

Lakefront Love Affair

Chicago is making its famous waterfront even better. *By Kari Lydersen*



Northerly Island's design uses a honeycomb shape as an organizing principle.

NORTHERLY ISLAND, LIKE MUCH OF CHICAGO'S 30-MILE lakefront, is a triumph of artifice—created from fill and debris, including detritus from the city's devastating (and formative) 1871 fire. It was to be the first in a chain of islands proposed by architect Daniel Burnham in his 1909 Plan of Chicago. More than a century later, Burnham's vision continues to guide development of the Chicago lakefront, and Northerly Island is among the sites undergoing renovation.

Island in name only

Burnham envisioned one continuous lakefront park that could be enjoyed by all Chicagoans. Northerly Island is a link in that continuous chain, but it is no longer an island. The federal Works Progress Administration connected it to the mainland in 1938, after it hosted festivities for the 1933–1934 World's Fair. Later it served as Meigs Field, a single-strip airport that was demolished in 2003, when former Mayor

Other projects include a complete overhaul of a former U.S. Steel plant site on the city's Southeast Side and yet another makeover of Navy Pier, the centrally located, multipurpose, 3,300-foot-long pier that is the biggest tourist attraction in Illinois.



Aerial rendering by Studio Gang Architects



Photo by Alex Maclean

Northerly Island (rendering opposite) is in the midst of a major, much-anticipated renovation. Two miles north, Navy Pier is undergoing improvements in anticipation of its centennial.

Richard M. Daley, citing post-9-11 security concerns, bulldozed the runway in the middle of the night—without Federal Aviation Administration approval.

Now Northerly Island is largely a prairie-scape that blooms with purple and yellow wildflowers in the fall and rustles with dry grasses in the winter. A bike path loops through the center, while the shoreline is a tangle of brambles, jagged rocks, and metal pylons. It has a certain beauty. But except for the Adler Planetarium, a small beach, a temporary concert venue, and parking on the peninsula's northern tip, it is largely inaccessible.

This will change as the southern portion of the 91-acre "island" is getting a \$6.1 million makeover designed by Jeanne Gang of Studio Gang Architects, known for works that incorporate and celebrate a site's ecology and history. The project, covering about 40 acres and overseen by the Chicago Park District, will open the shore to swimmers, provide artificial reefs as habitat for native

fish, create 900 campsites, and possibly even import a sunken Great Lakes ship for divers to explore.

"The idea is to create a place that is very intensely attractive to wildlife but brings the public paths through the space in a way that both can coexist," says Gang. "We're recognizing that it takes longer and longer to get from downtown urban areas to natural environments. In order for people to experience those, we need to start planning more ecologically diverse parks within the urban fabric."

Although an exact timeline has not been set, a district spokesperson says that a portion of the construction is expected to start this winter. Some \$3.9 million of the total cost will come from the Army Corps of Engineers, the rest from the Chicago Park District.

What's next for the pier

Just two miles north of Northerly Island is iconic Navy Pier, a tourist magnet but one

that has been plagued in recent years by complaints of overcrowding and mediocrity. Now the pier is getting multifaceted improvements leading up to its centennial in 2016, including the redesign of public spaces by James Corner Field Operations, architect of New York City's popular High Line, an elevated rail line converted into a park.

Plans for Navy Pier include more green space, water attractions, public art, and nighttime lighting. The existing Chicago Shakespeare Theater and Chicago Children's Museum may be expanded.

If all this comes about, it will be just the latest remake of Navy Pier. Like Northerly Island the pier was born as a partial realization of Burnham's plan, which originally called for five piers. It started as a combined shipping port and entertainment spot, then served as a World War I military barracks, a World War II naval training center, a campus of the University of Illinois, a convention center, and most recently a supersized,

family-friendly recreation destination.

The Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority owns both Navy Pier and McCormick Place, the city's massive lakeside convention center, but in 2011 a nonprofit called Navy Pier, Inc., was created to promote and undertake renovation of the pier.

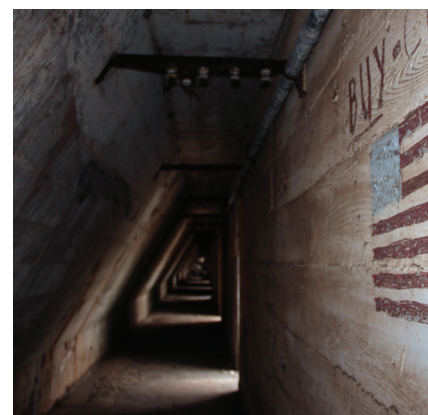
Postindustrial

About nine miles south of Northerly Island another swath of artificially created land juts out into Lake Michigan, this one bigger than Chicago's downtown Loop and built with slag from the steel industry that once defined the city's Far South Side. U.S. Steel's South Works, which operated here until 1992, made steel that built the Sears (now Willis) Tower, the Wrigley Building, and other landmarks, plus weaponry for both world wars.

