



CASE STUDY

INCLUSIVE PLACEMAKING TOM LEE PARK, MEMPHIS

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Photos are courtesy
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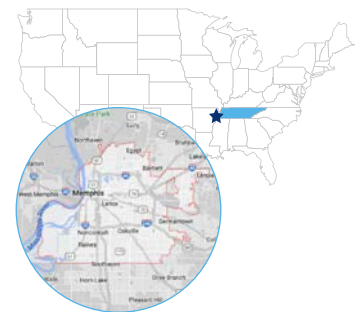
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INTRODUCTION

Public spaces become meaningful places from the actions of the people who use them. Although public spaces cannot force people to engage with each other, great ones, such as equitably designed and programmed parks, can nudge people toward shared public life.¹ Toward this end, many local communities are aspiring to develop places as common ground that create opportunities for conviviality and social mixing.² In the United States, this potential for conviviality and social mixing in cities is often hindered by the inequities in access to high-quality public spaces along racial and socioeconomic lines.

This case on the design and opening of Tom Lee Park in Memphis, Tennessee captures the Memphis River Parks Partnership's (Memphis River Parks) approach to creating a welcoming, inclusive park for all users and aims to contribute to the conversation on the potential of public spaces for advancing equity, prosperity and belonging.

In 2022, Memphis River Parks approached the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins University for a thought partnership on strategies to create a convivial space in Tom Lee Park, a \$61 million public-private investment on the banks of the Mississippi River in downtown Memphis. Memphis River Parks is a nonprofit organization responsible for the management of five riverfront park districts totaling 250 acres. The Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation is a university center established in partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies to advance public sector innovation by marrying cutting-edge practice with world-class research to deliver exceptional results for residents. From January until September 2023, the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation and Memphis River Parks met monthly to reflect on the park design and programming as inspiration for its development. This case study is a reflection written as a result of this collaboration.



