

Denver's Northside Park: The collision of program, process, and the past.

By Gale Fulton



Figure 1. Bird's eye view of NTF facility.

I. Project Beginnings

The summer of 1999 will see a new public park opened in the city of Denver, Colorado. Located on Denver's industrial northside, the park is part of a larger redevelopment plan for an area of the city once largely residential but which has become increasingly industrial. Northside Park is unique in that from its inception designers have been faced with theoretical issues such as memory and history in the city, as well as practical issues of regional stormwater runoff, and the creation of a public park capable of fulfilling its users programmatic needs.

The thirteen-acre park is the third largest portion of the sixty-three and a half-acre Northside Redevelopment Plan. Previously inhab-

ited by the Northside Treatment Facility (NTF), a sewage treatment facility abandoned in the eighties (Figure 1), the new plan will incorporate a ten-acre National Guard facility (this facility is to share parking with Northside Park) and a new twenty-two and a half acre industrial park. The remaining eighteen acres consist of a fifteen to twenty-year-old NTF holding pond that has naturalized as wildlife habitat. Already a successful refuge for herons and other wildlife species, the pond will be altered only slightly to provide a more secluded area for wildlife while allowing limited human access for bird and animal watching.

The larger context of the Northside Redevelopment Plan (NRP)

is a tangled, mixed use area comprised of old, ethnically diverse neighborhoods and scattered industrial complexes which have grown exponentially since the 1980's, and the Platte River Corridor which serves as the largest part of Northside Park's southern and eastern boundaries. One goal of the NRP is to reestablish the presence of cohesive residential neighborhoods, most of which have been decimated by post-industrial land uses such as junkyards as well as the intrusion of the nearby Interstate 70 corridor. The creation of new jobs at the industrial park and the ameliorative effects of Northside Park are the proposed beginnings of Northside's residential reorientation.¹

