From Vacant Lot to Playlot

The Chicago Motor Club's Play Yard Contest and the Provision of Public Space

BY STEPHANIE DOCK

A walk around the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago reveals to the observant eye a proliferation of small parks and playgrounds in an area surrounded on three sides by venerable spaces that date from the early days of Chicago parks: Washington Park, Jackson Park, and the Midway Plaisance. Venturing down Woodlawn Avenue near 53rd Street, one might happen to notice a small playground nestled between two apartment buildings. A sign on the fence announces to all its name — Butternut Playlot — and informs interested parties that the playground is a "Children's Playlot for Boys and Girls Under 12 Years." This lot is a considerably junior member of the park district when compared to its surrounding larger cousins, having been acquired by the park district in 1959.[1]

The lot's life as a playground, however, goes farther back. In 1948

1. Julia Sneiderman Bachrach and Elizabeth Ann Patterson, "Butternut Playlot Park" in *Chicago Parks: Historical Profiles*, May 2000. (Available on the Chicago Park District website: http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/index.cfm/fuseaction/parks.results/keyword_park/butternut).

a group of parents, with the assistance of the Hyde Park American Veteran's Committee and nearby businesses, got together to create the "Community Tot Lot," a private playlot with membership open to all.[2] Permission having been obtained from the owner of the lot, Irvin Klein, the parents cleaned the site, set up play equipment, and divvied up amongst the mothers the duty of watching the children while they played. By 1950, the tot lot was in regular use by eighty children.[3] In 1950, annual membership rates were set at one dollar for a family's first child and twenty-five cents for each subsequent child, with badges issued to each child to indicate that he or she had paid and could play in the lot.[4] When in 1958 the lot's owner served notice that the playground would have to leave because he was planning to sell the lot, community members pressured the city to purchase the land and thus maintain this small haven of safe play for their children.[5] With the neighborhood in the process of urban renewal, it was not hard to bring the matter before city officials, and soon thereafter the park was purchased by the city and transferred to the Park District.

This might seem to be an isolated incident. But across the nation thousands of such play yards were being created in backyards, in spaces behind apartment buildings, and in vacant lots. They were often less formal arrangements than the Community Tot Lot, and very few made

2. "City Proposes Two Playlots," *Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference Newsletter*, January 1958, 4.

3. "Tot Lot Parents to Meet Monday to Elect Officers," *Hyde Park Herald*, 29 March 1950, 8.

4. "Tot-Lotters Open Season Sunday," *Hyde Park Herald*, 3 May 1950, 5.

5. "City Proposes Two Playlots," *Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference Newsletter*, January 1958, 4.

Tot Lot in Hyde Park at 53rd Street and Woodlawn Avenue, 1954
Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

such a direct transition from private play space to public park. Consequently, just as they are tucked away from the general notice of passersby, the existence of such spaces has been largely hidden from historians. From Seattle to Washington, D.C., contemporary newspaper accounts give evidence that parents were taking the initiative to provide play space for their own and their neighbors' children.[6] In Chicago, the existence of these spaces can be documented thanks to a contest run by the Chicago Motor Club. In 1949, the Community Tot Lot was entered in a countywide contest that awarded prizes to the best private "play yards" constructed and maintained by parents and other community members. The Motor Club held the contest for seventeen years between 1934 and

6. Chicago accounts reference both those cities (see "Survey Reveals Children Prone to Street Play," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 30 September 1934, W2) but evidence can be found by consulting the archives of the *Washington Post*, for example "Play Areas Entered in Montgomery Contest," *Washington Post*, 20 July 1950, 12.

1958, resulting in over a hundred entrants.[7] The Community Tot Lot appears to have been entered in the contest only once.

The Motor Club's logic for creating these spaces was simple: alarming numbers of children were being killed each year because they were playing in the street. The solution, as the Motor Club saw it, was to find them better, safer places to play. If children were provided with attractive play spaces close to home and away from the street, there would be no need for them to play in traffic. They turned to parents and the community to provide such spaces, with the added incentive of a contest with prizes to attract entrants. Though a few charged a fee like the Community Tot Lot, the vast majority appears to have been free for all neighborhood children to use.

The creation of private parks run for a public audience such as the Community Tot Lot is not particular to this period. But the intense, widespread, and publicized proliferation of these spaces does appear to be unique to this contest. The contest was certainly a primary instigator of the play yards' creation, just as traffic fatalities were certainly a primary impetus for the contest. But underlying the contest was an evolving relationship between private and public play space in the city and the question of who was responsible for providing this space. By examining

7. The last contest was the sixteenth annual, but using newspaper reports, the author counts 17 years: 1934–1936, 1941–1943, 1947–1951, and 1953–1958. The main source for material on the play yard contest comes from contemporary *Chicago Tribune* reports, which are woefully incomplete. The number of articles discussing the contest varied widely from year to year (from two to thirty, average around twelve) and the number of play yards reported is highly variable and may, but probably does not, reflect the number of entrants for a given year. In general, most articles that named specific yards were reporting the contest winners for the different areas of the county. So, unless there was really no competition there should have been more entrants.

this relationship, I will seek to explain the origins and context of the Chicago Motor Club's play yard contest and its role in a collective response to mid-century urban health, safety, and efficiency. The private initiative behind the play yards was effectively filling a public need, predating and anticipating a public policy shift in urban park ideology.

The timing of the contest intersects several other play-related trends; three in particular may help explain why the contest occurred at this particular moment. First, the policies of the Chicago Park District as regarding the types and distribution of parks directly affected the supply of supervised play spaces. The citizens running the play yards were paying taxes that funded public parks and playgrounds. However, during the contest there were very few small, local parks, and until the 1950s, the Park District showed no interest in acquiring such spaces. Second, reformers during the Progressive Era had initiated efforts to control the ways and places in which children played. The rhetoric of the playground movement in particular would have paved the way for the contest's focus on child welfare while at play. Finally, there was steady movement toward the appropriation of urban thoroughfares for exclusive use by automobiles, which allowed for increased speeds and traffic efficiency but required children to move their play elsewhere.[8] Because it represented motorists, it was in the Motor Club's interest to help remove children from the streets.

I will begin with a discussion of the contest and its rhetoric, then examine the contexts of the contest, and close by addressing the provision of play space after the contest ended.[9]

8. Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 108.

9. The contest was countywide but this paper focuses on the play yards and parks of Chicago proper. In some areas of the county, suburban yards were a significant proportion of the contest entrants.

