

A park to mark the end of a sooty era

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Coal Dock Park will give the public access to the beauties of Lake Michigan on land that once was the source of chronic pollution

The repurposing of the land on the lake side of the Port Washington power plant is so dramatic that it can truly be said, to resurrect an ancient aphorism, that the city has made a “silk purse out of a sow’s ear.”

Sow’s ear indeed. For nearly 70 years, the land was host to a certified blight—the power plant’s coal pile. “Pile” understates the degree of blight. It was a mountain of fossilized carbon that gave off a black, gritty dust that could be seen, smelled and even tasted over much of Port Washington.

Southeast winds carried the grit into the downtown and beyond. Pockets of spontaneous combustion frequently burned in the mounded coal for days, sending up an acrid smoke that seemed to color the air a faintly yellow hue and was distributed around the city by the lake breezes.

Thus did the coal-burning power plant produce its smut at both the beginning and the end of the electricity-making process—when the raw coal was stored and moved into the plant to fire boilers and when its smoke and unburned residue of carbon and sulphur were emitted from the plant’s stacks.

That is now history that will fade fast from memory as the one-time home of the source of that nuisance is transformed into Coal Dock Park—the silk purse.

The charm of the park, which will open in a few weeks, will not be about what is in it, but what is around it. On filled lake bottom, the park juts into Lake Michigan and is embraced by its waters on three sides, inviting visitors to experience an intimacy with the lake rarely found on public lands.

The city’s work has mainly been to civilize the place, to make it green and provide for walking and lake viewing. This restrained treatment of the former coal repository is just right for this stage in the park’s development. A community brainstorming exercise, though it produced no definitive plan, yielded a plethora of ideas for the development of Coal Dock Park, including building a community center there. But it would be premature to proceed with that idea even if funding were available, for the location is so extraordinary that nothing ordinary in purpose or design should go there.

Maybe one day . . . something special. Think of Milwaukee’s Calatrava.

In the meantime, the new park achieves something for the city that may be unique in

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Wisconsin. It completes the chain of public lakeside walkways that covers the entire waterfront, from the north beach, around the marina and through the downtown, over Sauk Creek and now through Coal Dock Park and the adjacent bird sanctuary to the south beach.

Also important, the new park maintains (and actually improves) a remnant of its former life—the deep-water dock where coal freighters once moored to unload their sooty cargoes. An asset that many small ports don't have, the deep-water facility will be a boon to tall ship festivals and perhaps other beneficial uses in the future, such as visits by cruise ships.

Not mentioned so far in this paean to Coal Dock Park is the 8,000-pound gorilla (OK, more like 8-million-pound gorilla) that broods over it—the massive gas-fired power plant.

Yes, it's a daunting presence looming over the park. Locals may have come to terms with it, but it's a startling sight to visitors who wonder what the city was thinking when it allowed it on the lakefront. It shouldn't be there, of course. After the better part of a century enduring the coal plant, Port Washington deserved a future without a power plant on its lakefront.

That didn't happen, but one of the consolation prizes in the negotiation over the new plant was what is now Coal Dock Park. And a valuable prize it is—as both a piece of the lakefront the public can call its own and a symbol of the end of Port Washington's coal dust era.