

How Millennium Park created a unique nexus of culture

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It was designed as a lush urban park, a star-lit concert space, a grassy art gallery dotted with high-toned creations, but Millennium Park has become something more.

With approximately 3 million visitors streaming into the place last summer, with gospel and jazz and highbrow music set to sing again from its main stage starting next weekend, Millennium Park has become our town square, our meeting place, our focal point for the arts -- at least when the winter winds aren't howling.

Yes, historic Daley Plaza, in the Loop, long will endure as a political hot spot, a place where citizens converge by the thousands to protest grievances and rally supporters. And sprawling Grant Park, to the south of Millennium, long will be home to massive civic celebrations, such as the Chicago Bulls championships (remember those?).

Yet in ways that perhaps even its planners hadn't anticipated, Millennium Park has emerged unmatched in Chicago -- and perhaps anywhere in the country -- as a cultural nexus, a gathering place where rich and poor, connoisseurs and commoners, black and white and shades between bask in approximately 24 acres of music, dance, art, puppetry and whatnot.

The implications for this city, a place where races and religions and cultures famously have battled against and pulled apart from one another, are profound. For even though various observers have been unhappy with certain aspects of Millennium Park -- even apart from its running construction delays (it was supposed to open at the turn of the millennium for which it's named, after all), the park's impact on the texture of life and culture in the Chicago area have been undeniable.

"I know it cost a lot of money, but it's just simply the central gathering place for people in this city," says Timuel Black, a revered Chicago historian and author of the landmark book "Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration" (Northwestern University Press).

"In my opinion, it's a plus for bringing about unity, a sense of community among people whose backgrounds -- nationally, religiously, racially -- may be different.

"It's an opportunity," continues Black. "I think it's a unifying element in the city."

Adds Richard Dunscomb, a Chicago transplant who's chairman of the music department at Columbia College Chicago, "In my years that I've traveled around the world, I've not ever

seen something like this that has turned out as successfully.

"As we look at the crowds that come in, they're totally diverse," adds Dunscomb. "The fact that it is free is almost unbelievable, but it serves that purpose -- to welcome everyone."

Look out at the audiences that pack the Thursday night "Made in Chicago" jazz series, a multiracial throng that sways to Afro-Cuban backbeats one night, Eastern European folkloric melodies another, and you're seeing the face of Chicago, in all its hues. Listen to the languages -- German, French, Spanish, Russian -- that crackle before performances by the Grant Park Symphony and Chorus (which has nearly quadrupled its membership income since moving to Millennium Park in 2004), and you're hearing the cadences of a polyglot town.

Skeptics will observe that the same could be said of the masses that pour into Grant Park for the long-running summertime music festivals (such as the Chicago Blues and Jazz Festivals) or the stream of humanity that jams into Navy Pier as soon as the temperatures push upward.

Hardly ideal

But the dreadful acoustics, cheap folding chairs and asphalt-and-dirt flooring at Grant Park long have been impugned by performers and audiences alike, while the blatant hucksterism of Navy Pier has more to do with commerce than culture.

Both of those settings have declined in artistic stature since Millennium Park swung into action the weekend of July 16, 2004, when a marathon of jazz, classical, folk, rock, hip-hop, dance and percussion attracted 300,000 visitors. The crowds ogled the park's landmark artworks -- Frank Gehry's Pritzker Pavilion bandshell, Jaume Plensa's Crown Fountain and Anish Kapoor's then-in-progress Cloud Gate (sadly re-christened "the Bean" by media types) -- while hearing musicians performing in nearly every corner of the place.

If the rest of that first season at Millennium Park was devoted almost entirely to the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus, last year the place erupted.

Music from the black church shook the Pritzker Pavilion during the Chicago Gospel Festival. Mexican mariachi bands and Brazilian crooners brought foreign cultures to the same stage during the World Music Festival. The edgy Kronos Quartet and the Mark Morris Dance Group lit up the Harris Theater for Music and Dance (just behind the Pritzker Pavilion). Add to the mix "Revealing Chicago," an installation of aerial photographs of the city by Terry Evans, and you had the beginnings of a new kind of arts destination, an outdoor-indoor urban playground that opened its arms equally to Ludwig van Beethoven and Mahalia Jackson, to Studs Terkel (whose "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" was performed by Steppenwolf Theatre Company) and tai chi (with Saturday

morning workouts on the park's Great Lawn).

Wins and losses

Last season, in other words, marked the breakthrough, when the park became a microcosm of cultural Chicago -- or at least a wide swath of it.

Though observers can cite any number of triumphs and shortcomings, two central features appear to have made Millennium Park the city's most applauded summer stage: its enchanting mixture of first-rate attractions and come-one, come-all accessibility.

"It's this unique blend of ultra-high-end culture -- everything done at the very highest level of quality in mind -- yet it's available to everybody," says Deborah Card, Chicago Symphony Orchestra president and, like Dunscomb, a newcomer to Chicago.

"Whereas, say, Central Park [in New York] does have some concerts, it's really a park first. It isn't a gathering place, per se.

"And though there's a sense that the Hollywood Bowl [in Southern California] is `of the people,' too, but it costs a lot of money to go there."

Millennium Park, by contrast, has presented most of its concerts free (with the exception of a Tori Amos show in 2005 and some private, corporate events), so that anyone can partake of major attractions.