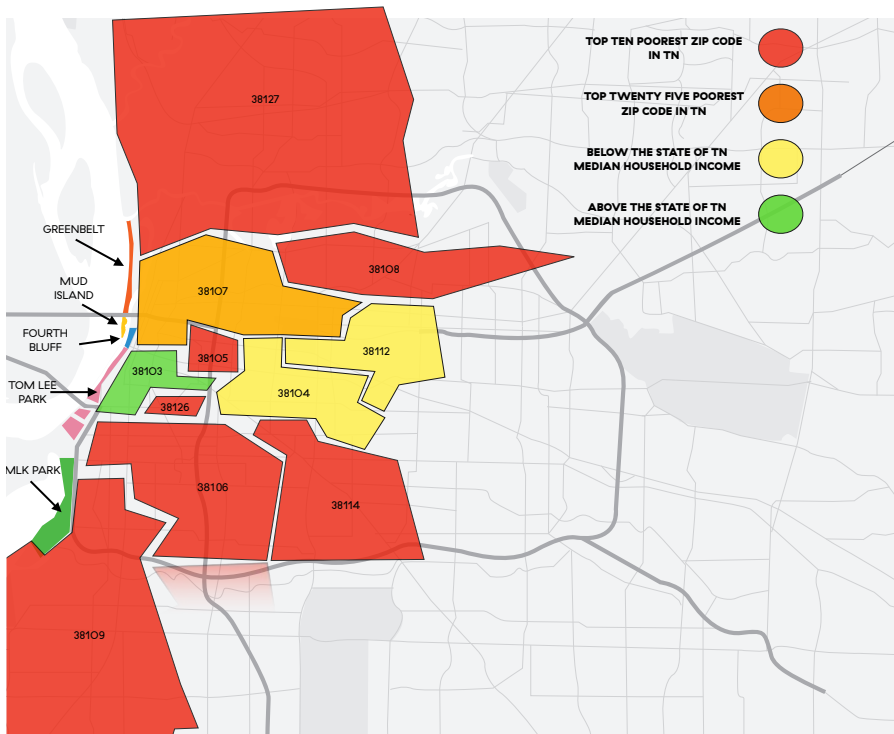
BACKGROUND

In 2017, Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland established a task force to connect downtown Memphis with the Mississippi River after a local delegation visited the Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia waterfronts and determined that their city had been turning its back to its greatest asset. As part of this exploration, Memphis River Parks commissioned architecture and urban design firm Studio Gang to take a holistic look at its five park districts on the river with the support of the Hyde Family Foundation and the Kresge Foundation. This Memphis Riverfront Concept identified specific potential in Tom Lee Park, a 31-acre field along the riverfront. The park was underused due to its lack of features and amenities, and was busiest during an annual seven-day music and barbecue festival. For festival organizers, the site needed to remain open and undeveloped to support the festival's unfettered use. For others, though, the large field was seen as an opportunity for developing a park where all Memphians could engage with each other and the Mississippi year-round.³

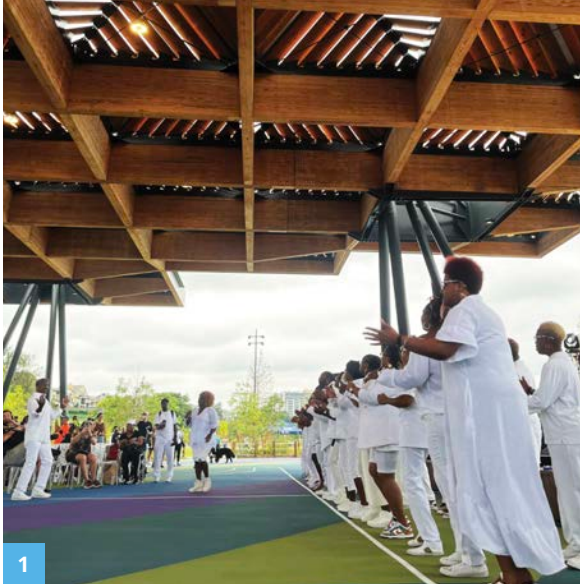
Symbolically, this underused field had been named Tom Lee Park in 1954 to commemorate a Black man who in 1925 used his small wooden boat to rescue 32 white people from a capsized steamboat in the widest and wildest part of the Mississippi. Tom Lee's selflessness and courage in seeing the humanity in people who would not even shake his hand in the segregated South functioned as a

guiding light to Memphis River Parks' effort to redesign and redevelop the park experience.

Tom Lee Park is surrounded by racially and economically stratified neighborhoods. The central location of Tom Lee Park presents a rare opportunity to create public space with the potential of serving people across the demographic spectrum.



Memphis' Tom Lee Park is situated at the edge of Tennessee's lowest and highest income zip codes.



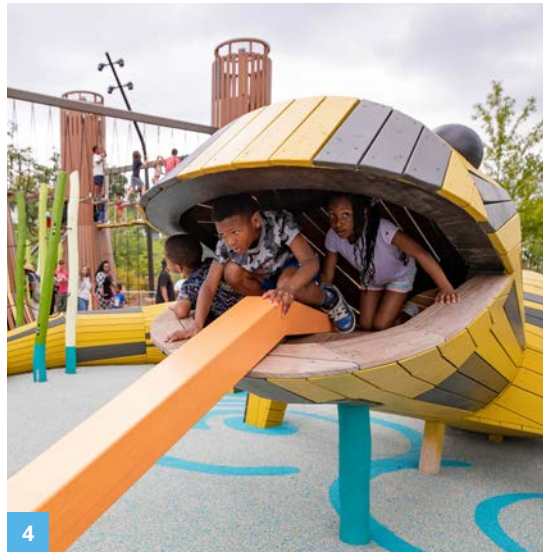
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- 1 Programming reflects the image of the city, including Memphis' Black culture. On opening weekend, the Tennessee Mass Choir performed under the Sunset Canopy.
- 2 The River Lounge provides opportunities for contemplation and people watching.
- 3 The park was designed by Studio Gang and SCAPE to highlight the Mississippi as Memphis' key asset.
- 4 Riverfront animals are represented in the park's playgrounds.
- 5 The park design incorporates bicycle access to increase connectivity.
- 6 The playground is designed for children's exploration, adventure, and delight.

