

OVERTON PARK

notes

november 2018

Community generates ideas for park master plan

To plan for Overton Park's future, we're talking to the people who know it best: the Memphis community.

This summer, Overton Park Conservancy began the park's first comprehensive planning process in 30 years with a deep dive into how users interact with the park. Working with Olivia Haslop of Endure Fort Design, we've been having wide-ranging conversations with current and potential park users about their experiences, what they love about the park, and what they see as opportunities for improvement.

This initial engagement process generated thousands of data points, with ideas as varied as creating regular themed meetups in the park (running groups, playdates, etc.), using the newly-vacant 13 acres at the park's southeast corner as a horticultural education hub, installing a pollinator garden, and adding more casual seating areas throughout the park.

As five core themes emerged from these conversations, we began to ask how we might take actions to solve specific problems or strengthen the park's relationship to its visitors.

Establishing Overton Park's Role in Memphis

The Insight: Given that the park is central to the city and thrives on community interaction, park users wondered why it was not considered a Memphis icon like Beale Street, FedEx, or St. Jude.



Guests at A Day of Merrymaking offered a variety of insights. (Olivia Haslop)

The Opportunity: How might we...highlight the park's history to tell a better Memphis story? Showcase the city's unique culture at the park? Encourage physical activity at the park to improve our community's health?

Building Loyalty with Marketing & Communications

The Insight: Communications are key to engaging a diverse park community,

but it's not always easy to reach visitors who aren't seeking those communications out via their existing relationship with the Conservancy.

The Opportunity: How might we...connect users to information while they're visiting the park? Expand the neighborhood park experience to more users city-wide? Attract visitors who enjoy the cultural institutions to use the park itself?

Curating Public Activity for a Diverse Park Community

The Insight: The Conservancy offers daily park maintenance and limited programming, but visitors are eager for more cultural, educational, and social events.

The Opportunity: How might we...highlight the important ecological habitat that the Conservancy preserves? Foster new social connections between people at the park? Spark long-term relationships with the next generation of park users?

Fine-Tuning Park Amenities

The Insight: The park's physical features have improved under Conservancy care, but updates to certain elements could make the experience better.

The Opportunity: How might we...make the park a premier destination to host events? Update facilities to extend park users' visits? Better guide all visitors to and through the park?

Developing Key Additions to the Park Experience

The Insight: More and more Memphians are enjoying the natural respite that the park provides, but visitors would like to explore a few new elements.

The Opportunity: How might we...outfit the park as an all-weather destination? Formalize pop-up food and beverage options to serve more customers? Build on communal areas so more Memphians stay and play?

Now that we've identified these overarching themes, we'll be exploring specific ideas in greater detail. Our next step is to create prototypes of some of these ideas and bring them into the park to see how well they work on the ground. We're developing those concepts now, so look for information on our website and social channels about how you can interact with these experiments.

We're also preparing to apply these core themes to the physical and operational elements of the park. We'll continue working with members of the community on specific questions, like how to improve



The Conservancy Board of Directors tours the 13-acre site and takes in user ideas.

the pavilion rental experience, how to make the park more accessible to underserved potential visitors, and how to use the 13 acres that will return to the park.

As we continue this community engagement, which will include upcoming popup events, we will also release a Request for Qualifications for a design team to create some concepts around the feedback we receive. Those concepts will be brought back to the community later in 2019, bringing us closer to a final iteration of a master plan for the park.

Thanks to everyone who has contributed feedback so far; we look forward to hearing more from you as the planning continues.



Bookmark www.overtonpark.org/masterplan for updates and opportunities to participate.

What will happen to the Brooks & MCA buildings?

With Memphis College of Art set to close in 2020 and the Brooks Museum of Art planning a move to the riverfront by 2024, discussions are underway about how best to use the buildings they will leave behind.

The City of Memphis is working with U3 Consulting to develop best-case scenarios for Brooks Museum and Rust Hall and recruit tenants to implement them. U3 will gather public input and oversee the process of recruiting and vetting any potential tenants.



October's Dia de los Muertos celebration on the Brooks Museum plaza

This effort is separate from Overton Park Conservancy's master plan, but is running in parallel. For example, as the Conservancy works to generate ideas for the 13-acre parcel at the southeast corner of the park, we will coordinate with the City and U3 to make sure those ideas complement the new uses proposed for the museum buildings and Rust Hall.



Stay up to date on the Brooks and MCA projects at POP.memphistn.gov.