The Contest

In August 1934, an article ran in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* announcing a play yard contest sponsored by the Chicago Motor Club. According to the article, the goal was to "reduce the number of fatalities among children . . . [by] seeking to awaken an interest on the part of parents in playground activities so intense as the interest manifested in many quarters in the garden club."[10] The spur to action was the alarming number of children killed by automobiles each year: 164 in Cook County in 1933. Of particular concern were the preschoolers who could not be reached by safety campaigns in the schools. For these children, the backyard was safest, and accordingly, the Motor Club urged parents and communities to construct play facilities in their yards, behind apartment buildings, and in nearby vacant lots in order to keep children off the streets. Fancy equipment was not necessary although, as the Club's president remarked, "The results which come from keeping off the street . . . are so important that no effort should be spared."[11]

Although held quite irregularly in its first decade, the contests soon became a nearly annual event during the late 1940s and through the 1950s.[12] Throughout the life of the contest, at least one hundred yards were entered within the city of Chicago alone. Taking into account entrants in the suburbs and those that are not specifically mentioned in newspaper accounts, the actual number of entrants may have been closer to two hundred or more during the life of the contest. Figure 1 maps the

10. "Drive Started to Cut Deaths Among Children," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 August 1934, S2.

11. "Play in Safety Drive Enlists Aid of Women," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 September 1934, S4.

12. Contests were held from 1934–1936, 1941–1943, 1947–1951, and 1953–1958.

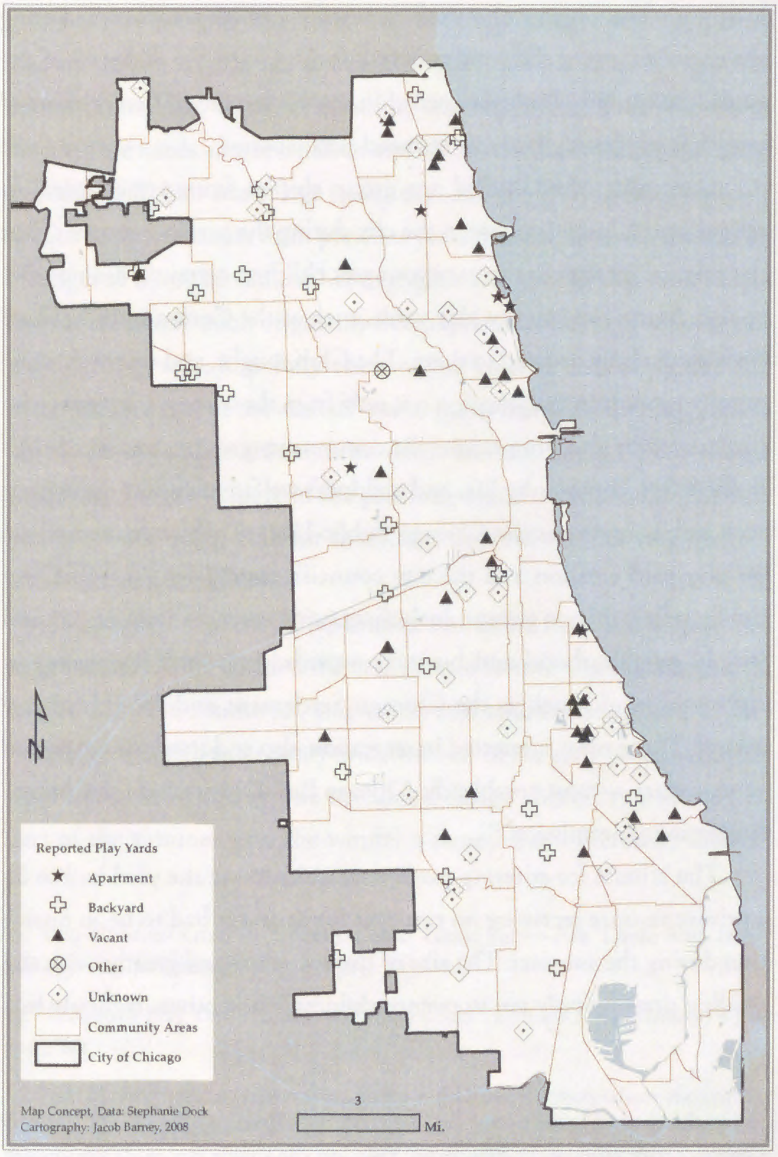

Figure 1. Play Yards of the Chicago Motor Club Contest, 1934–1958

Source: *Chicago Tribune*

locations of the Chicago play yards reported in newspaper accounts during the entire course of the contest (1934–1958). Given the dispersal of the yards, the contest clearly succeeded in reaching many different parts of city, thus suggesting fairly widespread participation.

Over time, the targeted age group shifted from preschoolers to school-age children let loose in the city during the summer months. But the original interest in the very youngest children certainly did not disappear. Many community play yards, such as the Community Tot Lot, were particularly devoted to them. The Club sought, and received, community support in its campaign not only from those most affected — the parents — but also from numerous community groups concerned with traffic safety, community life, and children's welfare. Support came from such public bodies as the Chicago Public Library, which loaned books on play yard creation and the city council's committee on traffic and public safety; private groups, including many veterans associations and various neighborhood and business organizations; and big names in city social work, such as the Chicago Settlement and Neighborhood houses. Those most interested in recreation also endorsed the contest in various years — most notably, the Chicago Park District and the Chicago Recreation Commission.[13]

The criteria for entering yards were quite loose: the yard had to be a private venture receiving no taxpayer funds and it had to be in operation during the summer. The size of these yards varied greatly, with the smallest drawing only ten to twenty children while others regularly had

13. On the library's participation see "Library Lends Books on Play Yard Contest," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* 17 May 1942, SW5; on the major city-wide groups see "Summer's Child Traffic Toll Is Cut 50 Per Cent," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 November 1941, SW2.

150, 200, or even in one case, 600 children using one large yard.[14] The size of the lot was not a major consideration in the judging of the contest, but utility to the community was important, both in terms of meeting the needs of area children and of "contribution to neighborhood appearance."[15] Nor was a large outlay of funds necessary; articles regularly cited stories of winners from previous years that had built their yards on a budget of $6.90 or some other negligible amount. In this vein, judges took into consideration originality in equipment and design when selecting the best yards, hopefully encouraging creative uses of money and material. The goal of the contest was to get as many children as possible off the streets and to this end, no effort was too small. Children were encouraged to participate in the planning and construction of the yard because it was being built for them, and the yard was not very useful if it did not attract children.[16]

The structure of the contest varied somewhat from year to year. But in general the Club divided the county into four or five regions (north, northwest, west, southwest, and south) and awarded prizes to a winner in each area as well as a county-wide winner. In the early years, the prizes were equipment, and in one instance a design contest run in the first part of the summer gave the winner a puppy. Soon thereafter though,

14. 600 children cited in "Here's a Real Good Joe—Ask These 600 Tots," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 August 1953, W7.

15. "Plan 10th Play Yard Contest of Motor Club," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 8 July 1951, W1.