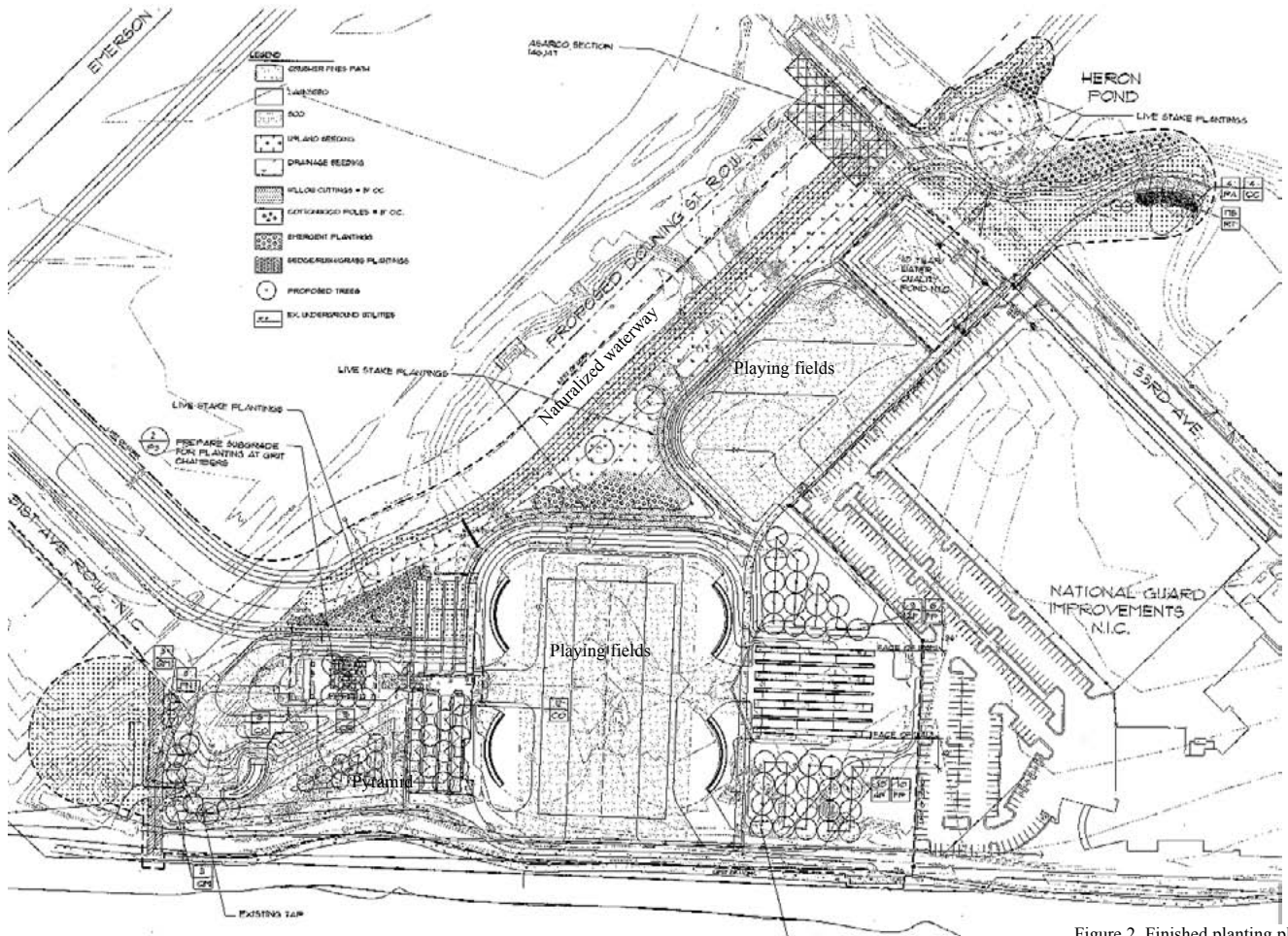


Figure 2. Finished planting plan.

II. The Park

Designed by Denver landscape architects Wenk Associates, Northside Park consists of disparate features such as a grassy earthworks pyramid, concrete forms retained from the demolished NTF, a naturalized waterway, playing fields, and groves of trees. The park's design is loosely based on a southwest to northeast axis connecting the park entrance at the National Guard parking area with another access area at the southwest corner of the park, and a cross axial gesture created by the central playing field (Figure 2).

The tree-covered pyramid serves as a visual-locating device to both automobile and pedestrian traffic, as well as a viewing platform and play structure (Figure 3). The majority of visitors in cars will first notice the earth work

sculpture through its axial alignment with 51st Avenue, and users of the Platte River Recreational Trail will be able to see the looming form over the levee that separates trail from park.

The park's western edge is comprised of a vegetative waterway accommodating both the park's surface runoff (the park drains away from the Platte, east to west) and that of the regional watershed. The waterway also serves to slow and filter stormwater before it reaches the heron pond preserve (Figures 4 & 5). Two concrete drop structures will be installed in the waterway, one in the channel inside the park and a second at the canal's entrance into the heron pond to help slow water and accommodate grade changes. The majority of the waterway's stability will be achieved through the establishment of vegetation. The area will be "shotgun" seeded with

a mixture of native plant species which, depending upon environmental factors and the specific germination and growth requirements of each seed type, will inhabit those areas most suitable for their survival. The channel bottom's finished elevation will average only inches above



Figure 3. Section-Elevation of Pyramid

the existing water table allowing for the survival of wetland species independent of regular runoff. The hillsides of the channel are expected to show a succession of species from wet to dry as the distance from the channel bottom increases. This naturalized waterway also serves to create a rough, wandering

edge against the more maintenance-intensive areas of the park.

