

Chicago unveils its new art park

The \$475 million Millennium Park includes a bandshell by Frank Gehry and a massive sculpture by Anish Kapoor

JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

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On 16 July Chicago unveils its \$475 million Millennium Park on Michigan Avenue just north of the Art Institute. Originally scheduled to open in 2000, the City-funded makeover of Grant Park expanded from 16 acres to 24.5 acres and evolved into a display space for new art and architecture including a bandshell by Frank Gehry, a 125-tonne sculpture by British artist Anish Kapoor, a video-fountain by Catalan artist Jaume Plensa, and a garden by landscapist Kathryn Gustafson, designer of the Princess Diana Memorial fountain in Hyde Park, London.

An initial plan for a music pavilion by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill was scrapped in favour of Mr Gehry's dazzling bandshell with its 120-foot-tall proscenium of his signature metallic ribbons. A \$3 million computerised sound system mounted on a trellis-like canopy arches over 4,000 seats and a grassy meadow and is designed to create an indoor concert hall effect for outdoor listeners. The \$50 million structure, a 50/50 public-private split, is called the Jay Pritzker Pavilion to honour a \$15 million gift from a member of the family that sponsors the eponymous architecture prize.

The park is also home to Mr Kapoor's first public sculpture in the US, a huge mirrored-steel elliptical form which is 66-feet long, 32-feet high, and 47-feet wide and reflects the sky and the city behind it. Bowed upward in the middle, it allows visitors to pass under it to admire their warped reflections in its bulging interior dome.

Engineers working for Performance Structures in Oakland, California, used aerospace technology to bend 120 quarter-inch steel plates to a precise curvature, welded them together and polished the surface to flawless “optical” reflectivity. “To my knowledge, no one has ever made an ‘optic’ this big,” says Ethan Silva, who led the project. The telephone company SBC contributed \$3 million towards the \$10 million cost.

The 2.5 acre Lurie Garden designed by Ms Gustafson includes flowering trees, seasonal plantings, and a wooden footbridge across water. And a third major work is Mr Plensa’s Crown Family Fountain which consists of two 50-foot-tall glass-brick towers that stand at either end of a 220-foot-long rectangular reflecting pool. Water cascades down the sides of the towers forming a sheet of water shallow enough for visitors to walk across.

These riches come at a hefty price. As the project ballooned, so did the city’s contribution, rising from \$150 million to \$270 million, and private donors have reportedly pledged another \$205 million to build and endow the art and architecture on the site, add an ice-skating rink, a classical peristyle, a promenade, and a pedestrian bridge also designed by Mr Gehry that connects the park with Lake Michigan’s waterfront.

More than 50 private individuals, 20 corporations, and 13 foundations and trusts each gave \$1 million or more, including television talk show host Oprah Winfrey, arts patron Lew Manilow, and Art Institute chairman John Bryan, the retired ceo of Sara Lee Corporation who led the private campaign. “There has been an outpouring from the business community,” said mayor Richard Daley.

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