16. Perhaps for precisely this reason, there were a couple years where the contest was run in two phases—the first for the best design of a yard done by a child, the second for the best yard constructed. The deadline for the former was often early in the summer (June or July) while the latter was judged at the end of the summer (often in August).

cash prizes became the standard. The awards were substantial — a grand prize yard could garner two hundred dollars with lesser awards of one hundred, fifty, and twenty-five dollars given in each area. Judges were drawn from local community leaders and their names were more consistently listed than the addresses of all the entrant yards, suggesting that the prominence of the judges was considered a measure of the contest's importance and possibly served as another incentive to enter the contest. The Motor Club's decision to offer regional as well as overall prizes would have allowed them to recognize more yards and this, along with the use of prizes and locally prominent judges, would have forwarded the contest's goal of reaching as many children in as many neighborhoods as possible.

The yards entered were generally of one of three types: backyards improved by individuals on their own property, vacant lots converted by a group for use by the block, and apartment backyard play areas constructed with the aid of the occupants for the building's children. Most numerous were the backyards that parents created for their own children and expanded to serve their children's playmates. One example of this was the Yoder family of 1919 Touhy Avenue who entered their yard in 1941. They wanted to keep their children safe and decided that the best way to do that would be "to make their backyard so attractive that the youngsters would never want to leave it." It began as an effort to entertain and keep their own children safe, but it became a popular place for nearby children where everybody was welcome so long as they followed the simple ground rules of "no quarreling and no rough stuff."[17]

Vacant lots, though involving more work, were nonetheless quite prevalent. Most often they were the creation of a community group

17. "How a Backyard Can End Fear of Street Tragedy," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 August 1941, N6.

formed for the purpose of obtaining a play area for the local children, such as Butternut's predecessors. Or a larger community group may have been in charge. For example, the Woodlawn Property Owner's Association sponsored several yards in their neighborhood, though these were still based on block-level organization. But not all of the lots were community initiatives — some were created by individuals who recognized a need in their neighborhood for play space. In one case, a truck driver with no children who lived on the West Side put much time and effort into turning two vacant lots across the street from his home into a play yard — that attracted some six hundred local children.[18] Similarly, the Quayles, a childless couple, converted a vacant lot on the South Side in 1943 "in a district where equipped play space is seldom found."[19] Run as a racially integrated play yard for seven years, the site was then purchased by the city which began running it in 1950 as Quayle Playlot, much as it did with Butternut some years later.[20]

The third type of yard, the apartment play space, appears to have been the least common. However, this type filled a particular niche for areas with few vacant lots or (interested) homeowners. Families in apartments lacked their own individual yard. But by banding together with other occupants — something in between a backyard and a vacant lot could be created. Creation of the yards by parents in the building was the

18. "Here's a Real Good Joe — Ask These 600 Tots," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 August 1953, W7.

19. "Need No Box Top to Compete in Safety Contest," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 20 July 1947, S4.

20. Julia Sneiderman Bachrach, "Quayle Playlot Park," in *Chicago Parks: Historical Profiles*, May 2000. (Available on the Chicago Park District Website: http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/index.cfm/fuseaction/parks.results/keyword_park/quayle/search_scope/parks/keyword_site/quayle).

norm. But in at least one case, it was through landlord initiative that the yard was created. That apartment fronted on a busy street and the landlords, "childless themselves, decided to do something to help the cooped up children living near them."[21]

Areas such as the backyard and apartment play yards can still be found behind most residences that house children. Though they may now only serve the children in the home or building, it is clear that these spaces do not owe their genesis to the contest. Furthermore, as the story of the Community Tot Lot demonstrates, even play yards in vacant lots were being formed and run but only sporadically entered in the contest (despite existing for nearly ten years, the Community Tot Lot was entered only once). This suggests the Motor Club was picking up on and benefiting from a movement within the community, and in turn supporting and expanding it. The yards were being created regardless of the contest. But by providing a forum to publicize and reward those efforts, the contest was (as intended) encouraging the creation of more yards in more places.

The peak year for play yard entrants was most likely 1949. Charles M. Hayes, president of the Chicago Motor Club through nearly the whole life of the contest and chief source of quoted material in the articles, announced "the record number of 45 play yards entered" in the contest that year. In his estimation, the volume of entrants "signalize[d] a heightened public recognition of the urgent need to cope with rising child traffic fatalities during summer months by providing children with adequate off-street recreational facilities easily accessible in their own neighborhoods."[22]

21. "Play Yard Built for Youngsters by Landlords," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 18 September 1949, SW11.

22. "Area Enters Yard Contest in a Big Way," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 21 August 1949, SW6.

Based on the number of articles covering the contest as well as the yards listed, although participation seems to have peaked in the late 1940s, interest remained steady throughout the 1950s. Though there was no formal announcement from the Motor Club, the association apparently decided to discontinue the contest after the summer of 1958. The priorities of the Club may have shifted away from the matter, but as of 1958 the contest's public appeal does not appear to have waned. The need for the play yards was as firmly stated in 1958 by the Club as it had been ten years earlier.

Contest Rhetoric

The contest was, as one reporter put it early on, "a war on the needless slaughter of playing children by automobiles."[23] The focus on child safety was a constant in the rhetoric surrounding the contests. Stories of play yards often cited the danger of nearby streets as a main cause of the yard's creation. One mother living close to an industrial area counted an average of sixty trucks passing through a nearby intersection every five minutes. Not surprisingly there had been numerous injuries to children in nearby apartments. The play yard she created was cited as an exemplar of responding to community needs.[24]

The Motor Club reinforced awareness of the dangers of street traffic through the use of statistics on child fatalities and injuries. The summer months were consistently acknowledged to be the most dangerous for

23. "Northwest Side Civic Groups Aid Safety Drive," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 May 1936, NW5.

24. "Playlot Prize Reveals Family Safety Drama," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 September 1941, N1.

children, "account[ing] for nearly as many traffic deaths and injuries as for all other months of the year."[25] The Club was quick to take credit if there were any diminution in these numbers. When reporting a reduction in summertime child fatalities in 1942, Charles M. Hayes observed that although total child fatalities had risen in the first half of year, the summertime reduction "leads us to believe that the summer play yard contest must have had a certain degree of influence on the reduction."[26]

Periodically, total numbers of child fatalities for a year or portion of a year would be reported. The few annual statistics cited are shown in Figure 2, along with the total traffic death toll for Cook County during the contest years. The overall decline in traffic fatalities is clear, and child fatalities seem to follow the same trend. The odd juxtaposition during World War II of a decline in total fatalities and an increase in child fatalities can be partially accounted for by wartime needs: the rationing of gasoline limited overall car use (thus lowering the overall death toll) but victory gardens took over many vacant lots and backyards normally used by children for their play. The general decline in fatalities does appear to have affected the rhetoric used by the Club. In the earlier years, when the death toll was higher, citing exact numbers of children killed was an affirmation of the crisis rhetoric about "slaughter in the streets." In later years, though, as overall deaths and, presumably, child fatalities decreased, the emphasis shifted from absolute numbers of deaths to the increased danger of death in summer months. The primary message remained unchanged though: children needed safe places to play.