The park is primarily open to the sky. Five groves of trees scattered throughout the site will provide some escape from summer sun as well as secluded areas for picnics or observation. Two such groves frame the northeastern entrance, and one provides a ceiling for a plaza at the southwest entrance. The fourth grove is designed in a checkerboard pattern occupying the space between the “Great Pyramid” and the central playing field, and a final grouping of trees is planted atop the grass-covered pyramid.

The scattered remnants of the NTF are another salient feature of the design. Remnant filters fill the void between the northeastern groves and serve as a physical connection between parking lot and playing field. Partially buried holding tanks intimate the boundaries of the playing field while old mixing basins form the southeastern entrance plaza. Three curving flumes now stand in formal juxtaposition with the earthen pyramid, and, finally, another set of filters stretch into the naturalized waterway providing a backdrop for the meeting of naturalistic waterway with regularly maintained lawn² (Figure 6).

III. Analysis and Interpretation

Having achieved a moderate understanding of the park’s designed composition, one can begin to investigate its significance. What is the role of the landscape architect in such a setting? Is the landscape architect’s primary interest one of amelioration, revealing site process, or mediating a wetland? How does the landscape architect address such complex issues as the reuse of existing site features in current design practice? Finally, what considerations must be given to the programmatic design of the



Figure 4. Heron Pond Preserve.

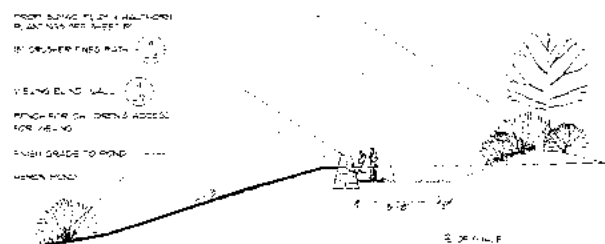


Figure 5. Section of Viewing Blind.

park in order to create a vital urban park capable of evolving with the changing needs of its users?

The Role of the Landscape Architect

What is the role of the landscape architect in the design of an urban park? The contemporary landscape architect’s situation in the public sector is a demanding one. Not only are landscape architects responsible for creative site design, but they must also mediate in the countless review boards and committee meetings which take place before physical construction may begin. Such diverse groups as Wastewater Management and Urban Drainage, Asset Management (they sell adjacent lands), the Division of Wildlife, public and private funders, and neighborhood special interest groups are just a few of the participants involved in the

creation of a city park. In this setting, the role of the landscape architect is expanded to include mediating between the interests of such groups and the integrity of the envisioned built work.

In recognition of such limitations, the role of the landscape architect must be reevaluated. It must be determined if their primary interests lie in attempting to satisfy the needs of the aforementioned parties, or in the ameliorative, revelatory, or mediative design of the site.

Phenomena and Process: A New Aesthetic Awareness

Northside Park provides playing fields and groves of trees where once stood sewage holding tanks and a barren, trash-filled lot. Wildlife habitat is sub-

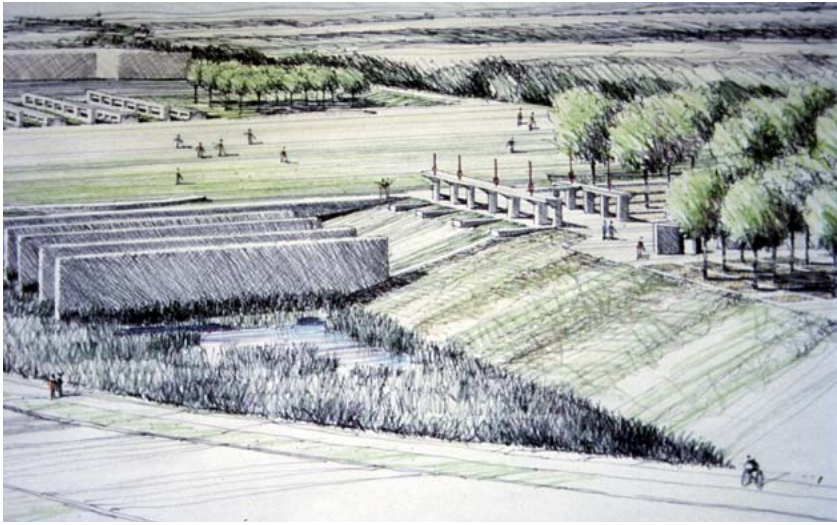


Figure 6. Perspective of waterway.