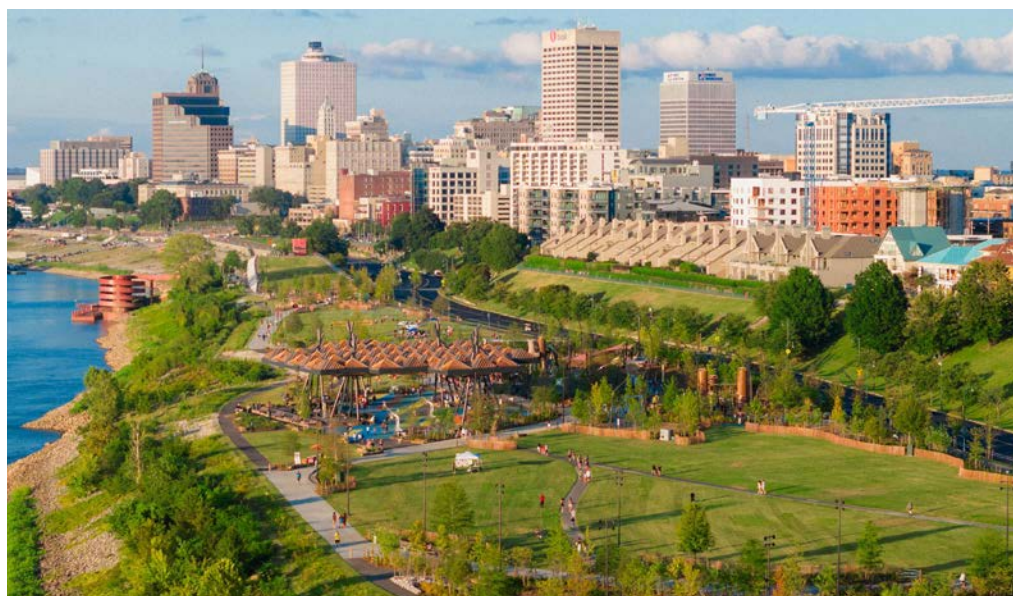
INCLUSIVE PLACEMAKING STRATEGIES

To create conditions for Tom Lee Park to be a convivial and alluring space for all Memphians, Memphis River Parks advanced four strategies during its design and opening stages: **1) Design Equity and Excellence, 2) Gradual Placemaking, 3) Neighborliness and Safety, and 4) Partnerships.** The case discusses the contribution of each of these strategies to achieving a public space that serves as common ground for all residents and places the voices and experiences of Memphis' Black community members as a distinctive asset that invites a sense of belonging, joy, and justice in Tom Lee Park.

01. DESIGN EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

Public space research shows that for Black park visitors to feel safe and welcome, park environments need to incorporate symbols and representation of diversity, such as inclusive programming and signage, and welcome diverse park visitors and staff. Park users' sense of safety correlates positively with their sense of belonging and feeling welcome.⁴

At the new Tom Lee Park, Memphis River Parks intentionally sought to create a more inclusive and welcoming public space for Memphis residents. Memphis River Parks



View of
Tom Lee Park

led an effort to validate the lived experiences of its residents as expertise, especially the hardest-to-reach populations, by identifying the desires and requirements of the community through conversations, workshops, and a comprehensive survey that engaged more than 4,000 Memphians. In a series of public engagements, residents were asked what they liked most about the riverfront, what would attract them more often, and what could be improved. Designed by Studio Gang, these activities included a riverfront “gameboard” for the public to post their thoughts directly to an aerial view of the 31 acres, a survey conducted at various locations, including the Memphis Grizzlies NBA games, and the display of a model of the early design of the park to gain more resident insights. A poll was also conducted asking residents about specific elements of the design and their preferences. The public’s desire for the park to be welcoming to everyone, to offer a variety of experiences, to be fun, and to activate a largely moribund location on the riverfront drove the design toward a clear emphasis on equity, a thoughtful tribute to the park’s namesake, a way to connect with the city’s downtown, and the creation of a unique place where people of different races, incomes, and interests could come together to build and strengthen community.