Equally important, the park's long list of world-class musicians has been presented in what may be the best outdoor acoustical environment in the country. The trellises that drape speakers above the Pritzker Pavilion and lawn distribute sound almost as if in a room, without the usual blast from speakers planted at the front, rear and sides of an under-the-stars venue.

"It feels like you're playing in a small club," says Chicago jazz trumpeter Orbert Davis.

"I think it's affecting the way the [Grant Park] Orchestra plays," says James Palermo, artistic and general director of the Grant Park Music Festival. "The musicians can hear each other, the ensemble has improved -- people are just charged to be in that space."

Daring programming

The programming, too, has been daring, considering that the park, by dint of its location at the center of the city, serves a broad audience that might expect mainstream fare. Instead, Millennium Park this summer will give listeners world premieres of music by Chicago jazz iconoclasts such as Ken Vandermark and Ernest Dawkins, a Mozart

Requiem featuring Tibetan Buddhist Monks and an unabashedly titled "Monster Concert" in which 30 pianists from Northwestern University's School of Music will flail away at 10 concert grands.

"Because the concerts are free, we can be much more experimental," says Helen Doria, executive director of Millennium Park.

"Same with the audiences. Because they don't have to buy a ticket, they can be more adventurous."

Certainly the thousands of listeners that jammed the place last summer to hear Rob Mazurek's aptly named Exploding Star Orchestra would not be likely to queue up at, say, the Empty Bottle club in Wicker Park for the same mind-bending sonorities. Yet the crowd not only turned out for the Exploding Star Orchestra but, more remarkably, stayed, cheering on some of the most adventurous musicians in Chicago, among them flutist Nicole Mitchell, saxophonist David Boykin and guitarist Jeff Parker.

Not that everyone is enchanted with Millennium Park's free, and copious, cultural offerings.

"I'm against it," says Joe Segal, owner of Chicago's Jazz Showcase, one of the country's oldest and most esteemed jazz clubs.

"All free music affects people that have to charge admission. It's good for the artists, I guess, but it also puts them out of the range of us being able to hire them," adds Segal, who says it's difficult to compete with Millennium Park's deep pockets.

But the folks who run Millennium Park find themselves chasing dollars, too, because tax revenues support neither the park's operations nor its programming, Doria says. The park's \$7.4 million operation and maintenance budget comes from advertising revenue on the city's bus shelters, while the \$1 million (excluding the Grant Park Music Festival) that Millennium Park spends on programming derives entirely from sponsorships.

Bringing in big bucks

Events such as last year's controversial "renting" of the park by Toyota to throw a party for its dealers (at a price tag of \$800,000) and a forthcoming, Aug. 7 event in which Allstate Insurance Co. will cordon off half the park (at a price of \$700,000), help underwrite the high-cost culture.

Still, at least one promoter bristles at being denied opportunities to stage paid concerts in Millennium Park.

"Why is this park only for symphony lovers?" asks Jerry Mickelson, co-owner of Jam Productions, which presented the paid-admission Amos concert last year but has not succeeded in following up that event with others like it.

"This is a park that's supposed to be for everybody," Mickelson says, "yet certain types of music are being excluded."

Doria responds that she and her staff are open to the possibility of other paid-concert events, so long as the dates don't conflict with already scheduled free concerts and that the crowds won't be too large for a space that holds only 11,000 comfortably.

In that regard, the deeper problem regarding Millennium Park may be that it's too little of a good thing. Because of the Pritzker Pavilion's seating-capacity limitations, planners of the Chicago Blues Festival and Chicago Jazz Festival maintain that the tens of thousands of listeners who crowd Grant Park for those events cannot be accommodated in Millennium Park. As a result, Blues and Jazz Festival lovers are relegated to the dilapidated, acoustically challenged Petrillo Music Shell.

But this represents a failure of the imagination on the part of festival planners, who at the very least ought to stage their daytime events (which typically draw smaller audiences) at the Pritzker Pavilion.

Yet Millennium Park remains very much a work-in-progress, with possibilities still to be explored.

When the Chicago Gospel Festival made the shift from the Petrillo to the Pritzker last year, there was some trepidation and a period of adjustment. Yet, in the end, "it was a wonderful, unbelievable, awesome experience," says Pam Morris, coordinator of the festival.

"When you think about a \$450 million park, and they want gospel, you feel blessed."

Adds Martha Lavey, artistic director of Steppenwolf, "To bring artistry and precious objects to the public square is so important.

"To stand there on the stage and to be in conversation with that place, the sky and the public -- it's tremendously moving."

To octogenarian historian Black, who lived through a grimmer day in Chicago's cultural history, Millennium Park represents a milestone.

"Years ago, just before World War II, a few of us heard that Duke Ellington was playing in a theater on the Northwest Side, where we [blacks] were not welcome," Black recalls.

"The manager told Duke that if he let us in, there would be a riot.

"And Duke told the manager: `These are my guests. If they are not allowed to enjoy my music, this concert is over.'"

After quite a scene, Black and friends were allowed inside, but only to stand behind the curtain. Ellington made his ultimatum once again, and won his fans a spot on the dance floor.

"We went out on the floor, we were enjoying each other, and nothing [bad] happened," remembers Black. "We were all moving our butts to the music, becoming supporters of something that was important.

"That's how I feel about Millennium Park -- it can help bring diverse communities together around common areas of enjoyment.

"Once they're together, they can disagree with one another about other things without becoming hostile or bitter.

"Millennium Park offers that opportunity, and I hope that those who are in charge of it will use it in that way."