stituted for a concrete stormwater runoff channel. The ameliorative effects of these features are obvious but nevertheless raise the question of the role of today's landscape architect. In a time when landscape architecture has become largely ameliorative (a condition exemplified by the automatic inclusion of tree-lined streets and grass parkways in many contemporary landscape architectural projects), how can the profession be moved forward? One approach is by revealing to park users something about



the processes and/or phenomena that are at work on the site.

There are two designed features of Northside which have the potential to reveal something about the park: the naturalized waterway and the recycled forms of the NTF.

Since its founding in 1982, the office of Wenk Associates has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to the inventive management of stormwater runoff. Projects in Denver and Colorado's Front Range have proposed and implemented design strategies to clean, control, and lessen the overall volume of stormwater runoff at regional, civic, and private scales. (Gregg, Wenk, 1998)

In line with this thinking, the virtually hands-off approach taken by



Figures 7 and 8. Remnants of the NTF.

Wenk's design team in dealing with this area of the park has the potential to be both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. The channel's design is dependent (other than the single drop structure) on such fluctuating phenomena as stormwater runoff, and the adaptabili-

ty of the vegetation to the particular soils and climate in which they are seeded. The sudden influx of large volumes of water may erode the channel displacing established vegetation and resulting in bare soil in which other species may take root. Lack of water may influence the invasion of more drought tolerant species throughout the channel. The mediative potential of the waterway relies on the successful establishment of the waterway's vegetation. Once established, the naturalized species of grasses and sedges will slow and filter runoff reducing its potentially deleterious impact on the established heron pond preserve.

One must also consider the influence on this design feature by the park's future management practices. Much of the channel serves as a border for the park's two bluegrass playing fields. In Colorado, the use of bluegrass requires supplemental irrigation. Depending upon the frequency of irrigation and the resulting runoff into the naturalized waterway, the dynamic of wetland species in the channel bottom and drought tolerant species inhabiting the sides may be reduced to a more homogeneous, less revealing whole. Regardless of how the landscape's narrative unfolds, change in the landscape is inevitable. It is this sense of change and awareness of it that is creating a new aesthetic awareness toward phenomena and process.³

The Olmstedian vision of an art form founded upon mystery and indeterminacy but purposeful in its aim to improve the social conditions of those for whom it was produced, has been eclipsed by a rational, aesthetically motivated landscape architecture often times unmindful of its power to influence societal conditions. This primacy of the "visual", cultivated in the last seventy to eighty years has resulted in a profession no longer connected with those founding

principles of mystery, indeterminacy, and mediation. (Howett, 1998)

In considering the second of the park's potentially revelatory features, the remnant forms of the NTF, one may also examine how the reuse of existing site features may be situated in contemporary design.

Before the implementation of Northside Park, the NTF remnants stood as a marker to the site's past usage as a sewage treatment facility (Figures 7 & 8). Since its closure in the 1980's, the abandoned forms have become a stage for urban decay, graffiti, and as a filming location of the television movie *Asteroid*. The design of Northside erases the memory of this facility as modifications to the forms reduce them to monolithic concrete slabs. Sandblasted clean of graffiti and disconnected from each other, it is unlikely the casual observer will understand the forms as anything more than minimal abstract sculptures juxtaposed against the greenery and undulating topography of the park.

Considering the longevity of the site's prior occupant (the NTF was built in 1936), in addition to its contin-

ued structural soundness⁴, it seems feasible to have considered what architect Bernard Tschumi refers to as "cross programming". Defined as "using a given spatial configuration for a program not intended for it" (Tschumi, 1994), cross programming the existing NTF structures would seem to contribute successfully to providing a setting for traditional programs, while offering a multitude of options for additional programming.

