The Chicago Park District scouted more than 20 locations for its new headquarters after leaving Streeterville, selecting vacant land in Brighton Park alongside the Western Avenue CTA Station at 48th Street. With a little imagination, the potential of this nondescript 17-acre former industrial site becomes clear: Its transformation to active green space will serve an acute need in the community, while relocating 200 existing workers.

The transit-oriented park will be another amenity along Chicago’s 26-mile “ribbon of green.” While the boulevard tie-in may be symbolic, architect John Ronan went a step further. “The design concept references the Chicago park and boulevard system with a continuous park pathway that widens out periodically into courtyards and plazas,” Ronan told a virtual town hall meeting in August 2020.

Chicago’s historic field houses have long been centered within parks to lend them a more dignified presence—a tradition that continues here. Ronan’s circular structure is half administrative headquarters and half recreational field house, delineated by the bisecting park path. Prairie meadow surrounds the building while two open-air courtyards bring light and air to the inner reaches. For added warmth, the walls enclosing the courtyards are clad in Chicago common brick. This treatment makes appearances in the lobby and gymnasium as well. According to Ronan, the building “takes on a lantern-like quality” at night thanks to its transparent curtain wall.

John Ronan Architects collaborated with site design group on the landscape design, which features a balance of active and passive recreational spaces. The Great Lawn is a picnicker’s delight that can be rented for community functions; three sports fields provide more flex space; and play areas stimulate kids with “nature play,” a spray pool and a playground.

Further Reading:
New Park District headquarters in Brighton Park approved by City Council, Mauricio Pena, Block Club Chicago. October 8, 2020.
Park 596 Project Updates, Chicago Park District.
Chicago Park District Headquarters, John Ronan Architects.