

Graves and Ghosts: Recovering the Body and Soul of an American City

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A TRAGIC INCIDENT.

On Wednesday, October 18, 1994, Eric Morse, aged 5, died after two other children, aged 10 and 11, dropped him from the 14th floor of his apartment building because he refused to steal candy. When arrested, the killers of Eric Morse showed no remorse.¹ (fig. 1)

Eric Morse lived and died at Ida B. Wells, a Chicago housing project at 39th Street near the Lakefront, in Chicago's south side near the famous "Black Metropolis."² Across the street, a very large vacant site became one of my urban design projects. Four years earlier in 1990, to critique a transportation proposal fragmenting the site beyond redemption, I offered an alternative design and advocated the site's importance as a missing link in Chicago's Park and Boulevard system. To my surprise the Department of Transportation agreed to develop my solution instead. I had naively presumed it was a design problem: I was not aware of the "**graves and ghosts**" haunting the site.

Remembering the senseless murder of Eric Morse as an emblem of what is at stake, this essay calls for recovering the "**body and soul**" of the inner city. To do so, we need to heal the stigmata, the "**graves and ghosts**" that subtly and insidiously create fragments and barriers to their productive re-use.

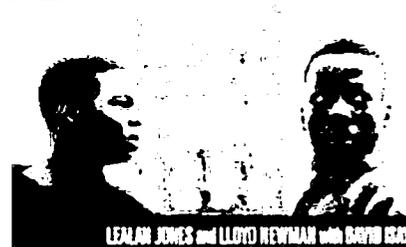
Through this project I will explore these two pairs of metaphors: the city's "**body and soul**" and its obverse, the "**graves and ghosts.**" I will seek what is buried, what has been lost and forgotten, to find what can be recovered to rebuild the city and rebuild trust and hope.³

This particular story is about an old project, long in the making. Yet its lesson is timeless; to fully recover we need to attend to both the **body and soul** and put to rest the **graves and ghosts**. As we move forward to rebuild cities in the United States and abroad, recently devastated by disasters and war, it is a lesson worth remembering.

BODY.

The city's "body" is built on land along water, over time and by design. Its layers reveal both the natural and the settlement history.

The vast scale of the urban morphology cannot be readily grasped; it requires abstraction and schematization. Bird's eye views in maps, aerial photographs and satellite images provide a privileged vantage point. Recollection and reconstruction provide a more intimate experience. We perceive the city sequentially as we walk or drive through it. We recall those fragments from notes and memory and reconstruct a schema, a cognitive map in our minds.



Chicago presents a remarkably simple and elegant schema. The **land**, a horizontal plane, once marsh and prairie, is framed by **water**: the diagonal shore of Lake Michigan and the T shaped Chicago River. It is subdivided by the **grid**, both **skeleton** and **circulation**. At the center, the towers of the Loop and Michigan Avenue form a tall core, the city's **heart**. It is surrounded by neighborhoods of different colors and sizes, with varied **tissue** according to the mix of building types. The parks, tree-framed streets, and public and private gardens also serve as the city's **lungs**. Over time, on this minimal diagram were overlaid two additional circulation systems: the "machine" one: railroads, the elevated, (the "L"), the major roads and post-war highways and the "natural" one, parks and boulevards.

The site is a missing link in this citywide park system. To the east, it connects via 39th Street Bridge to Burnham Park along the Lake.

To the south, Drexel Boulevard leads to Washington Park, which is connected via Midway Plaisance, to Jackson Park, the site of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. To the west, two parallel streets, Pershing Road and Oakwood Boulevard, lead to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, previously Grand Boulevard. This stretches from Washington Park north to the Loop and is the historic heart of the Black Metropolis. Further west Pershing reaches to McKinley Park.

