



Sasaki, on behalf of the City of Raleigh - Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Department

INNOVATION

With each of its significant downtown projects over the past decade, the City of Raleigh has incrementally become a more vibrant and desired city. To keep up with the rapid pace of growth, the Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources department drafted a System Plan in 2014, citing implementation of the Moore Square Master Plan as the highest priority action item identified by citizens for downtown. Additionally, the city, in collaboration with the Downtown Raleigh Alliance, created the Downtown Plan, dubbed “Experience It!” The Downtown Plan prioritized the renovation of Moore Square and called for new residential and commercial uses on currently underutilized and city-owned properties surrounding the square. The Downtown Plan also called for strengthened physical and programmatic connections to Marbles Kids Museum and the Moore Square Transit Station, both of which were amidst transformational renovation and expansion projects.

Moore Square was to be the great connector. It is both physical in nature—connecting the growing downtown core to the historic residential neighborhood to the east—but also provides users a connection to the rich history of Raleigh’s past. Moore Square, throughout its history, was a gathering place bringing the diverse neighborhoods of Raleigh together. Of the many successes of the renewed square, perhaps the most innovative is its ability to offer inclusive, flexible, welcoming, and safe spaces for all of Raleigh to enjoy.

OUTCOME

Prior to the renovation, Moore Square was primarily used as a place for large, civic gatherings. Though vibrant during those events, the park experienced significant wear and tear, damage and root compaction to the historic oak trees, and would sit largely empty in between.

Eager to thwart this cycle of programming boom and bust, and building off the success of new activations in Raleigh’s downtown, the design team was charged with diversifying the square’s programming from small and intentional to broader gatherings. The design includes a large flexible lawn surrounded by smaller, more intimate spaces. The vision included making places for the everyday life of the city and its cultural communities—from fitness groups to book clubs to lunchtime crowds to weekend gospel. The programming team, working closely with the city, identified barriers to day-to-day programming and encouraged the embrace of more pop-up and small scale activations.

Today, the site hosts local makers, artists, and the Black Farmers Market. Programming activities, which have been limited recently to smaller, socially-distanced events, include lunchtime lectures, exercise classes, themed events for kids, and arts and crafts events. Prior to Covid-19, the square hosted small concerts and lawn activities for all ages. The Moore Square Visitor Center features a history exhibit detailing the historic significance of the square and surrounding district to the City of Raleigh.

EXECUTION

The refined Moore Square reflects the diverse needs of the community in a manner that is sensitive to the past but durable for future generations. A rigorous review process by members of the public, city staff, county agencies, and the State of North Carolina resulted in a set of documents that were well coordinated with the needs of the various stakeholders. Everything from vehicular access for loading and unloading, electrical infrastructure for a variety of events, and maintenance access to keep the Square cared for were thoughtfully integrated into the design documents.

During construction, the contractor was held to high standards for quality of materials and execution of material installation and execution. The result is a public space that is durable and flexible for the variety of activities supported by the square.

The selection of the food vendor for the cafe building was an equally thoughtful process. The city's intent was to support and build upon the great momentum of the adjacent business community. With that in mind, an existing downtown food and beverage destination, Empire Eats, was selected to operate an outpost of their business. Named Square Burger, the café is off to a positive start.

REPRESENTATION

Due to its high profile nature, the four-acre renovation project included extensive interaction with the public. After design team selection, the city set out on a robust and inclusive outreach process geared at hearing from as many constituents as possible. The process included a series of public meetings, focus group meetings with themes of User Communities, Events, and Business Owners, and stakeholder meetings with city leadership, city staff, neighbors, and social support organizations.

Several trends emerged from those conversations: the design must be open and flexible to support diverse activities, the design must support the local and national historical significance (such as the perimeter trees), the design must respect and support the vibrant context within which the square sits, the design must result in a safe space that feels welcoming to all, the historic tree frame should be preserved and celebrated, families sought opportunities for play and restroom facilities, public art must be integrated into the process, and food and beverage should be introduced to the square.

Throughout the process Raleigh's Urban Design Center and the Downtown Raleigh Alliance were consulted as strategic partners to understand how improvements in the square could best support and complement the surrounding context..

REPLICATION

Many cities have historic or culturally significant open spaces that fail to meet the changing needs of contemporary city dwellers. Desires for preservation can minimize the ability of these spaces to evolve in a way that enables more use. Moore Square represents a strategic evolution of a significant cultural landscape. The design sought first to understand and then strengthen the square's critical view sheds, connections, and cultural life ways. Great care was taken to inventory and protect the square's historic tree canopy—providing more structured circulation to enable healthier, less compacted root zones. Materials were selected to fit within the historic palette of downtown Raleigh—granite, dark metals, lush plantings—while also reflecting contemporary craft and detailing. The renovated square is infused with new uses—the café, the play area, the water feature, and the restrooms—that amplify the vitality of the district and provide an outdoor living room for the city's growing downtown population. This project serves as a model for the sensitive and thoughtful evolution of cultural landscapes to meet contemporary needs.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Because of the park's significant legacy, the project required permitting from the Historic Preservation Committee to confirm the new design would meet design standards to properly represent the historic aspects of the park. Identified during that process was the legacy of the oak trees that frame the square. As one of the defining features of Moore Square, these trees have seen generations of families from Raleigh come to Moore Square as a place for gathering, playing, celebrating, and interacting.

Significant investment was made by the city, design team, and contractor to protect these trees during construction. For example, all key proposed programs were cited outside the critical root zone of the trees and special considerations were made for access to the site to prevent unnecessary compaction of the tree roots. Additionally, all construction within the critical root zone was performed by hand, or utilizing an innovative air-spade system that allowed for trenching and excavation without serious damage to tree roots.

Today, the historic oak trees are one of the celebrated features of the city's new park.