WHAT WE SAW
PHILADELPHIA
CHICAGO
NEW YORK
Fifteen years ago, a bold vision for Detroit’s waterfront began to take shape. It began with new investment by General Motors, an unprecedented philanthropic commitment of $50 million by the Kresge Foundation, and a partnership with the City of Detroit.

_The vision was inspired by the simple belief that all Detroiters should have safe, clean, and welcoming place to gather on the river._

The Detroit Riverfront Conservancy has transformed this vision into a plan - shaped by community input – to create a five-and-a-half mile public space of parks connected with a greenway along the Detroit River.

Today, we welcome more than three million visitors annually.

As we work toward achieving our vision, we have turned our attention to a 22-acre riverfront parcel just west of Downtown Detroit that was formerly the site of a newspaper printing facility. It’s a beautiful site located at the intersection Mexicantown, Corktown, and Southwest Detroit. It is a site brimming with potential. It will change the way our community interacts with the river. It will become a regional destination for recreation. And it will have a profound impact on the lives of area residents.

_The opportunity to build a waterfront park on this scale comes up once in a generation._
A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO PARK DESIGN

Historically, the vast majority of public spaces have been designed by elites. A patron hires an architect. A little work is done with input from community leaders. And often a drawing will hit the front page of the newspaper before anyone in the community knows about the project.

We set out to something different in Detroit. We set out to build the best park in the country for Detroit by building the best park in the country for Detroiters.

To accomplish this goal, we resolved to build this park not from the ground up, but from people up.

THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY TEAM

Before we asked Detroiters to dream about our park with us, we wanted to help them learn from other cities that have created significant public spaces.

So we decided to take a group of Detroiters to visit great public spaces around the country and bring what they learned back to our city.

We intentionally sought out the “un-usual suspects” -- people who are deeply in touch with their communities but are rarely heard in city planning meetings.

*We wanted to find the high school kid that everyone looks up to. We wanted to find the grandmother who watches out for everyone on her block. We wanted to find the retired pastor who knows the name of everyone in his neighborhood.*
We built an amazing cohort of Detroiters. And we have learned a great deal from their input.

This “Community Advisory Team” has become the heart and soul of this project.

THE INVITATION

We started by reaching out to our volunteers with a simple invitation:

“We are building a team of Detroit residents to help us dream about the future of West Riverfront Park.

Over the course of the summer, we are sponsoring a group of Detroiters to fly across the United States and explore some of the country’s leading parks.

We are looking for incredible people with a heart for Detroit and a strong desire to serve as ambassadors for their respective communities.

Do you know anyone who would be great? We are looking for the un-usual suspects...just great people. Seniors and kids are encouraged.”

The Community Advisory Team we assembled surpassed our expectations and reflects the diversity of Detroit:

- 62 percent women;
- 48 percent African-American;
- 29 percent Latinx;
- 30 percent under age 18 or over 60;
- 20 percent individuals with school-aged children.
We packed this group into airplanes and took them all over the country to visit great parks in cities that many had never before visited.

They played in the fountain at Millennium Park.

They sat in the swings at Spruce Street Harbor.

They watched kids roller skate at Brooklyn Bridge Park.

The advisors who joined us on these trips returned informed about what other cities have prioritized in building landmark parks and with new perspectives on the potential our site holds.

We all learned a great deal from these trips. And this learning will be applied to our work in Detroit.

WHAT WE LEARNED

This report contains a snapshot of what we saw and what we learned during our benchmarking field trips. This work and our ongoing community engagement work will guide our design team and make us a stronger community.

We are deeply grateful to the staff and trustees of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation for their support of this project and for reminding us every step of the way that Detroiters deserve nothing less than world class.
One of the teens who attended the trips with us pulled me aside on the High Line and whispered — out of earshot of the tour guide — “I think we can do better than this.”

His comment made me chuckle. Little did he know of other visitors’ breathless praise or the column-inches of critical acclaim devoted to the park. Or, for that matter, that he High Line is one of my favorite places in the world. Still, his comment made me smile. To that Detroiter, the High Line isn’t the best park for Detroit because it isn’t the best park for Detroiter.

As we work hand-in-hand with the community to shape the future of West Riverfront Park, we should be confident. We should be ambitious. And Detroit should unapologetically aspire to build the best park in the country... for Detroiter.

We hope that you will be inspired by this process, and by the ideas contained here that have been gathered by our community members.

Mark C. Wallace
President and CEO
In graphic design need white space. In
PHILADELPHIA
BARTRAM’S GARDEN
Job training, workforce building
"FAIL. FORWARD. FAST."
UNIQUE COMMUNITY DEFINED PROGRAMMING:
  "THE MEDICINAL GARDEN"
Learning landscape

"FAIL. FORWARD. FAST."
JOB TRAINING, WORKFORCE BUILDING
UNIQUE COMMUNITY DEFINED PROGRAMMING:
  "THE MEDICINAL GARDEN"

BARTRAM’S GARDEN
PHILADELPHIA
PHILADELPHIA SCHUYLKILL RIVER TOUR
DIRECT PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE WATER
AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE!