Memphis River Parks also commissioned the park’s design and its public art to women-led architecture and landscape firms, Studio Gang and SCAPE, and Black artists, Theaster Gates and James Little. Selecting designers and artists from outside of Memphis generated some public criticism. Memphis River Parks countered that there are a limited number of firms in the country with a reputation for designing sites this iconic, and that fully realizing the potential of the site benefited from an external perspective. The Memphis River Parks’ CEO Carol Coletta also warned: “If any city becomes a place that does not welcome outsiders, I think you are clearly on a trajectory as a city for decline.”⁵

Notably, Memphis has an iconic role in the history of the American struggle toward freedom and equity. The park joins that tradition. The park’s design and programming lean into the voices and experiences of Black people as an asset for Memphis. The way race and equity have been woven into the park design proves how pain and struggle can co-exist with joy. The park acts as a reminder that inclusive and multifaceted recognition of history in its totality is a prerequisite for equitable joy and belonging.⁶

The park reinterprets the story of Tom Lee as a source of local pride and inspiration for park users, yet it also recognizes it as a story of segregation and discrimination. This dilemma of holding multiple truths is powerfully captured

in Theaster Gates' public art installation, A Monument to Listening, a forum of 32 black seats carved from honed basalt.

Gates writes in his statement next to the installation:

"A Monument to Listening pays tribute to Tom Lee's legacy while functioning as a corrective medicine for a world that would rather view passively than talk intentionally about the truths of race."

In the spirit of engaging with challenging truths and honoring legacies, Memphis River Parks and the Hyde Family Foundation responded quickly in January 2023 to the death of Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man who was fatally assaulted by Memphis police officers. They named the park's main event space Sunset Canopy to honor Mr. Nichols' love of photographing sunsets over the river and his parents' courage in meeting the moment by calling for calm and peace. The canopy serves as a poignant reminder of Memphis' complex legacy and its ongoing struggle toward justice.

In all, the different sections of the park provide diverse opportunities for exchange and discovery. The Sunset Canopy design offers park visitors different modes of engagement, from active participation to observation, and is programmed for diverse activities like basketball, pickleball, yoga, and music. The southern end of the park offers opportunities for educational programs or calm and quiet relaxation. Theaster Gates' installation A Monument to Listening is programmed with local partners to explore themes of belonging, reconciliation, and dialogue.



Yaw Agyeman performing at
A Monument to Listening
at the opening of
Tom Lee Park.

