# Designing the Great Park that Everyone Deserves

In November of 2017, NRPA announced a new tagline for the organization: "Because everyone deserves a great park."

The organization is aware that equal access to parks or natural areas is not a current reality. In fact, nearly 1 in 3 people do not have a park or natural area within 10 minutes of their home. NRPA wants to help communities fill the parks gaps in their neighborhoods and to provide them with wonderful, beautiful and highly functioning parks and natural areas.

But what exactly is a "great park"? What makes one park great, another mediocre and another a failure? Does a park qualify by having a high-cost, fancy new play equipment, interactive fountain or bocce courts? What are the things that characterize great parks across North America and the world? How can you do an assessment of the parks in your own community?

Three primary categories of information may help residents, elected officials, and park and recreation professionals assess the "greatness" of their parks:

- Design Principles
- Cultural Influences
- Emerging Trends

## *Design Principles*

Great parks require great designs. They rarely, if ever, just "happen." Nearly all communities have some assemblage of public spaces and features that evolved without any type of an overall plan organizing it. These places may be appreciated, but they certainly are not the places they could have been with the application of solid design principles. The following top seven design principles should be evident in every great park or natural area:

**Inclusive and Welcoming**
Great parks make you feel good when you get there. They are open in their design and welcoming in their attitude. Regardless of your gender, age, cultural background or affinity group, you know you are in a public space that has been designed with you in mind, and you have little hesitation to enter and enjoy yourself. You enter knowing you are in a safe place, joining others who share your need to get away, relax, exercise, play with your kids or help your dog meet new friends. A great example of an inclusive, welcoming park is Trojan Park in St. Louis, Missouri, made possible by NRPA's Parks Build Community initiative.

**Sustainable and Resilient**
Great parks embody environmentally responsible development strategies, which are a key part of a community's public realm. They are not only great places for

people, but also for migratory birds, insects, soil organisms and aquatic life. They are designed with ecological processes in mind and incorporate them beautifully. Stormwater treatment, native plants, pollinator gardens, highly efficient water and energy utilization, and organic maintenance practices have both intrinsic and symbolic benefits for park patrons. A great example of this type of park is Tanner Springs Park, designed by GreenWorks and Atelier Dreiseitl, in Portland, Oregon.

## Beautiful

Great parks must be filled with beautiful elements. Researchers tell us that beauty is not simply a subjective exercise with a wide divergence of opinions. Despite our cultural differences, there is broad consensus among humans about what is beautiful. The design elements that make something beautiful include line, color, texture and form organized in ways to create balance, unity, rhythm, proportion and emphasis. Sit on a beach watching the sunset, examine a flower's intricate internal structure or take in the long view across a park's pond toward the trees on the other side and you instantly recognize beauty, and it refreshes your soul. One of the most beautiful parks in the world is Hibiya Park in Tokyo, designed by Dr. Seiroku Honda. Even elements placed within landscapes should be beautiful and add to the user experience. For example, Portland, Oregon's Forest Park Bridges, by Fieldwork Design & Architecture, which was recognized nationally by AIA in its 2019 Small Project Awards.

## Sensitive to Context

Great parks do not ignore their physical or social context, but rather directly respond to it. A park adjacent to an elementary school must recognize the young users next door and should be designed to maximize its playability by students. A design process for a new park set within a neighborhood of immigrants will work with these park users to understand their needs and desires. This may lead to clustered picnic tables for large groups, rather than individual, isolated tables. Some high-density neighborhoods lack gardening space, so including community gardens responds to this need. An example of this contextual sensitivity is Cully Park in Portland, Oregon, set within a diverse community of both Native Americans and recent immigrants. It's design includes an extensive Inter-Tribal Gathering Garden and key ceremonial spaces.