25. "Open Contest of Play Yards in Cook County," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1957, NW9.

26. "Summer's Child Traffic Toll Is Cut 50 Per Cent," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 Nov 1941, SW2.

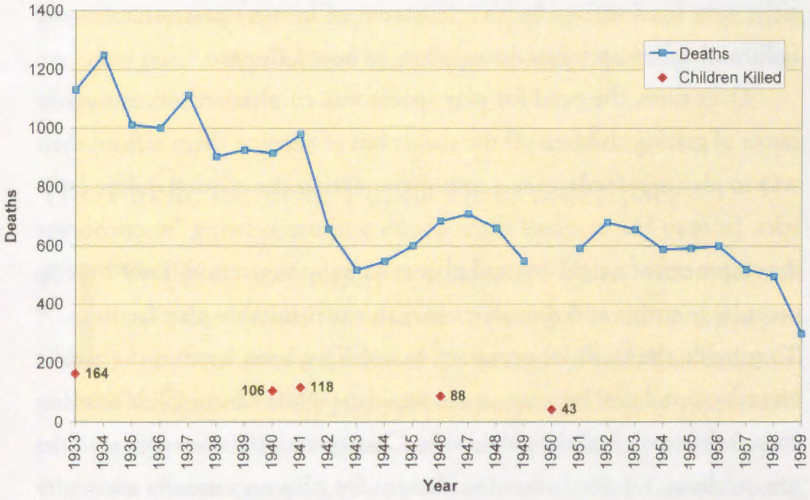

Figure 2. Cook County Total Traffic Deaths, 1933–1959

Source: *Chicago Daily Tribune* Articles

To bolster the case for the play yard contest when it first began, Motor Club officials also referenced other cities' success in reducing fatalities by implementing similar contests. Programs in Detroit, Washington, D.C., and Seattle were cited. In particular, the latter city showed enormous support for its program: some 360 yards were entered in its 1929 contest, and by 1933 that number had risen to 3,500, with a corresponding forty percent decrease in accidents for small children.[27] Such spectacular participation and results were clearly not achieved in Chicago, but any number of reasons might account for the different outcomes. Two primary reasons may have been the two cities' different park traditions and development patterns. The comparisons to other

27. "Survey Reveals Children Prone to Street Play," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 30 September 1934, W2.

cities were soon replaced with references to Chicago's past successes and failures, backed up by statistical data, as noted above.

Over time, the need for play spaces was emphasized not simply in terms of getting children off the streets but of keeping them safe on their way to play in safe places and so supplementing the existing public facilities. In 1949 Hayes stated the contest's purpose as being "to encourage development of neighborhood play areas so youngsters will not have to cross busy streets and thorofares [*sic*] to reach suitable play facilities."[28] To provide the facilities necessary would have been beyond the public sector's capabilities, because, as the president of the Motor Club noted in 1950, "while park facilities provided by Chicago and suburban communities are excellent, we need accommodations for play on virtually every city block for pre-school and primary grade children."[29] This position was further supported by public agencies themselves: "Public officials and traffic and recreation authorities agree that the most ample public recreation facilities alone cannot provide Cook County's almost 700,000 children of elementary and preschool age adequate traffic protection, principally because of the impossibility of distributing locations so that the little tot unaccompanied by parents will escape summer's heavy traffic hazards."[30] The City Council's Committee on Traffic and Public Safety agreed completely with the Motor Club's stance and attributed the rising child traffic death toll primarily to "the lack of sufficient grounds in which to

28. Charles M. Hayes, quoted in "Yard Contest Judges Named by Motor Club," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 June 1949, A5 (N).

29. Charles M. Hayes, quoted in "$1,175 in Prizes Is Offered for Best Play Lots," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 18 June 1950, W10.

30. Charles M. Hayes, quoted in "Popcorn, Swings, and Slide Attractions of Neighborhood Play Yard," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 August 1947, SW5.

play."[31] In one case, city support, facilitated by the local alderman, included purchasing a lot used by a play group and continuing to let them use it rent free.[32]

The Public Context: Public Parks and Space

This paucity of play spaces, admitted by recreation officials themselves, was the outcome of prior park traditions that had not been oriented towards the creation of such localized small parks. The idea behind the play yard contest was perhaps to supplement public playgrounds, but in many areas they were the only places to play when the contest started. Looking at a map of the Park District's parks in 1934, (see Figure 3, page 27) it is clear that the most of the park space in the city was still found in the large "pleasure grounds" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[33] These large parks were meant as an escape from the pressures of city living, a breathing space in the

31. Cited in "Prize Play Site Contest Will Close Friday," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 August 1947, N5.

32. "Area Play Yard Is Noisy Proof of Co-Operation," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 August 1950, A2(S).

33. The discussion of parks that follows is based on Part 1, "Historical Overview of Park Usage" in Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982) and Cranz, "Models for Park Usage: Ideology and Development of Chicago's Public Parks" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1971). In *Politics of Park Design*, Cranz periodizes park history into 4 phases the "Pleasure Ground," 1850–1900; "Reform Park," 1900–1930; "Recreation Facility," 1930–1965; and "Open-Space System," 1965 and after. "Models for Park Usage" has a more detailed breakdown of the Chicago Park District's phases, which largely correspond to the four phases above but further breaks the third period down into two groupings: "Centralization" (1930–1944) and "Physical Expansion" (1945–1966).

congestion and confusion of daily life. Covering large tracts of land, these parks were meant for the city as a whole, not single neighborhoods. Nor was their focus on recreation and play as became common in later park design. There are a number of medium-sized parks (most between ten and thirty acres) on the map, mainly on the South and Southwest Sides of the city. These so-called "small parks" were built in between 1900 and 1920 in response to the need for recreation space within the denser parts of the city, which were generally those inhabited by the working class and immigrants (often one and the same).[34] These parks were part of a series of new neighborhood parks begun in 1903 by the South Park Commission.[35] The innovation in these parks was the field house, which incorporated such amenities as community rooms and a library, and was supplemented by playgrounds and athletic fields. While these parks were more recreation focused, they were still quite large and widely dispersed. Only in a segment along the North Branch of the Chicago River was there any proliferation of truly small local parks as of 1934.

During the years the contest was held, the park district did increase the number of parks. But due to the Great Depression and then World War II, expansion did not begin until the late 1940s. In 1945, the Park District embarked on a Ten-Year Park Development Plan to acquire forty-three new parks. These new parks were still of a larger scale than

34. Cranz, "Models for Park Usage," 72–73.

35. Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880–1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 30. Chicago had twenty-two independent park boards, three of which — the South, West, and Lincoln Park boards — covered most of the city, until 1934 when they were officially consolidated into the Chicago Park District. Control of recreational facilities, however, remained fragmented as the city and board of education also maintained facilities. In 1957, the city traded its parks to the park district for the latter's control of boulevards and the policing of parks.