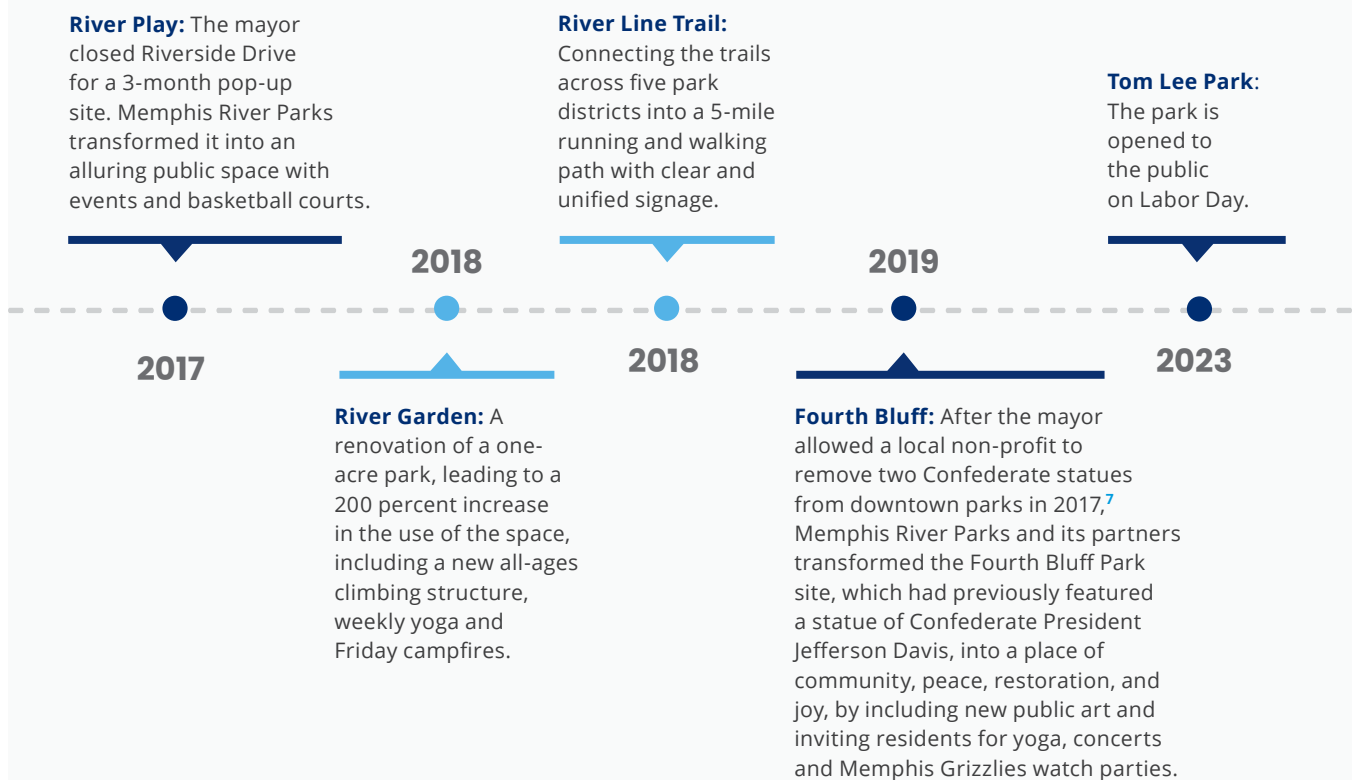


02.

GRADUAL PLACEMAKING

Significant capital investments at the scale of Tom Lee Park are often multi-year processes. Early on, Memphis River Parks understood that it is easier for residents and potential donors to imagine something different if they can see it and feel it, so they maintained the momentum of engaging residents during the six years of park design and construction through a strategy of gradual placemaking. With funding from Reimagining the Civic Commons, a national placemaking and learning initiative, Memphis River Parks tested new concepts and pop-up installations in various sites on the riverfront. These concrete and continuous public space experiments have allowed Memphis River Parks to present its vision and demonstrate its standard of design equity and excellence in accessible experiences for residents and build credibility to establish new partnerships with local organizations. The gradual placemaking has also allowed Memphis River Parks to incorporate the riverfront into the lives of Memphians in functional and tangible ways before the formal opening day of Tom Lee Park.

Timeline of Gradual Placemaking Interventions





The park provides opportunities for active play and relaxation.



03. NEIGHBORLINESS AND SAFETY

Research indicates that people have a clear understanding of the difference between being a neighbor and being a friend. Being a neighbor builds on the willingness to be friendly and engaging, but it protects people’s privacy and does not aspire to continued dependency. Being a neighbor is helping when needed but “not being in each other’s pockets”.⁸

As with its gradual placemaking strategy, Memphis River Parks nurtured neighborly relationships among park users through multiple iterations and interventions during park design and construction. This approach was explicitly on display on opening weekend with park staff wearing T-shirts that said “Hi Neighbor” and “We’re All Neighbors Here”. The park organization has intentionally focused on positive messaging on responsible behavior and encouragement of engagement in its signage. Choosing the concept of neighbor intentionally sent a message of belonging and cordial relationships while not assuming harmony or friendship. Memphis River Parks made the

Parks can promote a sense of neighborliness through their design and programming

This approach was explicitly on display on opening weekend with park staff wearing T-shirts that said “Hi Neighbor” and “We’re All Neighbors Here”.

decision to invest in trained park rangers with “Hi Neighbor” T-shirts who actively engage with visitors instead of employing a visible uniformed police presence, understanding that park users may not always associate the presence of police with a sense of safety and belonging.