This site was known as the "Five Crossings": the intersection of Drexel Boulevard, South Cottage Grove and 39th St.- E. Pershing

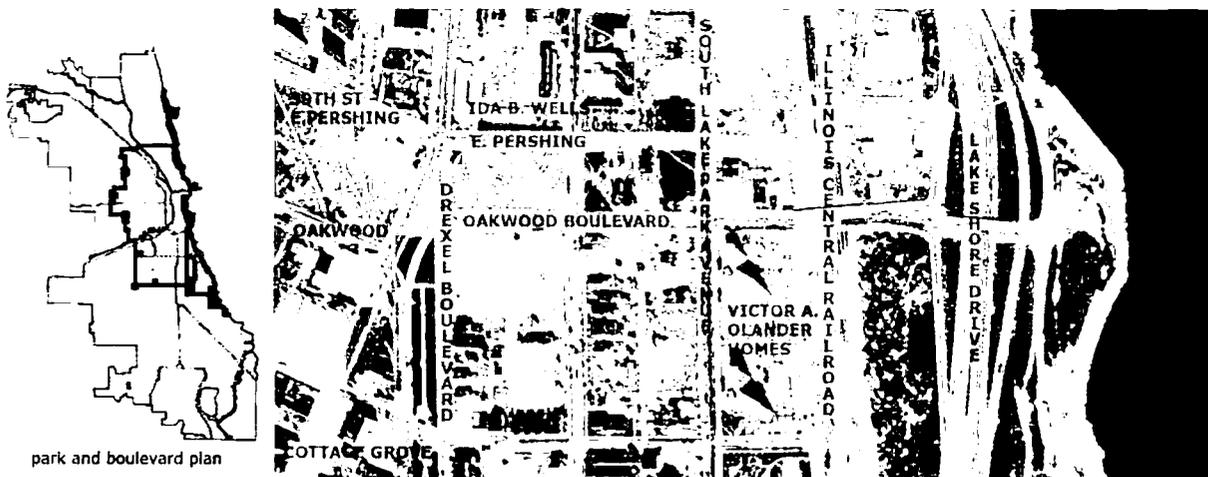
Road. Here, the dominant city grid encounters a rare grid shift along the Lakefront. This diagonal grid was the 1891 land subdivision that established Oakland as a suburb before the 1989 annexation to Chicago.

The "Five Crossings" was the commercial center of the affluent suburb built in the late 19th century along the South Shoreline with elegant single family homes and row houses. In 1881, the Illinois Central Railroad (chartered 1851) built a commuter terminal here. In 1910, the L built the terminus of the Kenwood Branch at 42nd Place. The L made the area affordable to Loop office workers and dramatically changed the area. To meet the demand, mansions became rooming houses and kitchenette apartments with one family per room and walk-up apartments were built to accommodate the influx of immigrants.

The figure ground plan of 1949 reveals the imprint of these changes: the dense urban fabric and a few detached houses along the lakefront. The vignettes show the contrast between the lakefront mansions and the walk-up apartments. Chicago prospered and grew exponentially and the neighborhood was teeming with life.

SOUL: Civility. (from civitas = city).

Cities have a "soul", a "spirit" of place, the *Genus Loci*⁴ that we can experience, that moves us, even if we cannot see or touch it. Chicago is the "City of Big Shoulders" "the City that Works". Work is at the core of the city's pulse.

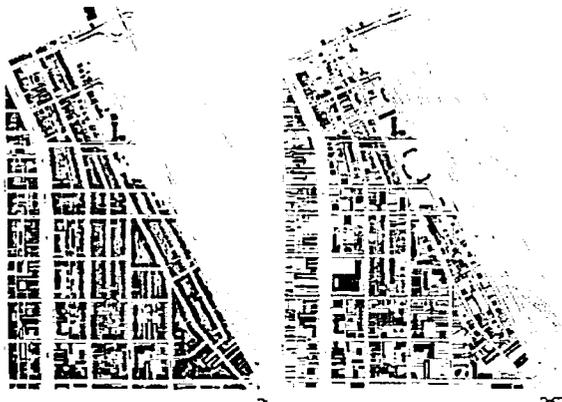


In Chicago, conceptual simplicity is the product of sheer pragmatism. The tough mind set that leaps from pork-bellies to futures derivatives is echoed in the body of the city: in the Chicago Frame, William Le Baron Jenney's steel skeleton skyscrapers⁵ were built to maximize downtown real estate value, the City's Grid (1830) fulfilled the Congressional Land Ordinance of 1785⁶ to facilitate land subdivision and speculation and in the Park and Boulevard System (1869) made inland areas more attractive for development.