SCHUYLKILL RIVER TOUR
PHILADELPHIA

DIRECT PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE WATER
AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE!
APPEAL TO ALL PEOPLE:
AGE, CULTURE, GENDER, ETC, ETC

INCLUSION AS OUTCOME
EXPERIMENTATION WITH TEMPORARY SPACES

PARKS ON TAP
PHILADELPHIA
VALUE OF UNIQUE ELEMENTS:
HAMMOCKS, NETS, LANDSCAPE, SHADE

ECONOMIC & SOCIAL INCLUSIVINESS

SPRUCE ST
HARBOR PARK

PHILADELPHIA
WHAT WILL WE DO THAT IS UNIQUELY DETROIT?

COMMUNITY CLASSROOM
WINTER LODGE

“WHAT WILL WE DO THAT IS UNIQUELY DETROIT?”

BLUE CROSS RIVERRINK
PHILADELPHIA
CHICAGO
JULY 24-25
AMELIA, DONOVAN, JACOB, DONNA, JOHN, VENEDA, ANN, ROSALYNE, JAMES, TRISTAN, BARBARA, TYLER
UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS THAT BRING PEOPLE BACK TO THE PARK, AGAIN AND AGAIN

MAGGIE DALEY PARK

CHICAGO

*designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc, competition finalist
CONNECTION AMONG NEIGHBORHOODS
STARGAZING AND CAMPFIRES
*designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc, competition finalist
FREE, OPEN, DEMOCRATIC

BEAUTIFUL SPACES THAT ENCOURAGE

POSITIVE HUMAN INTERACTIONS

SONIC ATTENUATION

MILLENIUM PARK
CHICAGO

*Lurie Garden designed by Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, competition finalist*
“I’m older. I’m retired. There’s some relaxation for me. And the water does that. Gardens. Flowers. And something new/unique. Could we incorporate solar energy? A panel might peak the interest of someone... spark a passion, a career pursuit. Who knows what type of engineer we’d be able to get out of that?”
NEW YORK
AUGUST 14-15
EDGAR, JAYLIN, TOYA, DENISE, MYRNA, ROBERT, LESLIE, RICHERD
DOREEN, DELESIAH, RICH, REBECCA, ANGELA, TONI, JARISSA, EVELYN
Plan parks for community first

Tourists want to be part of authentic experiences

Provide free space to organizations who provide free programming

**Brooklyn Bridge Park**

*New York

*designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc, competition finalist*
COMMUNITY INPUT CAN GUIDE DEVELOPMENT, AND FOSTER SUSTAINABILITY!

THE HIGH LINE
NEW YORK

PLAN AHEAD FOR GROWTH & CHANGE

LONG TERM VISION!

*designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro and James Corner Field Operations, competition finalists
GANTRY PLAZA
STATE PARK
NEW YORK

COMBINATION OF HISTORY, FUN, LEARNING
KNIT INTO NEARBY NEIGHBORHOOD
SUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIPS
ACCESS TO WATER TRANSIT
IMMIGRATION HERITAGE
NEW YORK
BATTERY PARK
GOVERNOR’S ISLAND
NEW YORK

SUSTAINABLE ECOLOGIES
INTERACTIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT
THINK 100 YEARS AHEAD
CITIZEN SCIENCE!

*designed by West 8, competition finalist
FIELDNOTES + FEEDBACK
OUR IDEAS MOVING FORWARD
INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMING:
SEATING:
LONG TERM VISION:
FOOD:
UNIQUE LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS:
EDUCATIONAL (SCIENCE/HISTORICAL):
QUIET/PEACEFUL/INTIMATE:
ARTS & CULTURE:
VARIED USER GROUPS:
CHILDREN:
4 SEASONS:
DIRECT CONNECTION TO THE RIVER:
NIGHT ACTIVATION / LIGHTING:
DEDICATED BICYCLE / WALKING PATHS:
COMMUNITY FIRST:
TACTILE EXPERIENCES:
MOST FREQUENT COMMENT:

“INCLUSIVE PROGRAMMING”

WE HEARD THIS COMMENT DIRECTLY & INDIRECTLY. SAMPLE STATEMENTS FROM FIELDNOTES:

Community plays a role in programming through an advisory council

Neighborhood involvement is key to sustainability

Public helps define the parks activity

Look around the community and see what activities need space

Cultivate local partnerships

And more
PHILADELPHIA
TOP TAKEAWAYS

- Direct public access to water, as close as possible!
- Experimentation with temporary spaces & programs
- Economic and social inclusiveness through spaces, programs and public involvement
- Universal appeal to all people: age, culture, gender, etc.
- Value of unique elements: hammocks, nets over water, seating options, landscape and shade

“DETROIT IS BETTER ALREADY.
THE RIVER. THE OPENNESS. THE DIVERSITY.
OUR RIVER IS BEAUTIFUL.”
TOP TAKEAWAYS

CHICAGO

Unique attractions that bring people back to the park again and again
Continuous flow and movement, with activities for all ages
Include basics: access to picnic tables, benches, shade, water and bathrooms
A welcoming space for all, with access from streets, neighborhoods & parking
Topography is desirable, but it results in some less functional areas

“I LIKE THE CONCEPT OF:
FREE. OPEN. DEMOCRATIC.”
NEW YORK

TOP TAKEAWAYS

- Provide free space to organizations who provide free programming
- A park for all the people – let the voices be heard and reflected in programming & design - youth and adults
- Importance of catering to a wide variety of recreational needs
- Ecologically resilient design, connecting the past to the future
- Plan ahead for growth and change, and have a long-term focus

“i have a new appreciation for the planning and costs required to run high quality parks”
21 COMMUNITY ADVISORS

THANK YOU!