

To Revitalize a City, Try Spreading Some Mulch

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BYLINE: By KEITH SCHNEIDER

IN many ways, this city's current fortunes are all about mulch. It's everywhere. Bark mulch is spread in neat circles around the city's trees; roughly 30,000 new trees are planted annually. Darker leaf mulch fills planters along State, Dearborn, Michigan and the other major thoroughfares now blooming in spring colors.

Mulch adorns 70 miles of green medians that have been sown over the last decade with native flowers, grasses and bushes. It's spread on the gardens and open spaces now required by the city to accompany new homes, stores and office buildings. And it sits on many of the energy-saving green roofs of 200 buildings.

But even more than its soil-enriching, moisture-conserving utility, mulch is an organic metaphor, tying together the various pieces of Chicago's novel development strategy, praised by the Sierra Club and the Chamber of Commerce alike. By wrapping its arms and famous big shoulders around its Latin motto -- *Urbs in Horto* (City in a Garden) -- Chicago has become a global model for how a metropolis can pursue environmental goals to achieve economic success.

During the last decade, the city's performance, measured in virtually every conventional category of civic well-being, has been off the charts, local boosters say. Chicago attracted more than 100,000 new residents, added tens of thousands of downtown jobs, prompted a high-rise housing boom, reduced poverty rates, built thousands of affordable homes, spurred a \$9-billion-a-year visitor and convention industry, and transformed itself into one of the most beautiful cities in America.

The generator of Chicago's mulch is Richard M. Daley, the unorthodox and popular Democratic mayor who took office in 1989 vowing to replant the urban forest of his youth that was lost to Dutch elm disease and other blights. At the time, the pledge raised the eyebrows of supporters and critics, who chalked up the mayor's love for trees to his birth on Arbor Day in 1942.

The tree planting, though, evolved over Mr. Daley's five terms into a much more sophisticated understanding of the benefits -- including to the city's treasury -- of conserving resources, saving energy, expanding parks, constructing environmentally sensitive buildings, reducing the amount of storm water, restoring wetlands, generating renewable energy and doing everything feasible to heal instead of harm the city's natural systems.

Over the years, Mayor Daley's plan to turn his hometown into the "greenest city in America" has ceased to be an unusual experiment in revitalization. Instead it is seen by urban policy specialists as an effective response to the rapidly changing expectations that business executives and residents, especially young professionals, have for cities.

"It's not so much about saving the world," Sadhu Johnston, the 31-year-old environment commissioner for Chicago, said in an interview. "It's more about using green technology to save \$4 million here, or earn \$10 million there, and make the city better by doing that."

The breadth and diversity of Mayor Daley's environmental and economic pursuits, one idea connecting and supporting the next, mimic natural systems. Take Mr. Daley's fondness for mulch. It's useless unless it gets spread.

That falls to people like Christy Webber, a landscape contractor who has turned Chicago's devotion to lawns, gardens, planters, parks and green roofs into a \$13-million-a-year business and one of the city's fastest-growing small companies. "By planting more gardens, the mayor encouraged new businesses to grow," said Ms. Webber, whose company, Christy Webber Landscapes, has helped install many of Chicago's important new gardens.

Ms. Webber, who is 44 and was raised in a working-class family outside Flint, Mich., started her company in 1990, the year after Mr. Daley was elected. Her company's development closely tracks the mayor's evolution of environmentalism as an economic plan.

The Daley administration has planted 500,000 trees, is putting up the most energy-efficient and environmentally sensitive municipal buildings in the country, has agreed to provide developers with much faster permits if they construct green

buildings, instituted a \$600-million-a-year program to repair neighborhoods and city parks, promised to obtain 20 percent of the electricity used by the city from clean and renewable sources, and converted hundreds of abandoned and contaminated properties into new businesses.

Mr. Daley's commitment is praised by the city's environmental leaders, although they note that there are gaps in the green program -- including the presence of two big state-licensed coal-burning power plants that operate without modern air-pollution controls.

"The mayor took the idea of green and has become increasingly serious," said Scott Bernstein, the founder of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, a research and policy organization that earlier this year earned "platinum" designation from the U.S. Green Building Council -- the nation's highest environmental rating -- for the renovation of the center's West Side office. "If you compare where the city was when Daley first came into office and where the city is now, it's night and day."

Nobody in or out of the Daley administration, including the mayor, knows exactly when environmental sensitivity became central to Chicago's development strategy. Ms. Webber is convinced that the moment came in 1996 when Mr. Daley began spending on a citywide beautification program to impress the delegates and the media who were attending the Democratic National Convention that year.

City crews cleared abandoned buildings in the West Side neighborhoods surrounding the United Center, the convention site. Mr. Daley accelerated bush and flower planting, hung flowering pots from new period street lamps and promoted neighborhood gardens.

The sparkling appearance turned heads. Mayor Daley and his green initiative rose to national and international prominence. In 2001, Boeing moved its headquarters from Seattle to Chicago, partly because the company's executives said they wanted to live there. That same year Mr. Daley built a green roof on City Hall.

Ms. Webber rode the green wave to contracts to cut, plant, mulch, install and maintain enough gardens and parks to employ over 100 people. Her revenue increased to \$2 million in 1998, and \$6.8 million in 2003. In 2004, Inc. Magazine said she and her squad of workers were the 54th fastest growing "inner city" company in America. This year Ms. Webber is scheduled to move the company to a new green headquarters designed by Farr Associates, the most prominent of the city's growing cadre of ecologically sensitive architects.

"After the convention, business just took off," said Ms. Webber, whose building is going up on the reclaimed site where the 1996 West Side demolition debris was dumped. "And it hasn't stopped."

Indeed, when the results of the 2000 census were published, the magnitude of Chicago's transformation became clear. The city population increased by 112,000 people, the first time that happened since the 1940's. Just as striking was the resurgence of Chicago's downtown neighborhoods, which grew by 16,000 residents during the 1990's, according to an analysis by the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. The city's median income increased 12.6 percent in the 1990's, 2 percent higher than the median incomes of the state or the six-county metropolitan region. With the new wealth, Ms. Webber and others here assert that Mr. Daley's crowning achievement is Millennium Park, a 24.5-acre, \$475 million expanse of lawn, wild-grass prairie, sculpture and gardens that joins the fast-growing neighborhoods along Michigan Avenue.

Ms. Webber helped install the turf and gardens, but says she lost money on the project because of constant design changes. Mr. Daley, who also encountered turmoil, dedicated the park in July 2004 amid criticism about delays and the cost, which was three times the original estimate.

Hardly anybody is still complaining. Landscape architects say the park set a new standard for design. Environmental leaders note that it showcases some green technologies, especially because it is the largest green roof in the world. Millennium Park is above an underground parking garage and ribbons of old Illinois Central track, which for more than a century separated the South Loop from the lakeshore.

Mr. Daley and his staff say that the park provides more evidence of the value of pursuing green goals. A market study commissioned by the city found that the park attracts nearly four million visitors annually, was responsible for encouraging at least 25 percent of the 10,000 units of new housing under construction or planned in neighborhoods nearby, and increased hotel, restaurant, shopping and entertainment sales by \$190 million a year.

Chicago is currently the host for an exposition, Garden in a City, set in an adjoining park. The show, which opened on May 13, is expected to attract tens of thousands of home owners and landscape professionals before it closes this Sunday. On display are plants that thrive in cities, with demonstrations on how to decorate bungalow backyards and build beautiful plazas. Ms. Webber prepared an exhibition to showcase her company's work. No surprise, the event also features beds of mulch.