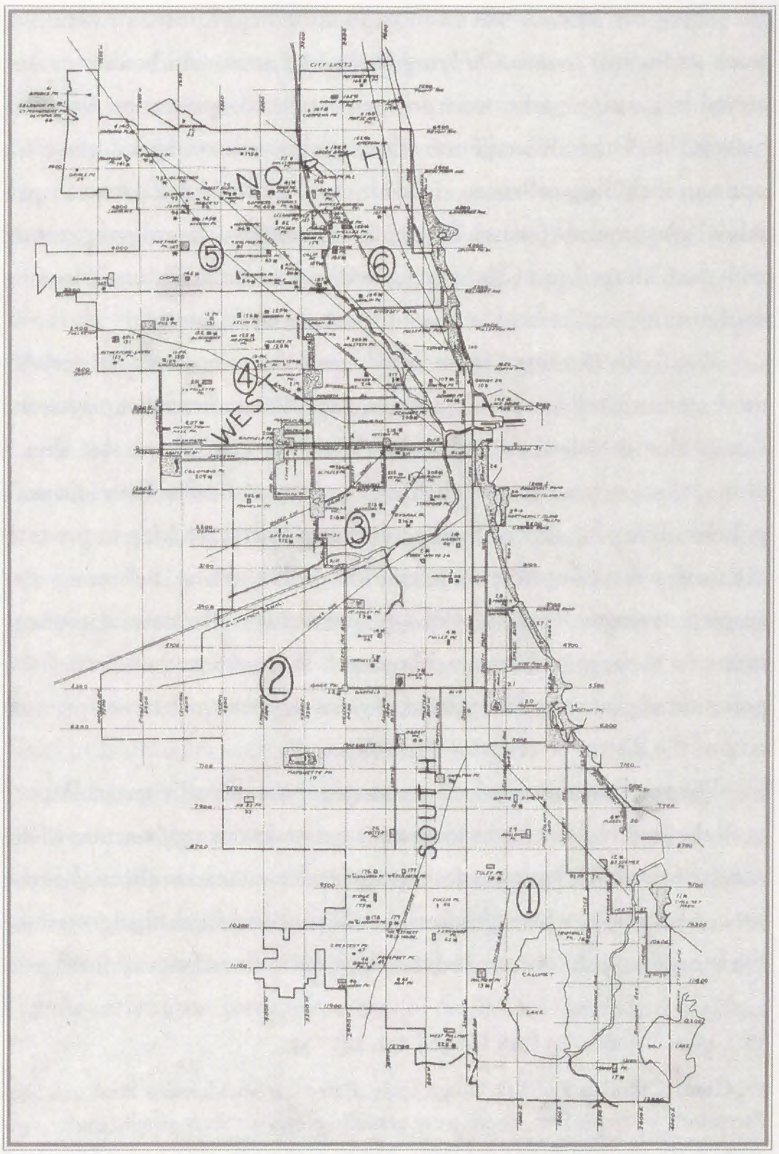

Figure 3. Chicago Park District Parks and Boulevards, 1934

Source: Chicago Park District

the play yards, as each was to incorporate a field house, a swimming pool, and tennis courts. Outlying residential areas, which were underserved by existing parks, were primarily under consideration for these new parks. Other interagency efforts also tried to expand the park options, including collaboration with the Board of Education to open school playgrounds for use during nonschool hours, and cooperation with the Chicago Land Clearance Commission and the Chicago Housing Authority to acquire land as part of those agencies' work.[36]

Finally in the 1950s there is evidence that the park district was more systematically responding to the need for smaller, local play areas: during that decade they acquired at least twenty-three playlot sites.[37] Nonetheless, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the Park District's policies more explicitly focused on very small parks, seeking to preserve the small pieces of open space left within the city. Many of these smaller spaces lent themselves to playlot-type parks due to their size and orientation to their immediate neighborhood. It is unclear, however, if the provision of play space (as opposed to green or open space) was a primary goal of the district in securing these spaces.

Despite the acknowledged inability to provide sufficient play space to all the city's children and a focus on larger parks throughout most of the contest period, the park district was attuned to recreation theories of the time. Ideas about where children should play had been changing since the late nineteenth century, and the playgrounds incorporated into parks

36. Cranz, "Models for Park Usage," 241, 243–245.

37. Cranz, "Models for Park Usage," 265. Based on Sneiderman Bachrach and Patterson's park profiles, there were actually closer to sixty small (under two acres) parks acquired during the 1950s. Not all of these are classified as "playlots," and so many are probably accounted for in the other park expansion projects underway in this period.

reflected this. In the period leading up to the contest, Progressive Era reformers had introduced the playground movement along with a new focus on organizing the leisure time of the masses, in part through the provision of parks in working class areas. The Chicago Park District's "small parks" are partly in response to these new ideas. The stated purpose of playgrounds was to keep children off the street primarily for reasons of moral, not physical, safety. By hiring adult playground managers to direct the children's play, reformers hoped to lure youth from the dangers of the street, saloons, and dance halls and put them in a situation that would introduce and reinforce proper behavior and good morals.[38]

It was in this period that the possibilities of backyard parks were first suggested, often in connection with city beautification ideas popular at the time. Ugly vacant lots and unsanitary backyards could be cleaned up, beautified, and put to use as pieces of nature close to home. The backyard movement was "never successful enough to capture the imagination of the proponents of large-scale urban beautification" who were more interested in large-scale projects like Chicago's lakefront as outlined in Burnham's 1909 *Plan of Chicago*.[39]

The impetus towards backyard play came more successfully from child care authorities who were as concerned about the "decline of the family" as they were about the immoral influences of the street. Backyard play areas kept children safe while maintaining family unity. Middle-class families in particular adopted this advice: Howard Chudacoff notes that "by the early 1930s, forty-six percent of families of means had backyard

38. Howard P. Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 113.

39. Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 84.

swings and fifty-eight percent had sandboxes."[40] Encouraging this trend was the fact that public parks were facing an image crisis, or soon would be, as a survey in 1939 of park users indicated. In part due to the earlier period's focus on neighborhood parks in and for working class areas, upper class children were not using the city's parks.[41]

The interest in both playgrounds and backyard play areas drew on an increased interest in controlling children's play. But for this to work, children needed to use the spaces provided, and "according to surveys, only about four percent of school-age youngsters frequented playgrounds in Milwaukee and Cleveland, and only a slightly higher percentage did so in Chicago."[42] Children appeared to prefer the autonomy—and perhaps the risk—of streets and other unsupervised public spaces. The organizers of the play yard contest appear to have been undaunted by such issues. They insisted through the years that if play spaces were provided, children could be convinced to make the play yard, not the streets, their preferred play space. Based on the examples cited in the paper, many yards do appear to have succeeded in drawing children to them. Their success may be due in part to the fact that they were supposed to draw children from the nearby area (as would a playground) but likely lacked the dominance of a playground supervisor.[43]

The final dimension to the play yard contest is the issue of the

40. Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 114–115.

