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Learn from how Chicago does culture

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When Chicago's Millennium Park turned 10 this month, the Chicago Tribune hailed it as "the best thing former Mayor Richard M. Daley ever did" and "the latest demonstration of Chicago's audacious ability to invent the urban future."

The park began as a way to reclaim a 24.5-acre civic dead zone of parking lots and railway tracks between the city's iconic skyline and lakefront. It's become a place nearly 5 million people flock to a year — attracted by "Cloud Gate," a mirrored arch by London artist Anish Kapoor that reflects the skyline and has been affectionately nicknamed "the Bean" because of its rounded shape; the "Crown Fountain," a reflecting pool between waterfalls cascading from two 50-foot-tall blocks by Spanish sculptor Jaume Plensa; and a bandshell designed by Los Angeles starchitect Frank Gehry.

Inevitably, there's been some grumbling; costs to build and operate the park have exceeded initial projections. Yet Millennium Park is viewed locally and internationally as a smashing success. Beyond that, it hints at a broader model to which other communities might aspire. Even as the world's visual- and performing-arts establishment becomes increasingly centered on a few major media capitals — New York, Los Angeles, London — Chicago exemplifies how other cities can energize the artists in their midst and use the arts to promote a livelier community.

Not coincidentally, the Windy City is one of the places Boston Mayor Martin Walsh's administration is eyeing for ideas as it looks to hire an arts and cultural affairs commissioner, elevating the position to cabinet level "for the first time in 20 years." Recently, Boston artist Maggie Cavallo wondered aloud on Twitter if there are any arts leaders with the extensive culture and financial qualifications the city is seeking. Joyce Linehan, a former arts promoter who serves as Walsh's chief of policy, tweeted back a few names; among them was Michelle Boone, whom Chicago's current mayor, Rahm Emanuel, appointed commissioner of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events in 2011.

Part of the reason Chicago has been able to accomplish things like Millennium Park is because it has a different culture than Boston — in its more daring and playful environment, artists and arts patrons are more willing to risk the embarrassment of falling flat on their faces. "There is this brawling, can-do, 'City of Big Shoulders,' Midwestern thing," says Martha Lavey, artistic director of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, known for launching the careers of John Malkovich, Gary Sinise, and Joan Allen, as well as the Tony- and Pulitzer-winning play "August: Osage County."

Indeed, many of the arts executives whom I interviewed emphasized how Chicago's leadership sees the city as a work in progress, rather than a finished product. "One of the reasons Chicago was able to do it is because of the reason we were able to do a lot of things: the Chicago Fire," says Kelly Leonard, executive vice president of Second City, the Chicago comedy troupe that gave us John Belushi, Bill Murray, Tina Fey, and numerous other actors who've risen from "Saturday Night Live" to Hollywood. That devastating 1871 fire encouraged a culture of reinvention. "Innovation, it comes out of the turn of the century attitude of rebuilding the city, and asking 'Why not?' instead of 'Why?'" Steppenwolf Executive Director David Hawkanson says. "A lot of that comes out of the Daleys' attitudes... I think a mayor can get people to think and to dream."

Daley, the son of longtime mayor Richard J. Daley, saw how a 50-foot-tall Picasso sculpture that his father erected in 1967 had become an icon of the city and burnished the politician's legacy. Chicago mayors became ambassadors for the arts. From the second Mayor Daley's support, city approvals and private funding followed.

“Rich Daley and his wife, Maggie Daley, were really determined to make Chicago a world city and they believed that a presence in the arts was important in doing that,” says Scott Turow, the Chicago-area author of legal thrillers like “Presumed Innocent.”

“There’s no way you’re going to get a Frank Gehry bandshell and an Anish Kapoor without somebody who wants to get this done, that person being the mayor,” says Hamza Walker, associate curator at the University of Chicago’s Renaissance Society gallery. “Millennium Park doesn’t come about by virtue of a committee.”

Chicago’s investment in the arts is all about attracting business and getting tourists to stay one more day. “When Mayor Daley was trying to entice Boeing to leave the West Coast and move to Chicago, they met in the Art Institute of Chicago,” says Mike Lash, the city’s former director of public art, who now lives in Salem, Mass. “Art is big business in Chicago.”

