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Big city oases

Take in these small outdoor public spaces

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Chicago, the city of big plans, desperately needs the leavening touch of small urban spaces.

The grand sweep of the lakefront is ideal for postcards and Olympics come-ons, but a city that does not transform such heroic gestures into a smaller, everyday scale will inevitably be a sterile city -- beautiful, but not vital; impressive from the air, but stultifying on the ground.

With the official onset of summer last Thursday, Chicagoans and visitors have a fresh excuse to take in three places that escape the trap of spirit-crushing bigness: Millennium Park and, along the Chicago River, Wabash Plaza and Erie Park. Each tells a different story about how to exorcise the curse of gigantism from the public realm.

1. WABASH PLAZA

A multitiered people magnet

Like Millennium Park, this terraced riverfront plaza between Wabash Avenue and State Street keeps getting better with age. The reason: the nearly 2-year-old plaza has finally been discovered. The presence of people invariably attracts more people.

Go to the amphitheater-like enclave, with its tiered granite steps, bright-green lawns and refreshing views of the Chicago River, and you'll see scores of lunchtime brown baggers: They eat. They lie on the grass and nap. They yak on their cell phones. They pose and take pictures. And they embrace, as if no one else were there.

All this occurs right around the plaza's sober centerpiece, the Chicago Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which proves that public spaces can simultaneously be lively and commemorate the dead.

When the 2-acre plaza opened in November 2005 -- November in Chicago is not exactly the right month to lure the brown-bag crowd outdoors -- you could only imagine that so much

activity could be packed into such a relatively small space. Since then, the skillful handling of the project by Chicago architect Carol Ross Barney (she worked off of a concept plan by DLK Civic Design) has become fully apparent.

The key to the plaza's allure, of course, is its river views. But it works for more subtle reasons. A switchback ramp that gracefully leads down to the river from Wacker Drive, for example, isn't just a route for people in wheelchairs. Barney lined its retaining wall with seating ledges, making the ramp a place rather than a passageway. Human touches such as that offer a welcome contrast to the gigantism of the hotel and condo towers, including Donald Trump's, now rising along the Chicago River.

2. MILLENNIUM PARK

Beyond spectacle

At 24.5 acres, of course, Millennium Park isn't exactly a small urban space. But every park is made up of landscapes within a landscape, and so it is here: Millennium Park consists of a series of room-like outdoor spaces, including the tree-lined precincts of the Crown Fountain and the Chase Promenade. When the park opened in 2004, these rooms were essentially bare. Now, thanks to the park's design director, Ed Uhler, they've been furnished, and the park ranks among the most pedestrian-friendly public spaces along Chicago's lakefront.

Numbers suggest the transformation. There are 96 custom-designed, cast-aluminum benches spread around the park, up from 55 three years ago. But the change is truly revealed by the range of human activity that these amenities make possible: Catching some shade under an umbrella-topped table, sitting around a table for a picnic lunch, reading a book without getting a grass stain on your pants or skirt.

Today, instead of simply inviting you to walk around and gape at colossal public sculptures, Millennium Park lets you pause and ponder. It's not only about spectacle. It has integrated itself into the day-to-day life of the city.

My favorite spot for this, which was there from the park's beginning, is the mini-canal along the boardwalk in the Lurie Garden. There, visitors kick off their flip-flops and dip their toes into the man-made stream. It's small, it's intimate and, best of all, it's quiet -- a refreshing antidote to the supersize, raucous fun of Crown Fountain and Cloud Gate.

Just one problem with the new benches, which were designed by Seattle landscape architect Kathryn Gustafson, one of the collaborators on the Lurie Garden: When they bake in the midday summer sun, their solid, green-gray metal surfaces are scorchingly hot on the human hindquarters.

Be sure to pick one in the shade.

3. ERIE PARK

An unfinished oasis



A city doesn't just need vibrant small urban spaces at the heart of its downtown. It needs them on the fringes of downtown and beyond. Erie Park, which quietly opened last fall along the north branch of the Chicago River between Erie and Ontario Streets, is such a space. Amid River North's brute residential towers, this little-noticed, still-unfinished 2-acre greensward has quickly established itself as a neighborhood oasis.

Bare-chested guys sun themselves on its three big mounds of grass. Mothers pushing baby carriages sit on the mounds and talk. One blows bubbles at her baby. People stroll along the park's undulating riverfront promenade, taking in ducks, kayakers and the black stalk of the Sears Tower to the south.

Designed for the Chicago Park District by the Berkeley, Calif., landscape architect Peter Walker, with Chicago's Ted Wolff serving as the landscape architect of record, Erie Park ingeniously seizes on the asset of its riverfront location.

Instead of high bulkheads that would have blocked your view of the water as you enter the park, Walker lowered bulkheads to open up the view. Three pathways -- not flat, but graded downward -- slice through the mounds and tease your eye down to the river. Once you arrive, the undulating promenade (which is accessible to people in wheelchairs) deliberately slows your movement, much like Frank Gehry's snaking BP Bridge in Millennium Park.

Walker is a minimalist but this space is soft and soothing, not hard-edged. It would be richer still if the Park District would finish the park with a permanent fence along the river and formal rows of trees on the park's edge.

But Erie Park has already established a beachhead for small urban spaces. Even when they are unfinished and imperfect, such artful additions to the cityscape are something to celebrate.

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What's your favorite small urban space? Send your answer to ctc-arts@tribune.com and it may be published in a future edition.

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