



CASE STUDY

Chicago | The 606

Linking Up for Green and Good

Initially prompted by the need to increase green space for Logan Square, residents of four diverse neighbourhoods in the city of Chicago joined forces with partners to create a well-loved park and trail system that has galvanised community bonding.

The Challenge

Logan Square is one of the most densely developed neighbourhoods in the city of Chicago. A census of open spaces in 2000 showed that Logan Square could not meet the city's minimum standard of two acres (8,093 square metres) of open space per 1,000 residents. In fact, it had a shortfall of 99 acres (400,639 square metres)—a result of prioritising demand for industrial spaces when Chicago was rapidly industrialising in the early 20th century.

In 2002, the city, with the support of then Mayor Richard M. Daley, began to consider converting existing vacant land in Logan Square into public open space. After two years of research, surveys and public consultations, 11 recommendations were made to add 15 acres (60,702 square metres) of public space.

One idea was to convert the privately-owned, defunct Bloomingdale rail line

into a linear park. Overgrown with grass, trees and flowers, the elevated track had become an unofficial nature trail popular with joggers. It also attracted the homeless, drug users and young delinquents. Hence, it was often littered with beer cans, broken bottles, hypodermic needles and abandoned furniture while graffiti covered old rail cars and walls.

The proposed 2.7-mile (4.3-kilometre) park would start at Logan Square and run through three other neighbourhoods—all disparate in socio-economic terms. Logan Square and Humboldt Park comprise mostly Latino families who rented homes while those living in Wicker Park and Bucktown are mainly white property owners earning higher income. Therefore, apart from adding green space, the project would also connect diverse neighbours.





The Bloomingdale Trail moved goods to the city till the mid-1990s.



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01 The Milwaukee Avenue bridge is an iconic fixture at The 606.

02 The elevated space opens up new opportunities for gathering and activities.

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The Solution

Most residents from the four neighbourhoods welcomed the prospect of more community space and a safer environment. In fact, some had formed the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail (“Friends”) in 2003 to explore ways to transform the underutilised space. They began to lobby actively for the new park—eventually named The 606 after Chicago’s postal code—to be realised.

In 2005, Friends turned to The Trust for Public Land, a non-profit experienced in creating public parks and protected lands, to manage the project. In turn, it reached out to city and civic organisations, marking the start of a public-private partnership between the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District and The Trust for Public Land.

To raise the US\$95 million needed for construction and community engagement activities, the Trust mobilised Chicago’s philanthropic community while neighbours held bake sales, pledged gifts and donated portions of their shop sales. Together they raised US\$20 million.

While much of the planning work for The 606 was done during Mayor Daley’s term, the project moved into high gear when his successor, Rahm Emanuel, promised to complete The 606 in his first term if elected as Chicago’s next mayor. True to his word, Mayor Emanuel later secured a US\$50 million federal grant (aimed at mitigating congestion and improving air quality) by pitching the trail as a useful car-free commuting route. Local government committed another US\$5 million.

03 The 606 is popular with joggers and those wanting a more relaxed stroll.

04 The Graffiti Walk on The 606.

“... the Trust mobilised Chicago’s philanthropic community while neighbours held bake sales, pledged gifts and donated portions of their shop sales. Together they raised US\$20 million.”

The final design plans were unveiled in 2013 after years of community meetings, including a three-day design workshop with residents. Apart from a cycling path bordered by running tracks, six parks would be built or refurbished along the rail line with 13 access points for users to reach the elevated path.

When construction began, care was taken to retain and reuse some of the line’s original features (like embankments and bridges) as residents wanted to retain the character of the freight line. The spirit of reuse kept cost down too. For instance, an old bridge was repaired and moved to another spot while soil excavated from one part of the trail was reused in another location.

Though the use of the federal grant required The 606 to be used primarily as a bicycle trail, the community found ways to use it creatively. This resulted in the idea of making The 606 an outdoor classroom as well as “a living work of art”—as a laboratory for creative practices to link art and life, nature and culture to create a new type of urban green space. “Art” is broadly interpreted: from a trail with plant species that flower and change with the seasons to an observatory for star-gazing; temporary art installations, performances and regular community arts programmes encourage neighbours to mingle.

01 The observatory on opening day.

02 Participants of the annual “A Walk With Light” festival at The 606.



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“The rail line was once a barrier that physically separated neighbourhoods ... now it is the connective tissue that brings them together.”



The Outcome

The 606 officially opened on 6 June 2015, adding 20 acres (80,937 square metres) of green space to the four neighbourhoods. Today, The 606 serves more than 80,000 residents who live within 10 minutes' walk to the trail; hundreds of walkers, joggers and cyclists use it daily for exercise and as a safe commute to downtown Chicago. Altogether, it had taken the community more than 10 years to create this well-used, well-loved public space.

Chicago's Deputy Mayor Steve Koch attributes The 606's success to the "robust community engagement process." Even after the trail was opened, he said in an email interview with *Urban Solutions*, "the community continued to contribute to ideas about programming and methods of operations. Many have taken ownership of the park in a positive way and there has been significant interest in volunteer opportunities."

Jamie R. Simone, Interim Chicago Region Director at The Trust for Public Land noted in her interview with *Urban Solutions* that "the rail line was once a barrier that physically separated neighbourhoods ... now it is the connective tissue that brings them together. Even in the design process, public meetings were a unique opportunity for people from

the surrounding neighbourhoods to spend time together and work towards a common goal."

The extensive community involvement was recognised by the American Planning Association, which awarded The 606 the 2016 National Planning Excellence Award for Urban Design in March 2016. The awards jury chair told the Chicago Tribune that "The 606 is a stunning example of a community working together to realise a dream".

Today, The 606 attracts more than six million visitors annually from other parts of Chicago, the USA and the world. This growing popularity has caused property prices, taxes and rent, particularly in Logan Square, to spike. While Logan Square is more economically vibrant than before, the inevitable gentrification has forced lower income families to move further from the city.

To ensure that homes remain affordable, the city launched The 606 Bloomingdale Trail Homeowners Forgivable Loan Programme in 2016. The loans, which cover up to US\$25,000 in exterior and repair works, do not have to be repaid and are available to eligible home owners living within two blocks of the trail through Logan Square, Humboldt Park and West Town. 