Vacant lots symbolize neglect, disinvestment. It's on all of Chicago to reverse the damage.

By the Editorial Board

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The Chicago Architecture Biennial has put vacant lots in the spotlight.

The large-scale exhibition of ideas and projects for dealing with vacant lots has turned the city's brownfields into a platform for new practices in urban design.

The exhibition's theme — "Custodians of the Common" — emphasizes that the city's vacant lots belong to the city's residents. But the government has allowed them to sit idle for too long.

During the city's 2005-07 biennial, a plan by the Metropolitan Planning Council called "The vacant lot plan" proposed a "vacant lot fund" to help turn the lots into usable public spaces.

"The vacant lot plan" also called for "alternative high school" programs on vacant lots near community centers.

The plan proposed "parklets" on vacant lots in the city's central business district, "missed opportunities" in the city's neighborhoods and "greening" of vacant lots.

The plan also called for "urban art" on vacant lots, "urban farms" on vacant lots and "public art" on vacant lots.

The plan was never adopted.

Still, the scale of the problem is daunting. The city owns more than 10,000 vacant lots.

The city has not tackled the problem with the urgency it merits.

The city's vacant lots are a city's visible scars.

"Vacant lots are a city's visible scars. They give blight both shape and form. Drive through just any Chicago neighborhood and you'll see them," writes the Chicago Sun-Times' Ken Sorkin.

Sorkin notes that vacant lots were not a problem in the 1960s, when he was growing up in the city's west side.

"Back then, you might spot one or two in a disadvantaged area, but they were rare enough to be the exception, not the rule. Now they're the rule. The city's urban center has grown hollowed out by disinvestment and neglect by successive administrations focused far more on the city's central business district than on its neighborhoods," Sorkin writes.

Sorkin adds that the city's vacant lots "are a visible testament to the gross overlooked problems of the post-industrial city, the problems of the city's poorest communities that were the focus of attention and action in the previous era of urban renewal."