The Same Old Programs?

The remainder of the park is made up of what is typically thought of as traditional park program with the possible exception of the grassy pyramid. Programmed elements include: playing fields, picnic areas, groves of trees, entrance plazas, circulation routes, and a parking lot. Undoubtedly, Northside is atypical in comparison to many city parks because of its reuse of site artifacts and the presence of a functional surface drainage system. However, when viewing the park as a whole, with its multiple programmatic accommodations and limited space, certain questions are raised as to how successful the park will be.

There are currently no definitive rules as to the specific placement or programming of a city park in Denver. While this lack of specific park guidelines undoubtedly contributes to the variety of locational and programmatic possibilities, it also begs the question of how appropriate location and program are established in a late twentieth century culture comprised of plurality, ambiguity, and ambivalence.

According to Wenk project manager, Billy Gregg, the space allotted for the park was a result of "What else could it be?" reasoning by city planners. To understand this decision-making strategy one must consider the ameliorative intentions this park represents to adjacent landholders and neighborhoods. Such reasoning is understandable as the programmatic flexibility offered under the term "park" is vast.

However, the question remains as to the appropriateness of the chosen program considering the site's geographical limitations, historical content, and existing as well as projected surrounding uses? Secondly, if the park's location was the result of such specious reasoning, one may also question how much thorough investigation was undertaken in determining its program.

Playing fields and promenades seem an almost automatic inclusion to many contemporary parks whether or not either will be well used by park visitors. In considering the difficult issues connected with programmatic concerns it would seem that above all the park of the twenty-first century must be flexible. Design of such parks based upon strategies accepting of change will allow future users to dictate how such parks can serve their needs as opposed to the user being forced to adapt to the programmed uses of the park. If one accepts the theory that society has



Figure 9. Bird's eye perspective of entrance plaza.

moved past the universalizing tendencies of modernism into a post-modern era predicated upon principles of individuality and difference, one may also speculate as to how this may be represented in our designed parks.

Conclusion

By addressing such issues outside of the conventional boundaries of the rational and visually aesthetic, landscape architects have the ability to return the lost mystery of the Olmstedian vision to the profession and to the city. For the profession to regain these founding principles, landscape architects must take a more proactive role in designing the built environment.

The uncovering of what are often times “hidden” site processes and phenomena provides landscape architects with new dimensions in which to design. Change, the passage of time, and understanding through experience become criteria for evaluation in addition to the visual. Design of this nature leads to new aesthetic awareness and propels the profession in new directions.

Acting as mediators between the site and those conditions acting upon it, landscape architects may play an active role in reducing the deleterious effects of such urban conditions as stormwater runoff. At Northside, Wenk Associates have continued their explorations of how to lessen the impacts of stormwater providing the casual observer a deeper understanding of such phenomena.

The reuse of post-use structures will inevitably be a recurring issue for designers in the next century as environment, history, and program collide with increasing frequency. The designers of Northside Park should be commended for their attempts at incorporating the remnant forms of a sewage treatment

facility into a city park, but missed an opportunity to give the park an added programmatic dimension. It is doubtful users of the park will leave the site with a deeper understanding of the sites history or its role in the city’s history. However, Northside Park as a whole would seem a step in a new direction for landscape architecture and the public park of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. General information about the park’s planning was obtained through a phone interview with Karen Grote, project manager for the Denver Parks Department, and via personal interviews (3) with Wenk Associate project manager Billy Gregg.
2. The specifics of the park’s design were related to me by Billy Gregg in interviews as well as through the use of Northside construction documents provided courtesy of Wenk Associates.
3. Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art.* (1985), pp. 10-13.
4. During an interview with B. Gregg he informed me of the structural merit and the beauty of the details of the original facility.

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