Your investment is strengthening our city

To the Overton Park community, I'd like to say one thing: You're an inspiration. You've been inspiring advocates and supporters for generations. You've brought your children here to make new friends at the playground, to learn how to ride bikes, and to play golf. You've had your first dates, marriage proposals, and weddings here. You've gathered for peace walks, demonstrations and rallies, and to honor our veterans. You've created, shared, observed, and enjoyed art and music. You've learned about nature and animals and conservation.

tina's message



You've done all this together, as a community. And as a community, you've demonstrated again and again your passion for protecting Overton Park for future generations of Memphians.

Overton Park isn't a static place. The park has an enduring design by a notable landscape architect, George Kessler. That design has evolved over the years as the city around the park changed and grew. As we look at the next 100 years for Overton Park, we'll need to consider how to continue cultivating a beautiful, safe, and welcoming park that draws our diverse community together. We'll honor the historic and current uses of the park, and plan for the future needs of Memphians as well.

True to form, you, the Overton Park community, are helping to shape that vision. You've given us some excellent feedback in the first round of community engagement around the master planning effort. You've shared your ideas for the future of Brooks Museum and Rust Hall as well. You came out to celebrate your park at our Day of Merrymaking festival in October, and experienced some of the best of what our city has to offer.

Memphis is changing. We see renewed investment in neighborhoods in our core city. Parks and trails and public green space are part of that investment. Great parks make great cities. Parks make us healthier, they bring us together with our neighbors, and they drive economic development. Most importantly, high-quality public places don't happen by accident. They happen through careful planning and resource investment. Your personal investment is a critical part of this exciting evolution of Overton Park and Memphis.

Thank you for propelling our shared vision forward.

Tina Sullivan



Scenes from A Day of Merrymaking: creating a collaborative mural (top left), students from Memphis Empower Coalition registering voters (above left), the dancers of Company d share their original choreography (above right)

Local organizations invest in Overton Park

The Conservancy relies on business and foundation support to fund core costs and improvement projects. Here are a few of the organizations that invested in the park this year.

As we work to add more accessible features and update equipment at Rainbow Lake Playground to comply with more rigorous safety standards released in 2017, we've received generous support from **The Children's Foundation of Memphis** and **Baptist Memorial Health Care**. Both organizations contributed to a design process that will redesign part of The Maze climbing structure to increase wheelchair access. The Big Green Mound will also be revisited in order to reduce the impact of erosion from all those climbing kids! Look for these updates in 2019.

Funding from **The Plough Foundation** was instrumental in establishing Overton Park Conservancy in 2012. This year, they contributed to the purchase of visitor counters, which will be installed at several park entrances. The Eco-Counters will enable us to count how many cyclists and pedestrians enter the park. This in turn will allow us to create well-informed maintenance plans and to better understand the economic impact of Overton Park on the city.

Support from **The Hyde Foundation** also helped to create the Conservancy, and has helped sustain our work for nearly seven years. This year, the foundation made major gifts in support of core costs and of the master planning process.

We continue to be grateful for **AutoZone's** support of Overton Park Conservancy, which includes funding for Rainbow Lake Playground and the Greensward restoration project. This year, they chose to designate their contribution to park operations, which enables us to apply the funds where they are needed most.



Rainbow Lake Playground's Maze will soon receive a design refresh.

The Hohenberg Foundation generously gave this year toward park operations and toward the process of redeveloping the now-vacant 13 acres that housed the City's vehicle maintenance area for decades.

REI opened its first retail store in Memphis this summer and immediately began supporting Overton Park. Their initial gift to the Conservancy will support an upcoming trail repair and maintenance project, but they also donated gear for staff and volunteers to use in park projects. This month, REI partnered with our longtime supporters **Memphis Made Brewing Company** and with **Merrell** to host a night at the brewery benefiting the Conservancy.

Twice a year, we replace the layer of engineered wood fiber (like mulch, but specially fabricated to be wheelchair-accessible) in both Rainbow Lake Playground and Overton Bark. This year, **Orion Federal Credit Union** matched the donations of dog park visitors, which also enabled us to add some new benches to the small-dog side of Overton Bark. The new surfacing was installed in record time by volunteers from **Memphis Dream Center**.

Each fall we hold a special after-dark Flashlights in the Forest tour for members of our Roots giving society. **Marco's Pizza** in Midtown generously donates salad and pizza so that families have plenty of energy to uncover as many creatures as possible.