41. Cranz, "Models for Park Usage," 227.

42. Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 114.

43. Playground supervisors at this time were expected to take a fairly active role in guiding children's play. Chudacoff quotes an eleven year old in Worcester, Mass. as saying, "I can't go to the playgrounds now. They get on my nerves with so many men and women around telling you what to do." Chudacoff, *Children at Play*, 114.

streets themselves. Where streets had once been a shared public space for various endeavors, including the play of children, Peter Baldwin argues that throughout the early twentieth century there was an increasing appropriation of this space for traffic purposes alone. The increase in traffic efficiency that resulted from this appropriation translated into greater economic efficiency, which made a compelling case for interested parties to promote vehicular dominance of the streets.[44] Baldwin documents this change in the public space of Hartford, Connecticut, up to 1930 but encounters much the same situation as the Chicago Motor Club was addressing in the following decades, including public outcry over child traffic fatalities in the 1910s and 1920s.[45] Tellingly, he notes that the Automobile Club of Hartford was "firmly opposed to street play, which made driving slower and more stressful. The Club's publications initially complained about children as annoying obstacles to traffic, but later spoke in terms of child welfare."[46] Concerned though the Chicago Motor Club might have been for children's safety, they were surely also aware of the importance of reducing child fatalities as they made their case for higher speeds and new traffic laws that favored vehicles over pedestrians.[47]

The play yard contest thus came along at a moment when the use and control of the streets was shifting to a more specialized set of users (automobiles) but before the public park system had been able to provide much new, appropriate public space in compensation. The community

44. Peter C. Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street: The Reform of Public Space in Hartford, 1850–1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 7, 173.

45. Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street*, 220.

46. Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street*, 173.

47. Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street*, 217.

was left to deal with the resulting carnage from this park policy failure. It did so by creating the play yards in hopes of luring children to safety. It is this private trend that the Motor Club recognized and promoted through its contest.

Geography of the Play Yards

Privately organized play yards, then, addressed a number of local concerns affecting communities throughout the city, most notably the lack of proximate safe available play space owned and maintained by public agencies. A map of the distribution of play yards in the city, as reported in the papers, serves at first glance to show the widespread nature of the contest (see Figure 1, page 15). The most notable feature is the lack of play yards in the heart of the city, a trend continued by later city playlots and playgrounds. The yards are meant to serve residential areas though, so it is not surprising that there would be none in the downtown which had been steadily losing its residential population since before the turn of the century.

Two clusters do stand out on the map: Hyde Park and Woodlawn with a related string in South Shore and South Chicago, and on the North Side along the lake. In both of these cases, a comparison to the 1934 park map shows that while these areas were well-served by large parks along the lakefront, and by Washington Park in Hyde Park's case, they did not have the moderately smaller neighborhood parks found in the rest of the city. Moreover, as the Park District began adding parks in the postwar period, much of the focus was on the newer residential areas on the city's fringes, not the older neighborhoods that had not experienced the same massive growth as the outlying areas. Ignored in part by the Park District, these communities turned to private means to address

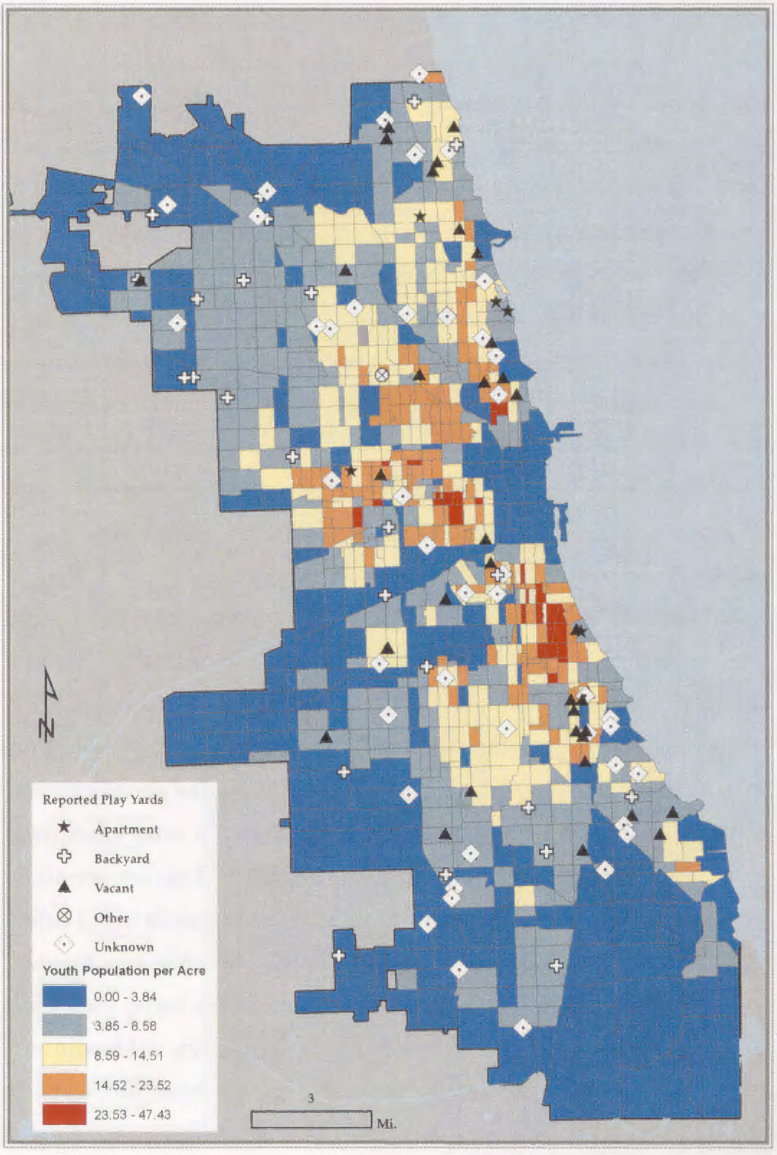

Figure 4. Chicago's Youth Population Density and Play Yard Distribution, 1950

Source: *Chicago Tribune* — U.S. Census 1950

the need for proximate and appropriate play spaces for their children.

Along with proximity to existing public parks, a primary factor in the location of the play yards should have been the numbers of children living in an area. Comparing the play yard locations to the 1950 Census (see Figure 4, page 33), we see that the yards were generally located in or near those Census tracts with the highest densities of children under the age of fourteen. Given that each tract contains many blocks, those tracts with higher densities would have had significant numbers of children within them: at roughly two-and-one-half acres per city block, a density of ten youth/acre would mean there were twenty-five children on a block and twenty-five youth/acre would translate to sixty-two children. Interestingly, some of the densest child population areas had no play yards. These areas may simply have been too overcrowded to allow the creation of play yards.