After 20 years, all that's left on the 589-acre site today are three crumbling "ore walls" and a small brick building transformed from an old credit union to the offices of Lakeside Development LLC, the partnership that is developing an ecofriendly hub of residential, commercial, research, and recreational facilities. The city approved a 40-year development plan for the site in 2010; redevelopment costs are estimated at \$4 billion.

The former U.S. Steel site is so massive that the residents of the surrounding neighborhood—known for high levels of foreclosure, crime, and unemployment—have never been able to walk or bike to the lake easily. One of the aims of Lakeside Development is to make the lakefront accessible to them.

"How do you take a site disconnected from the community and make it a site where people say, 'I have to be there?'"



Old infrastructure from the site's U.S. Steel days will become Ore Wall Park.

asks Edmund Woodbury, president of McCaffery Interests, which formed Lakeside Development in partnership with the U.S. Steel Corporation. "It really knits together the final leg of the Burnham Plan; we're very proud of that."

Phase one projects include a mixed use "commons" with 500 residential rental units (20 percent of them designated as affordable for people making the median area income) and the extension of Lake Shore Drive, the roadway that parallels most of the city's shoreline. A new charter high school is also planned in the near future. And the development features many green elements: permeable pavement made from steel mill slag; wind turbines, solar, and biomass installations on-site; an energy-efficient district heating plan with cogeneration; and a water conservation system allowing nearly all stormwater to be filtered and sent back to Lake Michigan instead of into the sewer system.

Lakeside Development has turned 90 acres of lakefront land over to the Chicago Park District, including all the land right next to the lake. The developers are helping to secure funding for native planting, bike trails, a marina, and other facilities. The project will also include an additional 40 acres of new parks and green space interspersed throughout the site. In early October, bulldozers were busy spreading thick, glossy piles of mud that had been delivered by barge from dredging sites on the Illinois River under the state Mud to Parks program, which is also providing the fertile



Photos by Karl Lydersen

muck to Northerly Island.

The now-crumbling ore walls that once formed bins for ore and limestone are overgrown with cottonwoods. One wall will be preserved as Ore Wall Park, stretching along the industrial inlet that will likely be transformed into a marina. The park is inspired by a similar project in Duisburg, Germany, in a former industrial area where much old infrastructure has been repurposed. A local biking group is even working to build a competition-worthy velodrome on the Lakeside site.

These three marquee projects are among several recent and ongoing improvements in the city's lakefront parks, including a new marina and new bike trails, public art, and prairie restoration on the lakefront south of downtown.

Continuing the tradition

Many cities now value their waterfronts, but more than a century ago Chicago was special in making the lakefront a place for public enjoyment. Back in 1836 the Illinois and Michigan Canal Commission promised that swaths of the lakefront would remain "forever . . . open, clear and free." Burnham and Edward Bennett in their Plan of Chicago and other prominent landscape architects and preservationists, including Frederick Law Olmsted and A. Montgomery Ward, promoted the importance of a public lakefront dedicated to recreation and natural beauty.

The city's 1972 Lakefront Plan and a resulting ordinance establishing a lakefront



U.S. STEEL SOUTH WORKS. This nearly 600-acre site will soon be home to a mixed use development.

RESOURCES

DESIGNERS Creators of the Chicago Lakeside Development master plan include Skidmore, Owings & Merrill; Sasaki Associates; and Antunovich Associates. See www.som.com/content.cfm/lakeside_master_plan. Ideas for Northerly Island from Studio Gang Architects: www.studiogang.net/work/2007/northerlyisland. Designs proposed for Navy Pier: <http://navypiervision.com/pierscape.html>. Friends of the Parks want to see the "Last Four Miles" of the city's lakefront made public: <http://fotp.org/programs/the-last-four-miles-completing-chicagos-lakefront-park-system>.

protection district further enshrined the concept in city policy. One provision specifies that no new private development be created east of Lake Shore Drive.

All this focus on the lakefront has also bolstered the "Last Four Miles" campaign by the group Friends of the Parks, which aims to create public green space along the two-mile stretches of north and south lakefront that are currently cut off from public use. Opening up these four miles through possible land acquisition and artificial shoreline extensions would result in green space stretching from the Indiana border all the way to Evanston, Chicago's northern suburb. The Lakeside Development means part of this goal is already being accomplished because shoreline that was long closed off as part of the U.S. Steel site will now be public.

"We're talking about expanding beaches over four miles, with a price tag of \$350 to \$400 million," says Friends of the Parks planning and policy director Tim Jeffries. "That sounds intimidating, until you start looking at the history of Chicago, and specifically the history of Chicago's beaches. The city has shown it can do incredible things when everything comes together: political will, residents' needs, money. It's something that would make Chicago totally unique in the world, having all of its waterfront system as a park. No one else has that." ■

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Photo by Alex Madlean

In the summer, North Avenue Beach teems with sunbathers, kids, and beach volleyball players. The beach house is meant to look like an ocean liner.