The rangers are front-line ambassadors for the park. They create and convey an ambiance of neighborliness and safety by personally greeting visitors to the park, by continually walking to guarantee the safety of the park and deter negative activity, by cheerfully answering questions about the overriding purpose of the park, and by exuding pride in the impact of this park on Memphis as a place for a diverse population to create connections.

Parks can also promote a sense of neighborliness through their design and programming, which builds on shared social norms and an expectation of friendliness, while recognizing people's diversity and need for self-determination. The naming of parks, public art, signage, and programming provide opportunities for communicating shared norms and for a more inclusive re-interpretation of local history and assets. Highlighting the voices of marginalized and historically underrepresented groups is a way to enable a sense of welcoming and belonging without alienating other visitors.⁹

04. PARTNERSHIPS

From its inception, the Tom Lee Park redevelopment has been supported by partnerships among Memphis River Parks, the city government, and local and national foundations. The Kresge Foundation and the Hyde Family Foundation played instrumental roles in supporting Memphis River Parks in learning from other experiences, advancing design excellence, and funding. To further grow the impact of the park investment, Memphis River Parks served as the convening organization for Memphis' participation in Reimagining the Civic Commons.¹⁰ Participation in Reimagining the Civic Commons strengthened the local community of placemakers, provided seed funding, and allowed learning and benchmarking from other cities. The local collaboration within the program allowed Memphis River Parks to frame Tom Lee Park alongside other transformative Memphis initiatives like the City of Memphis' broader effort to bolster the vitality of its downtown, the renovation of the Cossitt Library and the move of the Brooks Museum to the riverfront.¹¹

Notably, complex civic infrastructure projects with ambitious fundraising goals require a transition broker, a person or persons who orchestrate diverse ambitions and assets around a shared mission.¹² Memphis River Parks President and CEO Carol Coletta has been recognized by many in Memphis as instrumental in the success of the project. As a globally recognized urbanist with a life-long commitment

to her hometown, she has been able to pool local and national resources for the project and act as the steward of Tom Lee Park, ensuring its place as a piece of critical civic infrastructure for Memphis.

“THIS IS HOW YOU RE-OPEN A PARK!”

Tom Lee Park opened to the public on Saturday, September 2, 2023 on schedule and on budget, with 43 percent of the park’s budget invested in women- and minority-owned firms and contractors.

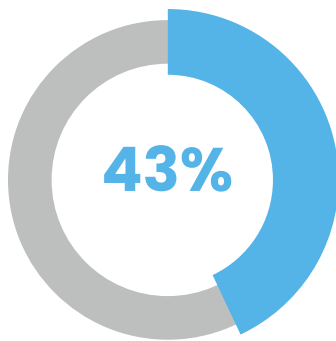
The grand opening of Tom Lee Park demonstrated a sense of joint achievement among community members: residents, local businesses, funders, politicians, and volunteers came together to bring a well designed space to life as a vibrant, inclusive and welcoming place.

The opening weekend leaned into Black culture as an asset to Memphis with a brass band, a gospel choir, and a parade down the Bluff to open the park. The Cxfeeblack partnership brought together local entrepreneurs, music and poetry, and the politics of trade and race. Descendants of Tom Lee, various faith leaders, and the artist Theaster Gates were invited to bless the park. All this recognition was done in a way that was welcoming to Memphians from all walks of life.

During the opening weekend, there was a palpable feeling of pride and accomplishment. On news and social media, the park was described as “great heights”, “having it all”, “spectacular”, and “a happy day”. The lanyards given to invited guests captured the sentiment that Coletta and her team had aspired to: This is Memphis. Local sportscasting icon, Jarvis Greer, captured this emotion on social media by exclaiming, “THIS is how you re-open a park!”

Many of the opening speakers and the media recognized that the road to this day had not been easy. Multiple visitors echoed the same sentiment: I can’t believe this is true.

The sense of joint achievement was not only in the physical transformation of the park but also in the atmosphere and engagement in the park. This “neighborliness” building on friendliness stood as a symbol of what community can accomplish when it unites with a common purpose.



of the park’s budget
invested in women-
and minority-owned firms
and contractors.