A second, important demographic consideration is how the youth population had changed. Those areas with the greatest growth, even if they had fewer total children than other areas, might be lacking in play spaces to accommodate their youth population boom. As shown in the map in Figure 5, the outlying areas of the city show the greatest change in youth population between 1930 and 1950. But in most cases these were areas that had previously had almost no children (or people in general) living in them. More significantly, the two clusters noted before — the North Side and Hyde Park area — both show widespread growth in their youth populations. Though not shown on the maps, these areas had already had significant densities of youth as of 1930, unlike the outlying areas of the city where the Park District was most interested in adding parks.

The presence of Hyde Park in this group raises questions about the racial issues potentially involved in the creation of play yards. The area

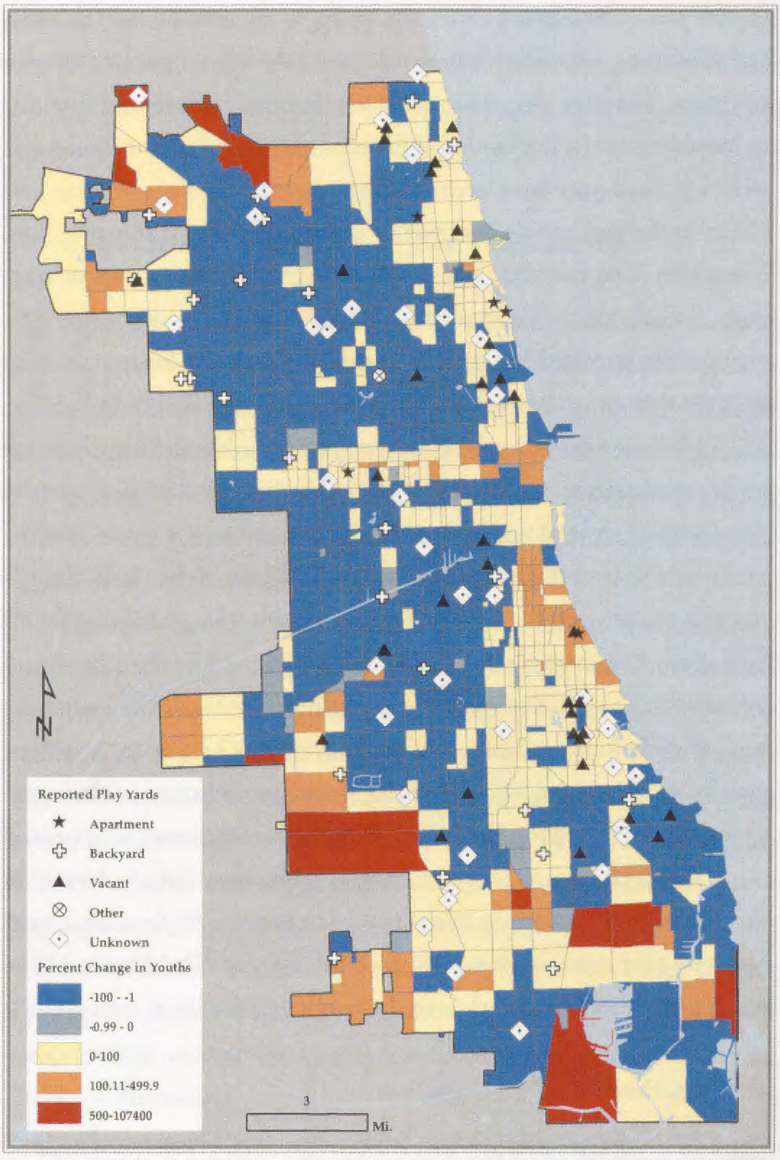

Figure 5. Chicago's Changing Youth Landscape, 1930–1950

Source: *Chicago Tribune*; U.S. Census 1930–50

from Hyde Park to South Shore was facing racial transition at this time, and the strong presence of play yards may have been a response to this situation. The large city parks may have become more threatening due to instability in the population if people didn't know their neighbors as well. Or there may have been fear regarding the mixing of races and classes in the park. Hyde Park was mostly middle class at this time, and it was that class that the 1939 recreation survey indicated was increasingly disinclined to use city parks.[48] The creation of play yards thus would have provided not only appropriate play areas for middle-class children, but controlled spaces that would have appealed to this group.

This discussion is nearly a moot point on the North Side where the black population remained almost negligible through the 1950s, and the population in general was fairly stable.[49] The newspapers make no mention whatsoever of the racial or ethnic composition of the yards, though pictures are generally of white children. Within the traditional South Side Black Belt there are no play yards. But due to scarcity of land and overcrowding within that area, the possibilities for play yards would have been severely limited. Only the Quayle Playlot is known to have been racially integrated, but that information was not indicated in the newspaper accounts (it comes from Chicago Park District historical records).[50]

Though concerns of control, race, and class may have had a role in the decision of parents to create play yards, there was undeniably a need for more play space within most areas of the city. The density of the youth population, its growth, and the existing park system can certainly

48. Cranz, "Models for Park Usage," 227.

49. Evelyn M. Kitagawa and Karl E. Taeuber, eds., *Local Community Fact Book: Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960* (n.p., 1960).

50. Sneiderman Bachrach, "Quayle Playlot Park."

account for the location of many of the play yards. The Park District was also taking note of this situation, and through the creation of new parks, attempted to deal with the recognized need to better provide for the health and safety of the city's residents.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Play Yards

By the end of the contest, the Park District had made progress in taking a more active stance in the provision of play space in the city. By asserting itself more forcefully, the Park District likely helped influence the public's expectation of who would provide play space for their children. So, with more public parks appropriate for children's play in close proximity and the yearly death toll decreasing, the urgent need for private play yards may have waned.

The real reasons behind the ending of the contest are unknown. Judging by the 1958 articles, there was no serious diminution in contest participation prior to its termination. Shifts in policy both nationally and locally could be behind the discontinuation of the contest: nationally, the American Automobile Association (the Motor Club's national group) may have taken attention away from play yards in advocating for freeways or other road projects and locally, the Motor Club got a new president in 1957 and he may have dictated an abandonment of the old policies on safety.[51] Interestingly, the Washington, D.C. area contest also appears to end in 1958 (using newspaper articles as a guide), which indicates that national policy may have been involved in the discontinuation of the contest.

51. The change in president followed the death of Charles M. Hayes, president of the Chicago Motor Club for forty-three years. Hal Foust, "Joseph Cavanagh Named President of Motor Club," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 October 1957, B2.