Speculation in land and in futures still shares a common spirit of immense optimism, of risk and daring, almost ruthlessness. The city is also famous for its civic pride, at times verging on boosterism and the true source of the nickname Windy City. Together, speculation and boosterism built a tough and beautiful city of great buildings and extensive parks.

The city's elite endowed it with major cultural institutions: the Chicago Symphony, the Art Institute, the Field Museum, the University of Chicago, to name a few, and still sustains them. This is the elite that Thorstein Veblen satirized in the "Theory of the Leisure Class" (1899).⁷

This elite built and inhabited the grand houses in South Shore, in Kenwood and Oakland in the late 19th century; they moved on as the neighborhood changed in the 20th century.



The area accommodated working class white immigrants and later, southern blacks, as the Great Migration proceeded and expanded after World War I. The first blacks to move there

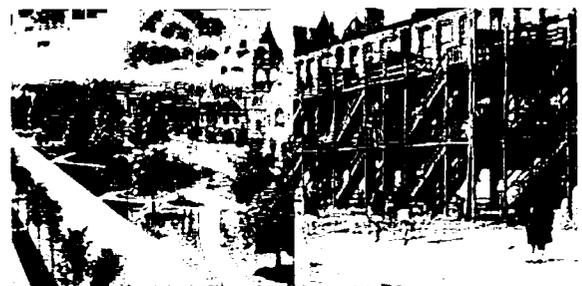
were the elite, prosperous businessmen and educated professionals, the beneficiaries of increasing prosperity. Over time, it became the eastern edge of the Black Metropolis or "Bronzeville", sandwiched between the Illinois Central tracks and the Penn Central tracks and the home of the **Blues**.

Sigmund Freud once said, "love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness." We also need civility and urbanity and these are nurtured in a shared world, a distinct public domain that mediates private interests⁸. It is built on being a "good neighbor." Civility and urbanity are built on trust, on respect of boundaries, and on tolerance. Its absence led to the neighborhood's demise.

GRAVES.

Industrial sites and working class neighborhoods were once the proud indices of progress; abandoned, they have become the debris of a superseded industrial civilization, its graves. Literally, the burial sites for the dead, and metaphorically, the vacant sites, the city in ruins. Graves are a metaphor for the physical barriers to productive redevelopment of these abandoned sites.

The site was vacant and a traffic knot due to "**graves**." Lake Shore Drive and the Illinois Central Railroad tracks along the south Lakefront cut off direct access to Burnham Park and brought pollution and environmental degradation. The bridge at 39th St. is the only access point. The fragmented street pattern results from the unresolved grid "collision" at the "Five Crossings."



During the 1920's and the depression, the area became a slum due to overcrowding, poor maintenance and the city's failure to provide basic services. Yet, although poor, it was alive.

Ida B. Wells, the northern boundary of the site, was the first public housing project built for the black community. A WPA project in 1934, when segregation was the official policy, it was completed in 1941, slowed by controversies and lawsuits. A mix of low rise apartments and row houses around a neighborhood park, it is in scale with the neighborhood.⁹

The dominant paradigm changed after World War II and like many other progressive cities, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) rebuilt the slums by adopting free-standing "towers in the park" following Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse. The Victor A. Olander Homes (1953) in the corner of the site overlooking Burnham Park was the first tower and it is Y shaped. In 1956, an identical clone was built to the south. In 1955, Ida B. Wells extension was built: ten large 7 story slabs with an exposed concrete frame and brick infill. In 1961, the CHA built the Clarence Darrow Homes next to Ida B. Wells; four large slabs, each 14 stories high, with 479 apartments. This was Eric Morse's "hood".¹⁰

The figure ground plan of 1989 shows the devastating effect of major slum clearance, urban renewal and "free-standing" towers.

Despite all the vacant land, land assembly is very difficult and time consuming because of fragmented ownership and absentee landlords. Cleaning brownfields sites is another common problem: it is expensive and the uncertainty discourages reuse of the land. Here there was only a small, abandoned gas station with buried storage tanks¹¹.

