

“A Breath of Fresh Air: Chicago’s Neighborhood Parks of the Progressive Era, 1900-1925.” *Chicago Cultural Center Exhibit*. 78 East Washington Street, Chicago, IL. July 22, 1989 to November 11, 1989.

The exhibit, jointly sponsored by the Chicago Public Library and the Chicago Park District, and displayed at the Cultural Center, July 22-November 11, 1989, emanated from the discovery of materials in a sealed vault at the Park District headquarters. The primary documents included original architectural designs and revisions for the planned parks, photographs, watercolor paintings, maps, annual reports, pamphlets, correspondence, and books, including a 1909 first edition of Daniel Burnham’s, *Plan of Chicago*. Artifacts on display included sporting equipment, a woman’s swim suit from 1900, athletic awards, musical instruments, materials for crafts and vocational education instruction, as well as the tools of enforcement employed by police.

In its portrayal of the parks as community learning centers, the exhibit assumed a broad scope. With the initiation of the playground concept in Chicago by Jane Addams and her colleagues at Hull House in 1894, other middle class social reformers seized upon the idea to fashion public areas to

meet the recreational and health needs of the urban masses, as they attempted to inculcate their own societal values. The reformers sought to gain social justice, albeit tempered by social control, as evidenced by the rhetoric of the primary sources. The evolution of such a movement culminated in the national organization of the Playground Association of American. Chicago served as the prototype for parks designed to achieve the objectives of social reformers.

Park district administrators employed America's best architects to bring their ideas to fruition, and it is this segment of the exhibit that is most illuminating to social historians. The original designs of Daniel Burnham, John and Frederick Olmsted, and Jens Jensen show extensive classical influences intended to elevate the plebian culture of the masses. Revisions, opposed by the architects, provide insight into the transition from a pastoral concept of leisure to a more active form with the inclusion of tennis courts, ball fields, tracks, gyms, and swimming pools. The pools served as the common means of bathing and fieldhouses were meant to attract clients to the parks on a daily and year-round basis. The field houses with gyms, clubrooms, branch libraries, and arts and crafts facilities, provided a well-trained staff to instruct and "Americanize" the ethnic immigrants and their offspring who comprised the vast majority of Chicago's residents during the period. Reformers addressed more than health concerns and industrial training. Moral values dictated separate indoor and outdoor facilities designed to segregate the sexes despite the additional costs. Carefully chosen staff members served as role models for children and their supervisory responsibilities were supported by a corps of park policemen.

The photographs, necessarily selective, provided ample evidence of the social conditions that so alarmed the reformers. Child labor, slum conditions, and street play are adequately represented. Photos of park and playground activities, however, give the perception of a passive and tranquil clientele who readily followed the guidance of park directors.

If the exhibit is to be faulted for a few factual errors, it is more suspect in the matter of interpretation. It assumed a functionalist stance, portraying the parks as a melting pot of ethnic groups unified by American patriotism, and park directors are portrayed as heroes to their charges. Historians who are more familiar with the complete park records have provided an abundance of evidence to serve as a counterpoint. Youths accosted supervisors, utilized park facilities for gang activities and gambling, and greater police protection became a regular plea. Athletic programs did produce a competitive spirit, but often exacerbated rather than abated ethnic and racial tensions. In this respect the exhibit denied the ability of myriad groups to forge their own destiny by portraying a consensus culture. Nevertheless, the exhibit gives an indication of the wealth of primary source material in Chicago available to historians of the progressive era, social reform, and sport. An exhibit catalog is available from the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 East Washington Street, Chicago, Illinois 60602, (312) 269-2926, for seven dollars.