## Flexible to Evolve Over Time

Great parks have longevity; yet, reflect how we prefer to recreate changes over time. Landmark parks, such as Central Park in New York City and Druid Hill Park in Baltimore, Maryland, have shown their adaptability over the decades. Originally designed as "Pleasure Grounds" for promenading, both parks later added active recreation facilities, such as sports fields, and Central Park converted the sheepfold into the Tavern on the Green restaurant, while Druid Hill Park added the H.P. Rawlings Conservatory. A great park can adapt and replace uses preferred in earlier generations with new activities.

**Timeless**

Great parks are also timeless in their design. This means that although they should reflect the era in which they were designed, they are not so gimmicky or trendy to be quickly outdated. Some of the most innovative park designs have changed the course of park design elsewhere. Two remarkable examples are Lawrence Halprin's Ira Keller Fountain Park, which opened in Portland in 1970, and Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial dedicated by the National Park Service in 1982.

**Maintainable**

As park budgets continue to be in peril, the ongoing maintenance of parks has been increasingly scrutinized. This has led to two developments: first, designers are being asked to design parks with maintenance in mind. Great parks involve maintenance staff in the planning and design process for new parks to ensure efficient maintenance processes are integrated into the design. And second, new ways of accomplishing park maintenance are being considered by communities across the country through park conservancies and private-public partnerships. In Portland, a new approach, called the Ecologically Sustainable Landscapes Initiative, identifies maintenance-intensive portions of existing parks and converts them to native, low-maintenance "nature patches."

## *Cultural Influences*

Great parks do not exist in isolation. When it comes to why certain parks become well-loved while others languish, context matters. The changing experience of parks is often related to broader cultural changes and phenomena. Parks have always been, and are increasingly becoming, places to register cultural change and preference. Evidence of a few of the more recent shifts are outlined below:

**Branding and Communications**

The internet has disrupted nearly every facet of U.S. life in ways impossible to imagine 10 years ago. Dating: meet Tinder. Shopping: meet Amazon. Friendship: meet Facebook. Driving: meet Uber. Great parks are equally tech-engaged and allow flexibility at entrances and along park edges, where cars once reigned, to accommodate ride shares, bicycle hubs and scooter rentals. Great parks are branded — and live in both the physical and digital worlds in the minds of consumers — with information about exploring park places and programs an increasingly simplified click away. And, as much as many may not want to admit, parks with "Instagrammable" moments see greater visitation and engagement. For example, Lawn on D in Boston, Massachusetts, dubbed the "selfie" capital of Boston, attributes much of its success to its light-up swing installation, called Swing-Time, designed by Howeler and Yoon Architects.

**Health and Wellness**

It's estimated that 34 percent of adults and 15–20 percent of children and adolescents in the United States are obese. Chronic illness is on the rise worldwide and is the leading cause of death in the United States. We also now know that parks provide immense health and wellness benefits — everything from stress reduction and improved mental health, to less exposure to air and noise pollution. Great parks

offer what we might consider as traditional wellness amenities (recreational trails, fitness stations and the like) but also use care to integrate the healing power of natural systems. Denver's recently completed park system plan, for example, is called "A Gameplan for a Healthy City," and its strategies link to the many ways park design can promote healthier lifestyles and urban wellness.

### Resiliency and Climate Change

Across the nation, climate-related disasters — floods, droughts, tornadoes, earthquakes — are hitting communities with ferocity. Great parks can create more climate resilience by integrating green infrastructure, providing places for community gathering (in both normal and emergency situations) and preventing future carbon-related impacts through tree planting and reduced heat-island effect. The recently completed sections of the Brooklyn Waterfront, called Brooklyn Bridge Park and Hunters Point South, provide great examples of resilient design that simultaneously provides human delight and ecologically rich spaces that capture water.