Graves present technically manageable problems that can be resolved by effective public action: rebuilding infrastructure, cleaning contaminated sites, consolidating property, restoring and building new parks and greenways. These efforts can transform

perceptions, give hope and promote private re-investment in the "inner city".

My park proposal sought to resolve a few "graves": the grid collision and the resulting fragmentation.

It also fulfilled distinct positive goals: to provide the missing link connecting Drexel Boulevard to Burnham Park, a safer east-west traffic connection of Pershing Road to Lake Shore Drive and active recreation close to the neighborhood. A track was proposed because there were none in the South side and Chicago Park District's Department of Recreation was seeking to build one. This would serve Northeastern Illinois University's Center for Inner City Studies, located in an old Frank Lloyd Wright building on East Oakwood Boulevard. The urban design plan envisioned the park framed by new buildings; it was not shown to avoid confusing the community.

I was aware of the "graves" and ignorant of the "ghosts". These came back to haunt us.

GHOSTS.

When the body of the City is abandoned and marked with "graves", the "soul" suffers from the trauma: riots and recurrent crime waves bring fear and distrust to those fortunate or unfortunate enough to survive, to remain. The spirit of the place turns into ghosts.

Ghosts are a metaphor for the intangibles that haunt urban voids and create the perception and/or actual threat of danger. They are psychological and social barriers to productive redevelopment. If the soul of the city is based on trust, urbanity and civility, built on respect of boundaries, ghosts are dead souls from violence and disrespect; it destroys boundaries and brings distrust, resentment, pain and suffering.



These vacant sites are a no-man's land, what Ignasi Sola-Morales Rubio called "terrain vague."¹² While apt, it is too vague to fully convey the tragedy of these "ghost towns". These ghosts are the legacy of poverty, racial and class discrimination, political corruption and hopes betrayed. Urban renewal, red-lining, restrictive covenants and other nefarious practices created these vacant sites. Unlike "ghost towns" from wars and plagues, the ruins of these "inner city" neighborhoods developed during peacetime and unprecedented national prosperity. This paradox is resolved when we acknowledge the "undeclared wars": the race riots, the gang wars. These ghosts leave traces, stigmata: graffiti, broken windows, bullets marks and acres of vacant "war zones."

The place of Eric Morse's death was not arbitrary; its nickname was "*the killing fields*." It is haunted by its history of violence, ghosts known but not fully acknowledged.

The 1919 race riot, in the "Red Summer" following World War I, was the worst among 22 such riots in the nation. It was incited by an incident further north in Burnham Park.¹³ The 1968 riot after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. accelerated the exodus away from the city. The Crack Wars in the '80s left "demilitarized zones" torn by crime and gang wars. The neighborhood was under siege by the notorious El-Rukn gang under Jeff Fort, one of the most dangerous men of this era. Their "Temple" was located on Drexel Boulevard in the old Oakland Square Theater.



Pursuing a friend's lead, I called a lawyer at the Justice Department working on the El-

Rukn case to discover their intentions for the Temple. "Why?" he asked suspiciously. "We want to build a park" I naively said. He replied cryptically, "you will know" and hung up. Within days, the FBI raided the temple, seizing guns and drugs. Jeff Fort sought a contract from Libya's Moïamar Khadafy to undertake terrorism in the US. During the raid, the Police Chief announced the future park on the site. "I don't need a park, I need a shopping mall", a bystander replied to the cameras. The "Temple" was immediately seized and razed. Later, all convictions were overturned under appeal due to alleged prosecutorial misconduct: in exchange for information, key witnesses in jail were allowed access to drugs and sex.

To eliminate the El-Rukn Temple, The first traffic proposal realigned Drexel to cut right through the building and justify its acquisition. This project was stopped by CDOT when it chose my proposed alternative. Later I learned that the engineers at CDOT hated this proposal, but were not free to reject it because the consultant was politically connected. By advocating a park as a missing link, I offered a legitimate solution to their predicament.