Though we know when, if not why, the contests ended, the point when the play yards disappeared is unclear. One of the purposes of the play yard contest, beyond promoting the construction of yards, was to encourage the continuation of the yards from year to year. By giving awards in equipment or money to improve the yards, the Motor Club was providing an incentive to keep the playlots going. The contest would not have been the main incentive to operate a play yard and given that many of the play yards were often operated over a period of many years — six or seven years was not uncommon and a lot in Evanston had been in existence for twenty-five[52] — it is unlikely that the end of the contest spelled their doom. Despite some apparent longevity, the private play facilities would have been inherently short-lived because their existence was dependent on neighborhood support and demand. Backyard lots would not have been useful once a family's children grew up. Groups operating vacant lots would have better chances at a longer lifespan since they could recruit new members with young children, but they relied on continued community interest to keep going. The apartment yards may have had the best chance of long term survival, because as long as the landlord did not remove the equipment, it would have been available for future residents to use and renew.

The solution to the inherent instabilities of the private yard would have been municipal take-over. A park once acquired was unlikely to stop being a park, though its facilities might not be properly maintained, and so lulls in community interest or changes in neighborhood composition would not have ended the play area. Such is the case of Butternut and Quayle Playlots. They passed into municipal hands and exist to this

52. "Grandchildren of Builders Use Evanston Yard," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 August 194), A2(N).

day. Other vacant lots were surely acquired and preserved as parks, two known instances being the current Triangle Park / No. 518 Park on the North Side (previously Juneway Baby Park) and University Tot Lot at 66th and University, known until recently as Chokeberry Park (now Arnita Young Boswell Park).

The acquisition of small overlooked lots, such as those used by the play yards, in fact became part of Park District policy in the 1960s and after. Cranz observes that the earlier period of park growth "had provided facilities — playgrounds, parkways, stadiums, parking lots, and open beaches — but not space, much less open space."[53] In response, the city began trying to preserve the last little pieces of overlooked open land all over the city, the "small size of these parks [being] both a cause and effect of their proliferation."[54] The goal was to create recreation space wherever one could, much as the play yard movement had sought to do. Simultaneously, the processes of urban renewal and accompanying housing developments were creating new opportunities to build parks where there had been none before. And built they were during the 1960s and 1970s, nearly doubling the supply of playlots that had already been significantly increased in the 1950s. Together, the city's embrace of the play yard's domain and its capacity (fiscally and spatially) to create new parks probably led to the ultimate demise of most of the private play spaces. The distribution of city playlots and playgrounds as of 2005 is even more prolific than the play yards. Significantly, those areas with concentrations of play yards, Hyde Park and the North Side spine up the lakefront, are now well-served by city playlots, as shown in Figure 6 (page 40).

Replacing a play yard with a city playlot carried implications for

53. Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 135.

54. Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 144.

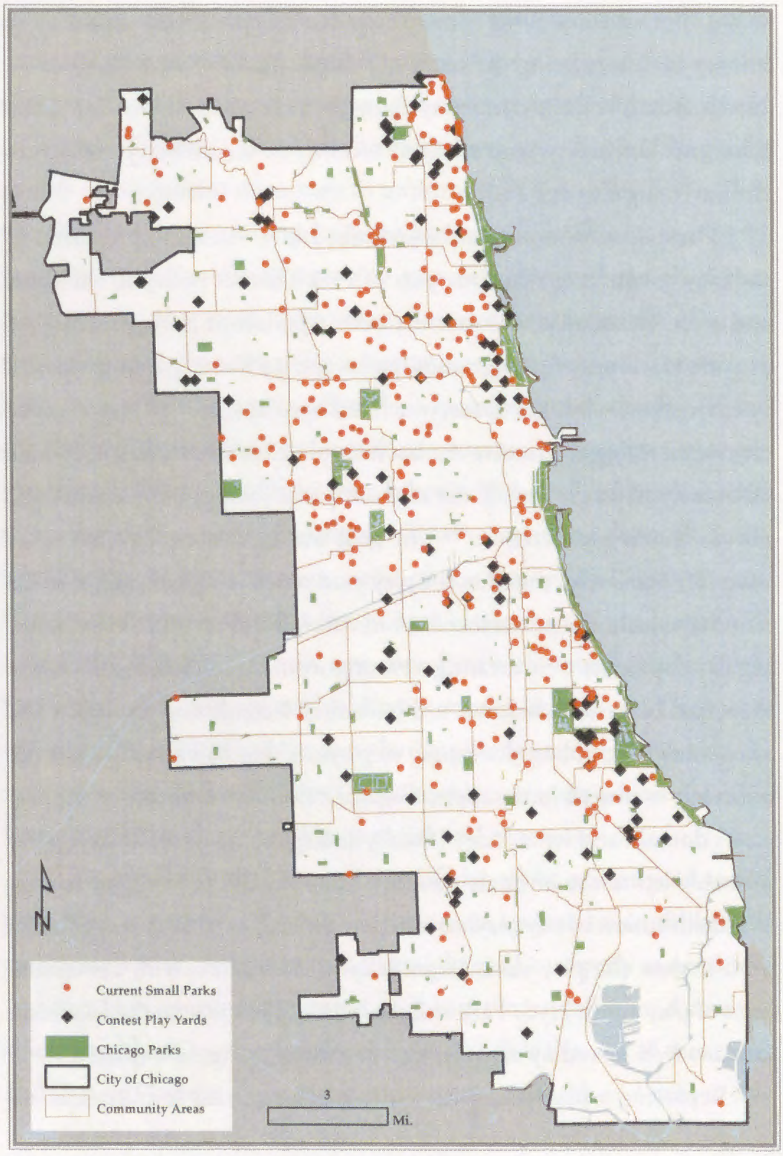

Figure 6: Chicago's Park System, 2005

these neighborhood play spaces: while they did not lose their community focus, they did become a part of the larger urban whole and subject to the broader influences of city park policy. In periods when the general quality of parks declined, the Community Tot Lot/Butternut and other municipalized play yards would now be part of that trend instead of a reaction against it. In the 1970s and 1980s, complaints began to be heard throughout the city that parks were not being properly maintained, especially in minority areas, and that it was mismanagement and incompetence on the part of the Chicago Park District [CPD] that was to blame. A group of concerned citizens and civic groups took action in 1982 and "filed a formal complaint against the CPD . . . assert[ing] that the Park District's policies and practices discriminated against residents of Chicago's African-American and Latino communities."[55] As part of the settlement, the CPD implemented many new reforms aimed at equalizing the distribution of resources. One of the initiatives that came out of this period of reform was the rehabilitation of "500 deteriorated park playlots," one of which was Butternut, which got a new play surface and equipment.[56] In purchasing the Community Tot Lot's vacant lot, the city had guaranteed the survival of the playlot, But the Park District's control of the lot had not guaranteed its upkeep, perhaps setting the stage for the creation of a new set of private play spaces that better met the needs of the community. ■

55. Julia Sniderman Bachrach, *The City in a Garden: A Photographic History of Chicago's Parks* (Placitas, N.M.: Center for American Places, 2000), 29–30.

56. Sniderman Bachrach, *The City in a Garden*, 30.