### Equity and Inclusion

Changing demographics and broader economic trends have resulted in increasing concern for greater equity and inclusion, particularly as, in recent years, all racial and ethnic minorities are growing more rapidly than white populations. Economic change and job loss have resulted in higher-than-ever numbers of people experiencing homelessness. Great parks are designed to be inclusive to all. Designers across the country are testing what this means — from compassionate park design that promotes social cohesion, to programming that celebrates diverse ethnic and cultural expression. Washington Park in Cincinnati, Ohio, is managed by the Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC) and is a fabulous example of a place where the music, food and programmed experiences speak to the city's ethnic, socioeconomic and multigenerational diversity.

### Multigenerational Experience

Baby boomers and millennials are nipping at each other's heels for the "largest generation" moniker — both in terms of size and profile. These generations have distinct differences in ideology, but they come together, most certainly, in parks. How else can we explain the massive pickleball craze that is sweeping the nation? Multigenerational experience is a common goal of park design projects. More and more designers are looking to create unique, hybrid programs that can relate to the uber-engaged "Silver Tsunami" folks, as much as to their millennial and Generation Z grandchildren.

### Democracy

The early years of the 21st century have seen an incredible resurgence in civic action and political protest. Movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter — just two of many — found a home in the plazas, public parks and streets of our communities. The Women's March of 2017 was one of the single-greatest gatherings

in human history — and those millions of feet marched largely across public parks and places. Great spaces for civic gathering and protest speak to both our democratic ideals and our sense of pride of place. The National Mall is our most widely known American democratic space, but smaller spaces in cities and communities of all sizes are seeing more political action.

*Emerging Trends*

We have entered a new era of innovation for park and recreation facility design. Driven by social, economic and environmental changes, local governments are challenged to provide an increasingly diverse breadth of recreation and social services, while competing for limited available funding. With these new challenges come not only new opportunities, but also new collaborations with a wide range of new technologies that are providing park and recreation design professionals with myriad opportunities for creative design. Creative partnerships, multiple-benefit infrastructure, innovative technology and pop-up parks allow new ways to provide the great parks everyone deserves.

**Partnerships**

Increasingly, park and recreation agencies are realizing the benefits of collaborating with other entities. Working with private development in public-private partnerships (P3) brings the value of entrepreneurial prowess and the financial means of private-sector money together with the public-benefit focus and long-term, stewardship of public parks, to the benefit of both. True partnerships with other public-sector agencies take better advantage of scarce public resources while realizing multiple-benefit opportunities. Collaborations with private, not-for-profit entities stretch resources and allow for creativity and philanthropy.

**Multiple-Benefit Infrastructure**

Creative communities across the United States are increasingly focusing an integrated design solution on infrastructure projects. Teams of professionals are being integrated early into the design process to incorporate recreational, educational and leisure opportunities into the final design of large infrastructure projects. The architects of major transportation, water and stormwater management plans are being asked to consider livability and sustainability objectives in their projects. This integrated approach not only provides critical funding for recreational amenities, but also enriches the environment, provides educational opportunities and builds more livable communities.

**Technology**

Our world today is connected. We often take for granted the ease with which we can immediately communicate with anyone or search for information on any subject. This new ability can provide rich meaning to park experiences and a deeper understanding of our environments. We can now share our experiences with loved ones and learn about places and events at the touch of a finger. We also can experience our parks in new and creative ways. Lighting can add drama and

excitement to a space, beyond simply providing security. Music and dance can be integrated into the landscape. The options are limitless.

**Pop-Up Parks**

Design professionals can now provide recreational opportunities in nontraditional locations. Mobile amenities and serendipitous programming allow us to create "pop-up parks" where needed in unique locations and underserved areas. These offerings can range from a small social space, temporarily created in a single parking space, to a major fitness festival in an office plaza. Strategic interventions are now mobile and can serve everyone. The fun can happen anywhere.

Adhering to timeless design principles, being sensitive to cultural influences and aware of emerging trends allow park professionals to create great parks that are beloved, beautiful and highly functional. The only limiting factor is our ability to think holistically and creatively.

**Play Saudi**