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Discovering their city on a field trip to Millennium Park

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 10/22/2009 –3:06 pm.

After walking east on Randolph Street, Mary O'Malley's third-graders take an elevator down past several levels of the Grant Park garage --- to another Randolph Street, about 40 feet below.

They come out onto a lower-level world that few Chicagoans and even fewer visitors see --- a world of basements and subbasements where, without causing traffic jams, trucks make deliveries and trash is hauled away.

Lower Wacker Drive is the best known segment of this underworld of transportation, but there are also lower-level versions of such streets as Michigan Avenue, Lake Street and Randolph.

While not as elegant as Grant Park nor as flashy as the Magnificent Mile, this subterranean street network is yet another product of the 1909 Plan of Chicago, commonly called the Burnham Plan, after its principal author Daniel Burnham.

“What’s above you?”

Mrs. O'Malley, a veteran teacher at the Finkl Academy at 2332 S. Western Ave. in the Little Village neighborhood, leads her charges a block west to the entrance to the Metra train station where the nine-year-olds gasp with glee as they see long, silvery commuter trains lined up along a series of tracks.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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“What’s above you?” she asks.

The children look up and look around. Then, Mrs. O’Malley answers her own question:

“It’s Millennium Park. The whole park is right above you.”

Did you know that? Did you know that the 24.5-acre, \$475 million Millennium Park isn’t solid ground? That it’s essentially a very elaborate, art-studded roof over a cluster of railroad tracks, a parking garage and that underground network of streets?

For the 27 kids, it’s an eye-opening moment. But, then, that’s what the entire day has been.

They’ve come down to Millennium Park as part of a crowd of some 1,300 third-graders from 32 Chicago public schools for a special field day as part of the Burnham Plan



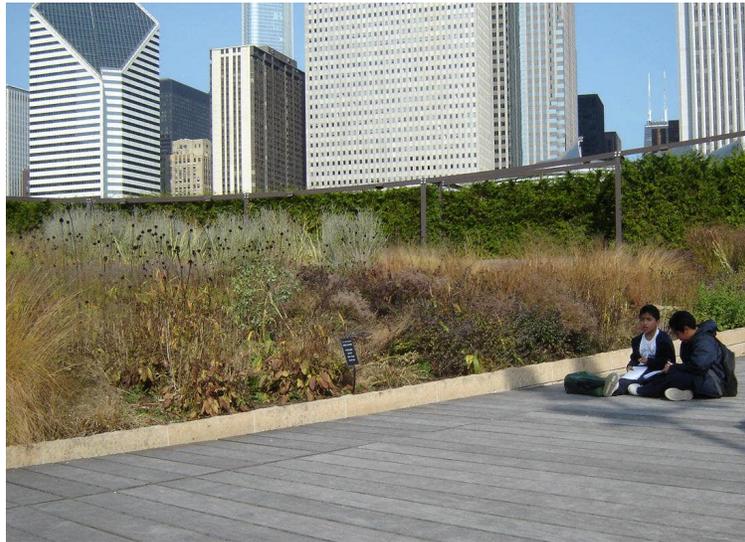
Centennial celebration. Their schools are participating in a demonstration project of a Chicago-centered curriculum, aimed at helping third-graders and eighth-graders get to know their city and feel responsible for its future.

On this day, Mrs. O’Malley is using the park and the Chicago skyline as tools to help her teach subjects ranging from art to science to history to geometry.

“These are kids who have never been downtown before,” she says. “I’ve shown them pictures of the lakefront, but they’ve never really seen it. These kids spend 99 percent of their time in Little Village.”

“It’s so big”

Walking through the park, the children are astonished at the rolling lawns and wide expanse of parkland. “It’s so big!” one exclaims.



These are children, Mrs. O’Malley says, who come from a densely populated, densely developed community with few, if any, nearby parks. “Empty space, for them, doesn’t exist,” she says. “This is just amazing to them.”



As the group moves along the Millennium Park paths, giggling in and out of the Bean and crossing the snake-like, Frank Gehry-designed BP Pedestrian Bridge, Mrs.

O’Malley is quick with an encouraging word or a gentle touch. And she’s full of questions.

“Look at the yellow on those leaves,” she says, pointing to a stand of trees near the “Cloud Gate” sculpture, more commonly called the Bean. “Why are they like that?”

“They’re dying,” one boy says.

“It’s sugar,” she explains. “They’re losing sugar. That’s why they’re turning yellow.”

Near the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, she asks one boy, “Why would someone come down here? What are you going to hear?”

“Music,” he says. “Nice music.”

Later, at the Lurie Garden, Mrs. O’Malley draws the group’s attention to a stand of tall, yellow straw grass. “Remember the story of the little red hen that we read. The stuff on the top of this grass looks exactly like the wheat in that story.”

“Built for them”

At the heart of the demonstration project and at the heart of Mrs. O’Malley’s teaching this day is a recognition that the children won’t be able to be full citizens in the future if they don’t understand and feel a part of the city where they live.



She summarizes it this way: “Hopefully, they will understand, as citizens, the needs of people, and that a good city will serve the needs of everyone. I hope they will be responsible citizens. And I hope they will learn to appreciate the city and love it.

“It’s a valuable experience for them to be downtown in the city and for them to know the city built this for them.”

Of course, that’s true --- and what a thing to learn as a nine-year-old. Millennium Park was built for the public, just as the 26 miles of parks along the lakefront --- a result of the Burnham Plan --- are there for everyone’s enjoyment. Just like the Cook County Forest Preserves and Navy Pier and the Chicago Riverwalk.

So beyond learning what wheat looks like and what’s under Millennium Park and why leaves change colors in the fall --- the greatest lesson for these children is that this park belongs to them. So, in a similar way, does the city.

Their city

Chicago is their city. Once they understand that, it's only a small step to the recognition that they play a role in what life is like in the city.

It's a heady realization, and one that Mrs. O'Malley's children seem well on their way to understanding on this bright October morning.

Indeed, one of the boys has learned it so well that he tells Mrs. O'Malley:



“I'm going to go home and tell my mom, 'Call up and make reservations here --- for my birthday.' ”