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The Z-pod has landed, delayed but worth the wait

Zaha Hadid's Burnham is a small structure with big ideas



Thomas Gray's film "Chicago: Past, Present and Future," plays inside architect Zaha Hadid's pavilion during the public opening that is part of the centennial celebration of Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago in Millennium Park. The seven-and-a-half minute film will play every evening beginning at 6:30 p.m. (Tribune photo by Brian Cassella / August 4, 2009)

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It's a shame that Zaha Hadid's pavilion for the Burnham Plan centennial didn't open until Tuesday night, nearly seven weeks behind schedule. The pavilion, one of two in Millennium Park commissioned to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Daniel Burnham's Plan of Chicago, is a virtuoso display of structure, space and light.

With its arresting combination of naturalistic forms and alien shapes, plus a dazzling video installation, the pavilion does exactly what it's supposed to do: invite us to boldly contemplate the future, just as Burnham foresaw a better Chicago -- with new lakefront parks and infrastructure -- amid the traffic-choked, noisy and polluted city of his day.

Go ahead -- call it the Conch or the Pod. And enjoy it while you can. For unlike Anish Kapoor's permanent "Cloud Gate" sculpture (a.k.a. the Bean), this is a temporary structure, scheduled to disappear after Oct. 31. Let's just hope that, between now and then, it doesn't get beaten up by the public, which has gouged the glossy white scoops of the Burnham pavilion by Amsterdam architect Ben van Berkel.

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For those unfamiliar with her, the Baghdad-born, London-based Hadid in 2004 became the first woman to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize, her field's highest honor. Early in her career, she was legendary (and infamous) for dynamic visions that proved unbuildable. But she has dispelled that criticism in recent years with such highly regarded projects as Cincinnati's Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art. And the Burnham pavilion's delay does not appear to be her fault, despite its highly complex structure of 7,000 aluminum ribs covered by the same kind of tensioned fabric used for tents and awnings.

The first contractor hired by the client, a group of civic leaders known as the Burnham Plan Centennial Committee, couldn't finish the job. The second contractor, Fabric Images of Elgin, created an on-site sewing factory and wrapped it up in less than a month. Twenty-four custom-made panels of fabric are precisely zippered over the metal ribs.

At the south end of the park's Chase Promenade, Hadid's pavilion will not satisfy those searching for obvious connections to the Burnham Plan. There are no literal quotations of his vigorous, Beaux-Arts classicism. Instead, Hadid and her associates, Thomas Vietzke and Jens Borstelmann, drew a line extending one of the plan's unbuilt diagonal streets into Millennium Park. The pavilion's structural ribs and eye-slit skylights run parallel to that line. From this takeoff point onward, it's "bye-bye, Danny Boy" and "hello, Zaha."

And what a show she gives us, using computer-aided design to re-create the infinite, ever-surprising variety of nature. There's barely a right angle in the joint. Light, airy and curvy, the pavilion brings to mind a conch shell. At the same time, its narrowly slit skylights confer an air of space-pod mystery. We know it, but we don't know it, so, as with the Bean, we feel compelled to step in and investigate.

It is crucial that Hadid's design invites this interaction. The pavilion is not a stand-alone object in the park. The park flows right through it, courtesy of two openings that resemble shark mouths. The experience is very different from Van Berkel's pavilion, which is raised on a platform that separates it from the ground. Hadid loves to go on about "fluid" forms. But here, the concept seems real, not just a buzzword.

What draws you in during the day is the play of light -- attenuated, almond-shaped light -- on the remarkably curving surfaces of the pavilion's inner layer of white fabric. Ceilings, walls and floors flow together. No surface is static. The manipulation of space recalls the mastery of [Frank Lloyd Wright](#).

So, unfortunately, does the triumph of form over function. As captivating as Hadid's skylights are, they have a downside: A striking, 7 1/2 -minute video installation by London artist [Thomas Gray](#) can only be seen at dusk and after. The installation, which evocatively conveys sounds and images of Burnham's Chicago as well as visions for tomorrow's metropolis, is crucial to cluing in parkgoers that this is a pavilion with a purpose, not a mere folly. My advice is that you go after dark when the Z-pod's exterior is lit up in orange, purple and green.

It is also troubling that Hadid's pavilion will require security guards to prevent the public from damaging it. Project organizers worry that crowds will sit or step on its angled fabric walls and rip them to shreds. If architects want the public to interact with their creations, they have to take the realities of everyday use into account.

There has been carping that Chicago's proud architects were overlooked for the Burnham Plan centennial, repeating the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, when Burnham brought in East Coast architects to design most of the fabled "White City." This carping is nonsense. A great architectural city such as Chicago should be secure enough to welcome a great architectural talent such as Hadid.

Last year, critics ridiculed Hadid's Chanel pavilion in New York's [Central Park](#) as a glorified product display. Here, though, the only thing being sold is the significance of bold urban planning and its impact on the quality of life -- that, of course, and the architect's virtuosity.

Fortunately, unlike Van Berkel's, her pavilion can be dismantled and reconstructed. And why shouldn't it? A second run is called for in 2010, if only to keep the Burnham flame burning.

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