In that spirit, the city has built on existing infrastructure — the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Art Institute of Chicago, the theater scene. About a decade ago, the city’s theater district was revitalized when city and state funds were poured into new playhouse construction and renovations. Millennium Park is the capstone on efforts to transform downtown from a place that went to sleep after the business day into Chicago’s front yard. “Millennium Park was one of the really good uses of power. The mayor managed to coordinate huge corporate donations for Millennium Park,” Turow says.

Meanwhile, unlike in Boston, Chicago’s public art program is partly supported by a “percent-for-art” ordinance that requires 1.33 percent of the budget of most city construction and renovation projects to go to art. At the major downtown sites, the city programs events from concerts to farmers markets. “You give constant reasons to come back,” says Boone, the city’s cultural affairs commissioner. “You don’t put it up and leave.”

The city, she says, presents nearly 2,000 cultural programs per year, the vast majority of them free — blues and jazz and gospel music festivals downtown; exhibitions and events at the department’s headquarters, the large former central library that became the free Chicago Cultural Center in the early 1990s; as well as music, theater, and film screenings, in parks and libraries around the city. “We’re probably the largest employer of artists in the city.”

Promoting a vibrant arts scene isn’t just about the city’s own programming, it also involves nurturing artists, promoters, and organizations that generate good ideas of their own. The Pitchfork Music Festival, the summer indie rock fest held in Union Park west of downtown, has become one of the standout events in North America since launching in 2005. Coincidentally, that same year, Lollapalooza chose to transform from a traveling music festival into an annual showcase in Chicago’s downtown Grant Park.

Pitchfork festival director Mike Reed says they blossomed under the radar. “We kind of did our thing, and the larger powers that be didn’t really know or understand. People turned their heads and they’re like, ‘There’s this big thing.’ ”

But he says it’s “very dangerous” for the city to do so much programming, to compete so much with private entertainment businesses like Pitchfork. He adds, “Most stuff that’s put on by a municipality is not very good because they don’t have the vision.”

Still, it’s also possible to imagine a cooperative approach between the city and arts organizations. Two years ago, the city unveiled its Chicago Cultural Plan 2012. It was billed as “the first new plan for strengthening the city’s arts and cultural sector in more than 25 years.” Cambridge cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who has participated in music programming in Chicago public schools, was quoted in the city’s announcement saying the plan’s initiative to “reinvigorate” arts education would be “transformational for the students of Chicago.” Ma continues to praise the city’s proposal to make arts part of the public schools’ core curriculum, fund more arts teaching, and distribute that money equitably throughout the school system.

Likewise, in June, the city announced that it would launch a major “Architecture Biennial” in fall 2015 — it’s a partnership between the city and the architecture-promoting Graham Foundation. The idea for the event grew out of the city’s cultural plan, which identified the city’s landmark architectural tradition “as a cultural asset that the city could leverage,” says Sarah Herda, co-artistic director of the biennial and director of the foundation. Organizers are trying to identify unique assets of the community, preferably in territory where there isn’t a lot of competition (Herda says this will be the only architectural biennial in North America), then do something that will grab international attention.

What can Boston learn from how Chicago does culture? “Listen to people. We’ve spent a lot of time listening to what people want,” Boone says. “Don’t look to Chicago. Look to your people.”

In Boston, our staid Brahmins and august academic institutions still too often foster a feeling that “You can’t do that here.” The Second City comedy troupe, which defiantly embraced the insult as its name when it launched in 1959, today runs workshops for companies and government agencies hoping “to be more innovative, creative, and playful.”

“The number one tenet of improvisation is saying ‘Yes, and ...’ We live in a world where people love to say ‘No.’ ” Leonard says. “ ‘Yes, and ...’ allows a stupid idea or a silly idea or a crazy idea to exist for enough time that maybe it’s just crazy enough to be great. Or enough time to go away. But you can’t even get there if you say no. So try this example: Everyone has to stop saying no for a day.”