We've also had the privilege of working with volunteer groups who selflessly give their time to beautify the park. Thanks to **Daughters of the American Revolution - River City Chapter** for their regular maintenance of the formal gardens, to **Grace St. Luke's** and **Valero** employees for helping to clean algae out of Rainbow Lake, to **Central High School** students for assisting with a park cleanup, and **Medtronic** employees for painting picnic tables.



Volunteers from Valero rake algae out of Rainbow Lake.

Finding inspiration and connection at Overton Park

Overton Park has been central to the artistic life of the city since Brooks Museum opened its doors more than 100 years ago. To honor that legacy, the Conservancy engages local artists to design everything from sculptural gateways to t-shirts. For our 2019 shirts, we were thrilled to work with an emerging artist who spends nearly every day in the park as a member of our cleaning and maintenance team.

Spencer Whitley, Jr., better known as LJ, is part of the Pinnacle Perpetual Services crew led by his uncle Ron Teamer. The team's primary role is daily cleaning, but over their three years working in the park, LJ says they've become a kind of park ranger crew, making sure visitors have a positive experience.

A 2013 Bolton High graduate, LJ always loved to draw but had been searching for his own style. A chance meeting during one of his shifts at Overton Park with Greg Cravens, a nationally syndicated cartoonist, gave him the opportunity to take his skills to the next level. Their conversation about art grew into a mentorship, with Greg first offering to take a look at LJ's work and then bringing him in as an assistant on several projects. They've now been working together for over a year.

"Greg has put my art skills through the ringer to draw out my God-given ability to its fullest potential," LJ says. "My favorite artwork of all-time is the Sistine Chapel--the fact that Michelangelo painted all of that on his back on a ladder, I can't even begin to fathom that. But when I see what Greg does in his studio, that's kind of like my Sistine Chapel. I can't go to Rome right now, but that's a place where I can create."

LJ's work caught the attention of the Conservancy staff, and we asked him to design our 2019 shirt. He chose a graffiti-style hand-lettered design that celebrates the different ways people use the park. While working on that shirt, he had inspiration for an

additional design featuring a tennis ball that goes rogue during a game of fetch.

"One day before work, I was watching Looney Tunes and one character was trying to catch another, but ultimately got so frustrated that he broke down and just decided to join him. That's when I incorporated the tennis ball who always tries so hard to run away from the dog but always gets caught--because you see so many people at the park playing fetch with their dogs."

Although LJ loves many kinds of art, his ambition is to become an architectural designer. He wants to help people reflect who they are inwardly in the outward appearance of their homes.

As he hones his craft, he'll continue to enjoy the experience of being at Overton Park every day. "The people are the best thing about working at the park," LJ says. "It has all the best parts of a small town, because you walk in and you're on a first-name basis with everyone. Even the dogs--if I yell a dog's name at the dog park, they'll run up to me."

He adds, "If Overton Park were a TV show, I would definitely watch. The park is a character all on its own. You have so many different elements working together to create this place that's big enough that you can have your own space, but small enough that you don't feel lost."



The experience is enhanced by working alongside his family. "They hold me to such a high standard, and their support has been overwhelming. When they saw the shirts, you would have thought I built the Eiffel Tower--especially my mom, because she won't tell me she likes something just to say so!"

Look for both shirts at park events and in the Brooks Museum gift shop.

Park accessibility to increase with new Poplar sidewalk

If you've walked, biked, or maneuvered a wheelchair along Poplar Ave. through Overton Park, you know it can be a tough place to get around.

With the addition of a new sidewalk along Poplar, plus the eventual creation of a small entrance plaza at the park's Cooper Street bicycle and pedestrian entrance, the park will soon become safer and more accessible.

These projects follow the recommendations of the 2015 Mid-South Regional Greenprint & Sustainability Plan, which identified Overton Park as a regional hub for bikes and pedestrians.

The new sidewalk will stretch from the Veterans Plaza Drive park entrance west to the entrance at Tucker Street. Funded by a federal public transit grant administered by MATA, the sidewalk is a City of Memphis project designed to make it safer and easier to access the two bus stops located on Poplar between Veterans Plaza Drive and Tucker, and to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The addition of the sidewalks will also prompt drivers to turn more slowly from Poplar into the park in order to address safety concerns at this busy intersection.

Sidewalk construction is likely to begin in 2019.

