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ART/ARCHITECTURE; Big Shoulders, Big Donors, Big Art

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN JULY 18, 2004

CHICAGO's 24.5-acre Millennium Park, opening this week, is a sculpture garden on steroids, filled with large, challenging works chosen by wealthy donors. But to the city's mayor, Richard M. Daley, long a champion of the "green roof" -- a way of using plants to insulate buildings -- the new park is precisely that: a big green roof. When Mr. Daley took office 15 years ago, the site, north of the Art Institute and east of Michigan Avenue, contained old railroad tracks and gravel parking lots. He proposed building subterranean parking garages, which would generate revenue to help pay for a new park at street level. Amenities like a skating rink and restaurant will make the park "useful all year," the mayor said in a phone interview last week. Mr. Daley, who styles himself a populist and an environmentalist, also wanted a band shell (for the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus's free summer concerts) and a bike garage (where pedalers can shower on their way to work). "If you just did a lawn," the mayor said, "it wouldn't have been much of a gift to the city."

In 1998, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill produced a plan for a park, then expected to cost about \$150 million. The park that opens this week cost \$475 million. What happened was that John H. Bryan, the retired chairman of Sara Lee and now a nonpareil arts fund-raiser, decided that Skidmore's proposal wasn't bold enough.

Mr. Bryan, his ambitions intersecting with the mayor's, raised more than \$200 million from 91 donors, whose money talked when it came to choosing artists. The Crown family -- Henry Crown was the largest shareholder of General Dynamics -- chose Jaume Plensa to design a fountain, and Cindy Pritzker -- widow of the Hyatt Hotel mogul Jay Pritzker -- convinced her friend Frank Gehry to design the band shell. Mr. Gehry said he had no problem with the city's moneyed elite selecting art for a public park. "The Medicis," he said, "did the same thing." Mayor Daley said that the investment in the park (including more than \$200 million in public money) will increase the value of downtown real estate -- though he added that he doesn't believe any of the park's donors stand to profit directly.

Each of the improvements -- including Mr. Gehry's band shell and a 110-ton stainless steel sculpture by Anish Kapoor -- required changes to the caissons supporting the park, adding costs and delaying completion by years.

Running the project was the longtime Chicago Park District architect, Edward Uhler, who did everything he could to hide the fact that the park is really a roof (even bringing in Renzo Piano to design sleek elevator pavilions in its corners). Still, the underground world -- with more than 4,000 parking spaces -- intrudes on the park in unexpected ways. Opening an unmarked door in the vast subterranean garage, in a last-ditch effort to find his car, one visitor found himself face to face with Mr. Gehry's band shell. And kitchen workers from the Park Grill, which sits beneath the Kapoor, take cigarette breaks by a door that faces the Plensa fountain. FRED A. BERNSTEIN

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THE FOUNTAIN -- Chicago has plenty of fountains, including a beloved classical confection in Grant Park. Millennium Park would have to have a fountain, too. To choose a designer, the Crown family sponsored a private competition, Mr. Uhler said. After talking to Maya Lin and the architect Robert Venturi, the Crowns settled on Jaume Plensa (above), a conceptual artist from Barcelona, Spain. His high-tech fountain -- which cost \$17 million -- consists of two 50-foot towers of glass blocks facing each other across a black granite plaza. The plaza becomes a one-eighth-inch-deep pool, allowing visitors to "walk on water," Mr. Plensa said. Inside the towers, more than one million L.E.D.'s form vast TV screens, on which Mr. Plensa chose to show images of ordinary Chicagoans. (His assistants researched census data, then worked with community organizations to make sure they were photographing a cross section of the city.) Faces on the two facing towers are "having a conversation," Mr. Plensa said, adding, "My work is about duality." Each face appears for precisely five minutes; for one of those minutes, its lips purse and spit out a huge stream of water. "It's the gargoyle effect," said Mr. Plensa, who places his creation squarely in the tradition of European fountains in which human forms spout water, suggesting "the giving of life."

Perhaps, but Mr. Plensa's fountain required some very nontraditional means. Digital manipulation was required to make the lips on all 1,000 faces appear in the right spot for spouting. During a test run, when the transition from one giant face to another was more abrupt than the artist would have liked, he promised, "The software will be finished in two weeks." Below the towers are cinderblock rooms filled with machines (including 10 computers) to run the L.E.D.'s, to pump the water and to cool the inside of the six-story towers, lest the L.E.D.'s overheat. Altogether, the city had to sacrifice 26 parking spaces (representing lost revenue of about \$100,000 a year) to the equipment rooms beneath the fountain. Said Mayor Daley, "There's nothing else like it in the world."

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