systematically channeled into a single stream for increasing quantities of effluent. The massive and rapid growth in population and industry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century spurred efforts for improved infrastructure. Three massive channeling efforts between the 1890s and the 1920s successfully altered the river flow away from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi. Tapping the Great Lakes to flush away polluted water raised political opposition from people living in the other states and provinces adjoining the Great Lakes. Legal battles ended with an international agreement enabling Chicago to use water from the Great Lakes, but with annual limits imposed and the requirement that the water be treated to reduce pollution before launching it downstream. The quality remained industrial grade until the 1960s when Chicago's water polluting industrial industries folded, moved away or downsized to meet the shifting demands of an increasing global economy. Environmental activity by activists and water quality policies promoted by the newly fashioned Environmental Protection Agency reclaimed the river for lost ecological and recreational use. This quest has taken decades of purposeful collaborative efforts by advocacy organizations (Friends of the Chicago River), government agencies (City of Chicago, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, EPA) and the courts. Plans created in the 1990s and 2000s not only assure the continued flow of shipping, but take important infrastructure improvement steps to make places for active recreation. The river provides a physical pathway through increasingly obsolete industrial land offering an opportunity for creative mixed use development that includes places for walking, cycling and water related recreation.

### Regenerating abandoned industrial land: The 606 Trail

The 606 runs along Bloomingdale Avenue on Chicago's northwest side, connecting the nearby neighborhoods of Logan Square, Humboldt Park, Wicker Park and Bucktown, as well as the Chicago River and several city Boulevards. Its centerpiece is the elevated 2.7-mile Bloomingdale Trail, built on the unused Bloomingdale railroad. The 606 ultimately will comprise the trail, six neighborhood parks, a public plaza, an observatory, art installations, educational programming and other amenities.

"The 606 not only serves nearby neighborhoods, but also provides a way for people from across the city and region to explore these diverse and culturally rich neighborhoods," said Chicago Park District

Superintendent Mike Kelly. "It advances the green vision of Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago, and we're proud to receive an award that honors his legacy."

In 2003, neighborhood residents and activists established Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail to introduce and advance the concept of the Trail. They approached The Trust for Public Land about building a park along the western end of the trail; Julia de Burgos Park, the first of five new parks that are part of the 606, was developed on that site by The Trust for Public Land and Chicago Park District in 2008. Mayor Rahm Emanuel made the 606 (after Chicago's zip code prefix) a signature project for his effort to create new parks, recreation areas and green spaces throughout Chicago. It opened to the public in June 2015. The park not only transformed a hulking obsolete rail embankment into a green corridor but activated the improved pathway for active cycling, walking and jogging integrating parks and semi-public open spaces into places for play. Other rail embankments exist, but in less prosperous neighborhoods where efforts to revitalize will require a wider scope and stronger nodes attracting and connecting walkers, runners and cyclists.

### 3 Create places that embrace diversity

Our expectations for play often distract us from the extraordinary adaptability that we may each deploy in its service. The social conventions separating work and play discourage blending the two. Those of us accessing jobs as professionals, managers and executives can study and nurture elements of play to enhance our work, while those making, selling and servicing products must keep both apart. Supervisors insist employees concentrate on the work avoid the distraction of play. The conventions that segment labor and housing markets carry over into how and where people play. But cities can design and make places that increase the opportunity for interaction across these divides.

The large regional magnet parks provide places that the City can use to host annual events celebrating music (e.g., the Jazz Festival, Blues, World Music), dance (e.g., Salsa, Ballroom) and cuisine (e.g., Taste of Chicago) attracting people from every class, race and ethnic group. The success has translated into neighborhood scale events that celebrate aspects of local culture attracting visitors to join with locals in play that enables people to share the pleasures of unfamiliar differences. The City takes steps to coordinate, promote and subsidize these events across many different neighborhoods.

The lopsided development that has accompanied land development in aging racially segmented cities like Chicago creates unfavorable conditions for greening the thousands of vacant parcels that accompany the depopulation of African American inner-city neighborhoods (Schilling & Logan 2008). The demand for parks follows the contours of increased density. Community gardens and other local experiments converting empty parcels into a place for active use and play provide islands of innovation rather than seeds propagating a revitalized system.

## Conclusion

Ultimately almost anything or place in the world may offer infrastructure for human play. The most hopeful aspects of local agency involvement with play come from examples of collaborative effort that revise the tradition of civic involvement. Chicago has taken important steps in the past 20 years to improve and revitalize the largest parks. The challenge of activating the smaller parks into a system linked with school grounds and other potential local spaces for play remains. Making parks and school grounds multi-purpose; integrating ecological infrastructure with fields and grounds that invite active

play; and weaving healthy activities with the pleasures of play will take resources that the park district and school district do not possess.

How play might matter in the long run

Accelerated digital automation across the globe promises to transform the fossil fuel based industrial labor economy into a renewable energy based information economy. Agricultural innovations and changes that foster sustainable quality food provision will reduce reliance on subsistence and illicit farming practices. Continued urban migration will lead to improved literacy and education for women. As fertility levels decline and become stable economic growth will rely almost entirely on the value added by human education and innovation. The meaning of work would shift from just a special kind of commodity to be allocated within local markets to a more complex set of practical skills, ideas, codes and conventions that channel and mediate markets for private, common and public goods across places. These changes are happening across vast segments of industry, but remain tied to conventions of political and social control that resist change.

Imagine leisure and play no longer treated as escapes from the exploitation and drudgery of labor; but as activities integrated into daily life as the norm. Recess is not escape from boring rote learning. School includes observing and reporting on the behavior of insect colonies in a nearby field, learning how to dance and sing about feelings, using tools to fix broken objects and other activities that integrate the pleasure of discovery through movement with the discipline of science, literature, language, art and craft. The developmental dreams of early 20<sup>th</sup> century progressive education reformers challenge the necessity of economic and cultural segmentation and exclusion. The creative power of play in this urban future taps and develops practical forms of diverse knowledge and experience to foster individual flourishing. The legacies of repression and exploitation remain, but no longer justified as necessary and inevitable. The feast of fools overwhelms the unheavenly city (Cox 1969 Banfield).

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