The project proceeded at a snail's pace. For six months the city debated which City Department Planning or Housing would be responsible - Planning won. A year later, the North-Kenwood/ Oakland Community Conservation Council was appointed by the newly elected Mayor, Richard M. Daley and confirmed by the City Council. After two more years, two land-use plans were developed and approved by the City Council and Mayor Daley, both community organizations identified the site as a park.

Concurrently, the city's Planning Department initiated an ambitious "Mid-South" Plan. This vocal group also claimed jurisdiction to determine the site's land-use. To resolve the ensuing turf battle between these two neighborhood councils, the Law Department was called in. They found the site officially retained the urban renewal designation and was therefore, outside the jurisdiction of both groups. In short, the future of the site was at stake.

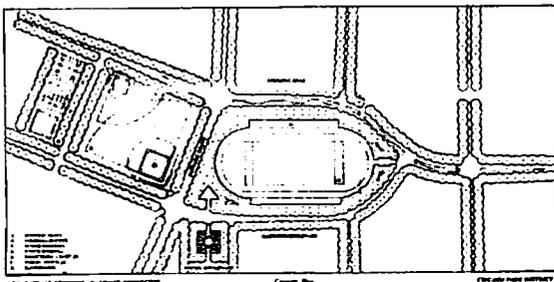
Community support for the park plan had a hidden agenda: not love for the new park, but

fear the CHA would control the site. These middle class community leaders could not admit their fears in public without being accused of prejudice. The big taboo was not race, but class. Their fear was completely justified.

In 1989, Vince Lane, then CHA head and powerful black entrepreneur made a deal with Jack Kemp, then Secretary of HUD. In exchange for federal funding to renovate Victor A. Olander Homes, the CHA committed to build new low-rise housing within a square mile. Despite the community process determining its park use, the City was ready to grant the site to the CHA.

Vince Lane presented his case to the Chicago Park District at a private meeting I attended. Seeing the writing on the wall, I offered a compromise plan: we would build the Park east of Cottage Drive with the new road realignment and complete the missing link to the lakefront. The CHA could keep the larger parcel to the West. With this secret compromise, we returned to the Community to proceed with the park-road plan east of Cottage Drive.

The hostility from the community was palpable. There were two combined agendas. The first was initiated by a few property owners directly impacted by the proposal. Once the plan was in motion, they became incensed. Perhaps they did not believe they were going to be justly compensated; or they were being difficult to demand as much money as possible from the government.



The second was a broad based NIMBY (not in my back yard) effort. They were ready to hijack the road and the park to keep the CHA out. Together with CDOT, I convinced the Planning Department to give the Park District the complete site to avoid an impasse. Surely enough, as soon as the Planning Department

offered the site to the Park District everyone calmed down and work could proceed.

After a few more meetings we agreed on a revised road alignment to accommodate local traffic pattern and bypass the property whose owner refused to sell. The use and abuse of eminent domain in the 50's and 60's led to a counter reaction. CDOT did not want to invoke the city's eminent domain power to avoid costly and time consuming litigation.

After securing state funding for land acquisition and road construction, we were determined to get the project built and avoid unnecessary delays. The normal procurement and approval processes by state and federal agencies are time consuming enough.

Once the road alignment was settled, I got smart and convened a community-based one day *charrette*. After a site tour, I divided them into three groups with the new plan and templates for different athletic fields: a football field inside a track, two baseball diamonds, and two tennis courts. They all came up with the same design, were delighted with the results and it ended in very good spirits.

At the *charrette*, a couple actively disrupted the process to advocate a 12 screen movie theater and create badly needed jobs for teenagers. Frustrated, I asked the husband: "Where have you been all these years while we were planning the park"? He sheepishly replied: "In Jail." As it turned out, he was an Aldermanic candidate set up by the gangs to defeat the honest Alderman. Their real agenda was to disrupt her meeting.

Ghosts are difficult to put to rest; they bring fear, anger, and distrust. Community resistance is understandable and justified by the history of corruption and malfeasance. Yet consumed by intrigues and hidden agendas, legitimate and illegitimate, local resistance can paralyze development but it cannot make it happen. Confrontation and resistance sound heroic, but ultimately are counterproductive, further delaying the already cumbersome and bureaucratic process of rebuilding.

