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## THE BURNHAM BLOG

### The other riverwalk – finding Nature on a walk above The Chicago River

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri., 10/09/2009 –7:21 am.

*Second of two*

There is the official Chicago Riverwalk --- extending now along the south bank of the Chicago River's main channel from Lake Michigan to State Street, and eventually all the way west to Lake Street.

And, then, there's the unofficial one, running between Jackson Boulevard and Randolph Street along the west bank of the river's south branch.

Or, as one City Hall wag named it, the "river climb."

That's because moving along the shoreline of the west bank involves a lot of walking up and down stairways at each of the cross streets ---

Adams, Monroe and Madison Streets and Washington Boulevard. It's definitely not wheelchair-accessible.



#### Drawbacks

That's one of the drawbacks that this unofficial riverwalk has in comparison with the official one.

Another is its height.

The south bank path along the river --- described in my last posting and one of the 20 "green legacy" projects that are being highlighted as part of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Plan of Chicago --- is just a few feet above the water line.

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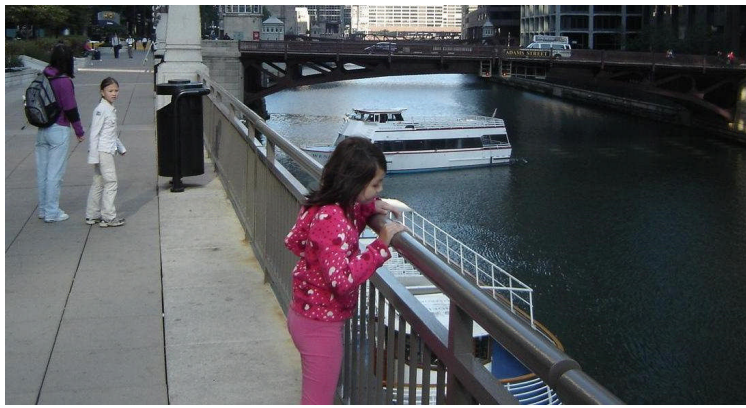
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This blog is about history, planning and the future. It's rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

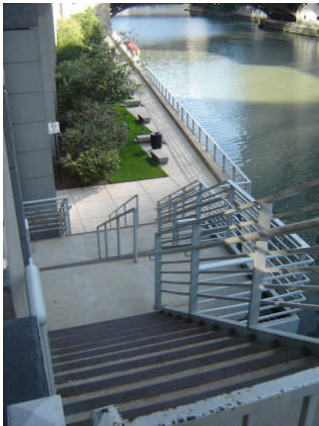
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)



People who jog, bike, amble or simply picnic there find themselves up-close-and-personal with the river, able to listen to the lapping of the water or the sound of a leaping fish.

But, along the west bank, visitors look down at the waterway from a height of 10 or 20 feet. The only exception is between Randolph and Washington where a newly built narrow park is down at water level. But to get to this area involves trekking down a long stretch of stairs (left).



So, clearly, the “river climb” isn’t perfect.

Yet, for anyone who works or visits in the West Loop, this walkway through a series of building plazas is a wonderful amenity and a great improvement in the quality of life.

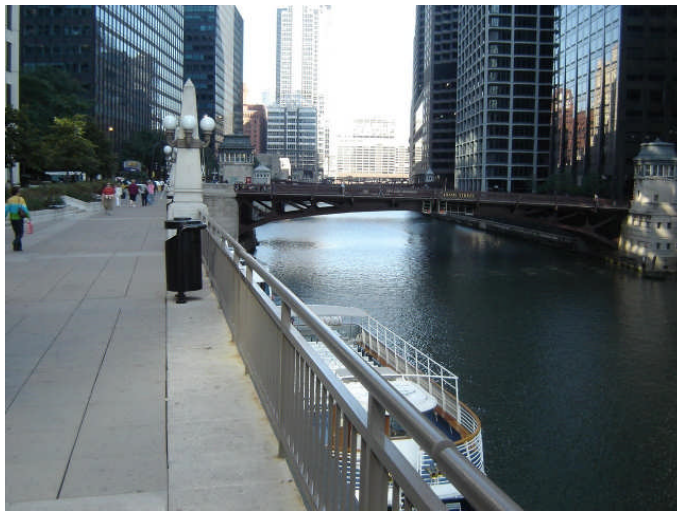
### **An urban grand canyon**

For one thing, amid the towering forest of downtown skyscrapers, the river provides breathing space. The plazas are clogged during the noon hour with office workers eating their lunches because, even if they don’t look at the water, they benefit from the open space above the water.

The line of the river through the looming glass-and-steel structures creates a sort of urban grand canyon. Eating a ham sandwich on the western bank, a worker can look up and see the sky. See the forming and reforming of cloud shapes. See birds and planes. See the sun!

You walk out the door, and, for an hour, you’re in Nature.

And, yes, the river is a lot further away here than along the south bank. But, still, the river is here.



Looking across the always moving water can be a balm in the midst of a frenetic day. It is a reminder that the hard surfaces of offices and buildings and sidewalks and streets aren't the entirety of the world.

### **Walk out the door and it's there**

People drive for hours to sit on the banks of a river. Here, you walk out the door, and it's there.

Here, because you're higher up, you see the river more in its context --- how it's framed by the Opera House on the east bank, for instance, and the Sun-Times building to the north.

Here, you get a better sense of the river's length. At some points, you can see in the distance where it joins the main channel. At others, you can glimpse the open, skyscraper-less area to the south, a reminder that the city and the metropolitan region aren't defined by the climbing-to-the-sky Loop.

You can see the river traffic -  
-- the sightseeing boats, the barges with their heavy, long loads, the tiny motorboats, the water taxis.



You can see the union of human works and Nature, together --- not one over here, and one over there.

Yes, it is a river climb. But worth the effort.