As a separate project, the future entrance plaza at Cooper Street will likely have a small landing area



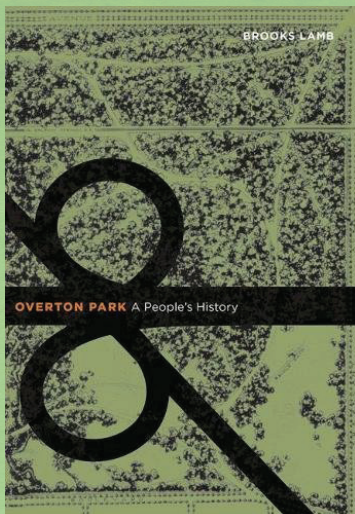
Artistic rendering of Poplar Ave. sidewalk and historic trolley stop (Amanda McGillvery)

for bikes and pedestrians crossing into the park. This feature would be subtle enough not to interfere with views into the park. A new path would run through this landing area, connecting it to the nearby park entrance at Veterans Plaza Drive. Currently, visitors entering at this location must traverse the golf course to pick up a road or trail in the park.

"Anyone who has ever tried to enter Overton

Park by foot or on a bicycle knows firsthand how uncomfortable or even harrowing such a seemingly simple act can be," says Nicholas Oyler, Bikeway & Pedestrian Program Manager for the City of Memphis. "Great urban parks provide safe and easy access to all people, no matter how they get around. Through these projects, Overton Park continues to grow more accessible for more Memphians."

The Cooper St. entrance project is funded through a federal transportation grant administered by the Tennessee Department of Transportation, and is managed by the City of Memphis. Funds for the Cooper Street entrance were generously matched by the First Tennessee Foundation through a donation to Overton Park Conservancy. The project has cleared National Environmental Policy Act review and can now proceed to the design phase, with construction likely to begin either late 2019 or early 2020.



Looking for a holiday gift for the park lover in your life? *Overton Park: A People's History* is available online and at Novel and Burke's Books. Author Brooks Lamb interviewed generations of park lovers for this oral history during his time working for the Conservancy as a Rhodes College Bonner fellow.

Profits from sales will benefit Overton Park Conservancy.

"Overton Park has been the setting for spectacles both large and small, and few are forgotten in this valuable narrative as the author explains how citizens protected the park from interstate highways and residents today have led the park's rebirth as one of the city's most vital institutions."—Dr. Carroll Van West, Tennessee State Historian, Director of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation

A Day of Merrymaking brings Memphis into the park



Enjoying the bungee run (photo by Jay Adkins); Danza Azteca Quetzalcoatl de Memphis delighted the crowd with traditional pre-Hispanic dance.

From the opening drumbeats of the Snowden School Marching Band to the joyful reggae finale of Chinese Connection Dub Embassy (CCDE), this year's Day of Merrymaking festival brought the best of Memphis to Overton Park for a day of fun in the sun.

Presenting sponsor Hollywood Feed teamed up with Streetdog Foundation to present a fashion show featuring adoptable dogs, as well as a costume contest and a cooling station to mitigate the still-summery temperatures.

Attendees were treated to music from Snowden School and the Overton High School Concert Band, as well as CCDE and folk duo The Rusty Pieces. Compelling dance performances from the Company d troupe and Danza Azteca Quetzalcoatl de Memphis rounded out the showcase of Memphis performers.

Thanks to a grant from the Tennessee Valley Authority, we were able to offer recycling bins, free aluminum water bottles, and hydration stations to reduce plastic waste, and thanks to FedEx, attendees could ride free shuttles to the festival.

We're grateful to everyone who came out to have a great time with us on the Greensward and contribute valuable funds to the Conservancy's work.

Thanks to our major sponsors, Hollywood Feed, A2H, ArtsMemphis, The Commercial Appeal, Crosstown Concourse, Echo Systems, Eclectic Eye, Independent Bank, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare, MLGW, and the Tennessee Arts Commission, for making this event possible.

We're also grateful to our community sponsors for their strong support: Art Center Memphis, The Art Project, Belleair Woods Neighborhood Association, Celtic Crossing, Central Gardens Association, Cooper-Young Community Association, Dumpsters.com, East End Neighborhood Association, Evergreen Historic District Association, Huey's Restaurants, Lipscomb & Pitts, M. Palazola Produce Co., Mahaffey Event & Tent Rentals, Memphis Made Brewing Company, Midtown Memphis Development Corporation, Morningside Neighborhood Association, Pinnacle Perpetual Services, Utopia Animal Hospital, Wagner General Contractors, and Young Avenue Sound.



These flying monkeys inspired by *The Wizard of Oz* won the top costume contest prize.



VERTON PARK

CONSERVANCY

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This year's seasonal Overton Park
greeting cards, designed by Carl E.
Moore, are available only at
www.overtonpark.org/holidays.
Order now while supplies last!