

Populist gem joins 'Cloud Gate' at Millennium Park

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Traditionalists recoiled last summer when it was announced that two paragons of the architectural avant-garde -- Zaha Hadid of London and Ben van Berkel of Amsterdam -- would design temporary pavilions in Millennium Park to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Burnham Plan.

Architect Daniel Burnham, after all, was a committed classicist who sought to transform cantankerous, turn-of-the-century Chicago into a civilized "Paris on the Prairie," complete with diagonal boulevards and Beaux-Arts bridges that seemed lifted from the banks of the Seine.

"Why not some classical columns?" this line of thinking went. "What do these two modernists have to with old Danny boy?"

Well, now we have an answer, or, more accurate, half an answer because Hadid's geometrically complex pavilion gave a contractor fits and won't be finished for weeks.

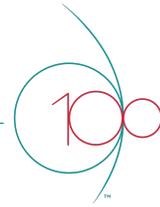
Van Berkel's pavilion, which opens Friday on Millennium Park's Chase Promenade, is at once thoughtful and delightful, packing just enough bling to stand up to the park's star attractions -- the spitting, oversize faces of the Crown Fountain and the mesmerizing sky and skyline reflections of "Cloud Gate." Like those two populist works of public art, it is thoroughly interactive.

You can walk on it, sit on it, guide a wheelchair over it and look at the skyline through it. At night, a grid of 42 computer-controlled, LED lights will shine on the underside of its roof, changing color and intensity depending on the number of pedestrians who walk by.

Designed by van Berkel's UNStudio and sponsored by the Burnham Plan Centennial Committee, a group of civic leaders orchestrating programs to mark the anniversary, the privately funded pavilion is a computer-age marvel. Built on a steel frame, it has a skin of glossy white plywood that starts off in familiar right angles and transforms into voluptuous double curves of bent plywood.

As Chicagoans who inhabit a city defined by a street grid, we're intuitively acquainted with the rectilinear geometry of its floor slab and roof canopy. They evoke such modern icons as Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House.

What's between this sandwich, however, is beguilingly strange: Three scooplike forms that van Berkel's project architect, Christian Veddeler, compares to lips or eyebrows. Rotated at different angles, the scoops rise gracefully toward the pavilion's ceiling and merge seamlessly with it. At certain points, they burst through the roof, as if it could not contain their energy.



I had worried that the vast open spaces of the lakefront would swallow up van Berkel's and Hadid's pavilions, making them seem diminutive and therefore inadequate symbols of Burnham's "make no little plans" ethos. But with the trees flanking the Chase Promenade, shaping an intimate, roomlike enclosure, van Berkel's pavilion actually stands out by virtue of its boldly sculptural shape and blazing white color. Even surrounding skyscrapers don't overwhelm it.

While the pavilion's raised platform marks it as a special precinct, distinct from quotidian clutter, it does not seem off-putting.

People still will be able to sit on it, dangling their legs. The LEDs, which are embedded in the floor, can be counted on to make the pavilion as alluringly festive as the Crown Fountain, bathing it in a variety of colors that draw inspiration from the pastel renderings of the Burnham Plan.

The design is equally successful as you draw closer, a credit to the design team, which included the architect of record, Chicago's Douglas Garofalo.

The architects have cantilevered the floor slab, so it appears to float gracefully above the ground. A ramp sliced into the floor slab serves as the entrance for everyone, including people in wheelchairs. While there are some minor missteps -- the roof's outer edge tapers awkwardly to accommodate a roof beam, and some floor and ceiling surfaces remain uneven -- they are quickly forgotten once you ascend the ramp and the scoops cast their intoxicating spell.

They are, first of all, beautifully built, with seamless connections between individual pieces of curving plywood and remarkably crisp edges. Look closely, and you see how they make the floor, ceiling and columns appear to intermingle. Best of all, they open to reveal surprising, through-the-roof views of downtown skyscrapers, including Trump Tower.

The pavilion thus becomes a viewing device, a large-scale frame, like a hand placed over your eyes, through which to glimpse the horizontal expanses of Burnham's lakefront and his city.

But just as the domed interior of "Cloud Gate" offers multiple reflections of the joyous crowds beneath it, so the pavilion affords many perspectives on Chicago, not one favored, God-like view, as in the renderings of the Burnham Plan. The pavilion is no high-end gas station, as harsh critics would have it. It symbolizes a Chicago rooted in a proud past but adapting to a complex present.

The Burnham pavilions are scheduled to appear through Oct. 31.