Acknowledging these ghosts, listening to people's fears and gaining their trust are an ongoing task design can contribute to. ¹⁴

THE UNCANNY.

These sites are marked by Freud's uncanny, *Unheimlich*, the place where the familiar, the *Heimlich*, unfolds and reveals the unfamiliar, the specter of death. "The uncanny is uncanny only because it is secretly all too familiar, which is why it is repressed".¹⁵ Yet, the "inner city" is not a collection of "haunted" houses. As Anthony Vidler remarked, "there is no such thing as an uncanny architecture, but simply architecture that, from time to time and for different purposes, is invested with uncanny qualities."¹⁶

The "uncanny" remind us of the limits of metaphor. It reveals the naturalistic fallacy: that the vacancy of the "inner city" is a "natural" process of urban "growth and decay", a cancer. This justifies as "natural" a very destructive, cannibalistic pattern of urban development. The "uncanny" questions the mechanistic fallacy: technology or the invisible hand of the market has condemned the inner city to oblivion. Disavowing human agency engenders passivity from complacency or despair. The "inner city" was abandoned because of fear, contradictory cultural values, public policies and institutional constraints. This intrinsic momentum is hard to change, yet it is not inevitable.¹⁷

Invoking the "uncanny" we acknowledge the form and effects of human agency, even if forgotten or denied. Awareness of the repetition compulsion should make us wary of environmental determinism and remember the disasters brought by utopian planning. It also provides a standpoint to resist the seductions of the general cultural amnesia¹⁸. To acknowledge the return of the repressed, the devious ways that history may repeat itself, may serve as an antidote to hubris.

Psychoanalytic terms may provide insights into urban processes. Suburban flight and sprawl result from **denial**; sporadic symbolic gestures and the media's obsession with transgression, sex and death, **act it out**. Instead, we need **working through**, confronting reality and its predicaments, acknowledging the tragedy of the inner city and the need to build public trust. It calls for hope through memory and redemption.¹⁹

HEALING.

How can "graves and ghosts" become "body and soul"? To pursue the metaphor urban bodies need to balance the natural and built environments. Graves are dead bodies from natural disasters or man-made causes: contamination, pollution, barriers. Beyond a turning point the imbalance brings disease and ruins. To heal, balance needs to be restored.

The soul of the city is built on civility, on the respect of boundaries. Ghosts are dead souls killed by violence to these boundaries, leaving confusion, distrust, pain and suffering in their wake. To heal requires a sober, pragmatic attitude and a commitment to integration, to tolerance of others. To heal, we also need to mourn, honor the pain and suffering and re-establish boundaries on which to build trust and faith in the future.

The scope is daunting. The task should proceed in parallel at different scales, from small steps at the grass-roots that empower individuals and small neighborhoods to act, and extending to large scale restoration of brownfields sites and rebuilding obsolete infrastructure that now scars the landscape. One of the means is to re-Construct Nature.

Since time-immemorial, mankind has revered Nature and emulated it by building, gardening and cultivating the land. To mark the land, to pray and remember is profound: *marking and memory, mementos and memorials, memorabilia and memoirs, moratoria, and mourning and muses*. Mindfulness, memory and mourning are healing. Constructing nature heals space over time; it reveals the traces of human action and remembers history.

Constructing the city and nature requires work, love and care, what Plato called "the craft of life" *techne tou biou*. *Techne* goes beyond technology and instruments to engage artful managing and careful shaping. It calls for poetry and beauty, solicits judgment and discernment, a keen awareness of sensibilities and moods. It is a profound artistic challenge.

The last design called for large shade trees to frame the streets and the park. A low berm to the north would provide visual and sound cushion from the traffic. Understory plantings

would add more layers in section and create bird habitats. Evergreen accents would provide year long color, a welcome relief to Chicago's long winters. Through form, color and texture, I sought to restore life to the site.

After almost a decade, the project was finally built thanks to the team effort of key women public servants and community leaders I was fortunate to work with: Alderwoman Tony Preckwinckle, Barbara Maloof at CDOT, Kelly King at the Department of Planning and Shirley Newsome, the chair of the North Kenwood-Oakland Community Council. Dedication, commitment and shared faith in the project's potential to heal the area helped us steer the rocky process. With perseverance and community support, the park prevailed; the initial "*parti*" survived and the key was the community *charrette*.

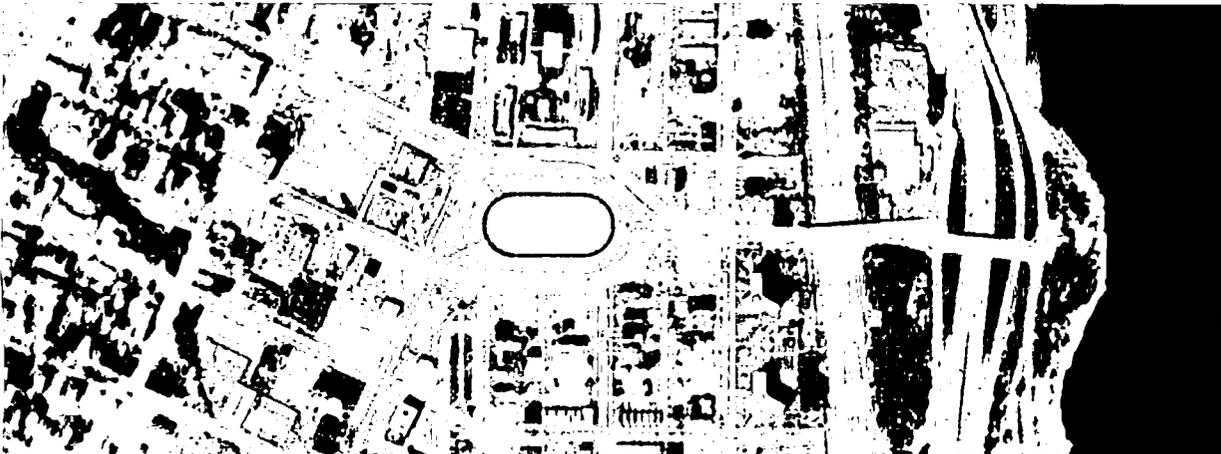
I was able to oversee the working drawings by the traffic engineering consultants and the road was built according to my design. The Park was completed after I left Chicago to be a Loeb Fellow. During the road construction, Mayor Daley wanted to use the site to build a new fountain; the Alderwoman persuaded him to honor the community's design from the *charrette*. The plan was finally built.

The Southern section of the Park and Boulevard System is now complete. Over time, the park might become a new center and a symbol of hope for the community, a place to mark an event to endow the city and landscape with meaning and community action.²⁰

Remembering Eric Morse teach us the meaning of **remorse**²¹. We may invoke a distinction between **guilt and remorse**²². **Guilt** is self-hatred, it depletes and defeats us; it brings depression and despair and leaves little room or energy for transformation. Guilt brings regret; it is mean spirited, it does not accept the lessons, the gift that even deep tragedy offers. **Remorse** is a state of recognition, the awareness of suffering and pain we have caused. Remorse can bring relief, free us to let go of the past with resolve not to repeat our errors. It is generous; it allows us to forgive ourselves and others, to heal and move on, to nurture faith in the future.

As we move forward to rebuild recently devastated cities: New Orleans, Biloxi at home and in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Guatemala abroad, let's remember these lessons: to fully heal, we need to attend to both **body and soul**.

To recover the body of the city, we can physically rebuild the graves: restore the polluted sites, infill the urban voids back with life. We can construct nature and nurture settlement to restore a balance between the two. To recover the soul, and put the ghosts to rest, we need to acknowledge and mourn the tragic past, not bury it into oblivion. Let's honor the victims, remember their sacrifice by marking these sites, however subtly, to integrate them back into the fabric, into daily life, thus recovering the intrinsic connection between the sacred and sacrifice. By rebuilding boundaries we can restore civility and trust. These key civic actions bind people to places and affirm love and life.



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- ¹² Sola-Morales Rubio, Ignasi de. "Terrain Vague." Anyplace. Cambridge, Mass. The MIT Press, 1997.
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