THIS is how you re-open a Park!

Tom Lee Park, Memphis
on the Mississippi River.



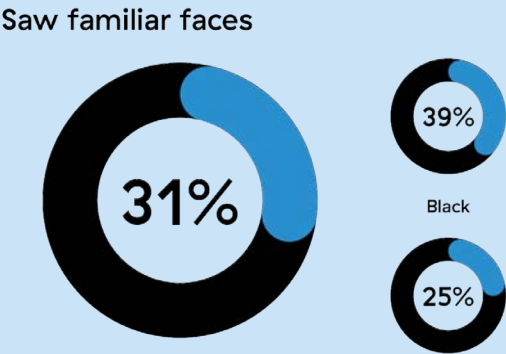
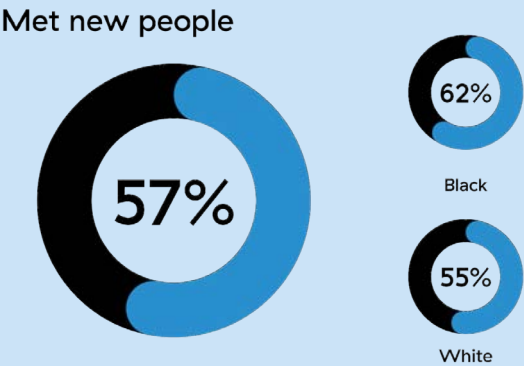
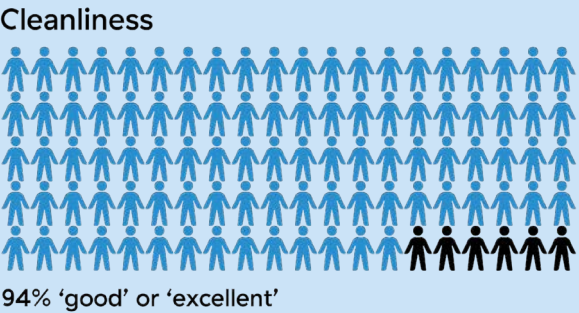
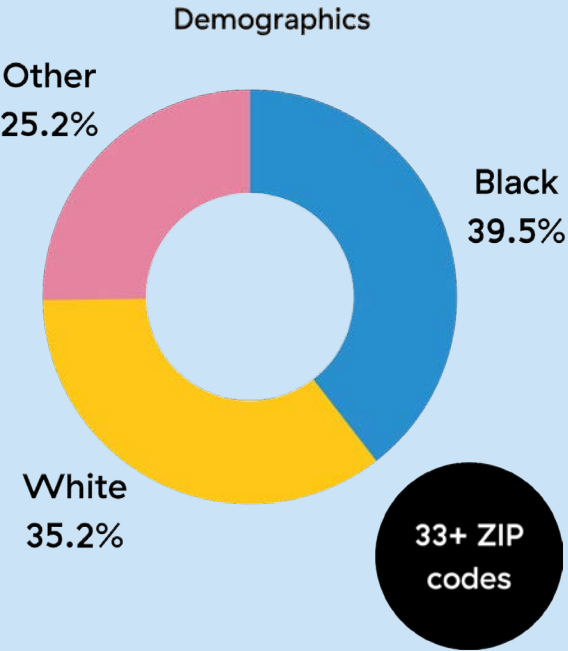
A survey distributed by Memphis River Parks and Innovate Memphis after opening day demonstrated that Tom Lee Park is on its way to becoming common ground for Memphis residents. Of the 214 respondents, nearly 40% self-identified as Black or African American and another 35% self-identified as White. A majority of visitors (57%) reported meeting someone for the first time at Tom Lee Park, including strangers or friends of friends, and a third (31%) reported recognizing people at the park that they had never met. Overwhelmingly, 88% of respondents rated the safety of the park as good or excellent.

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SURVEY

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Graphics are courtesy of Memphis River Parks Partnership.

KEY LESSONS

Lesson 1: **Design Equity** **and Excellence**

Park organizations can push for the highest possible quality standard in design, programming, and maintenance while demonstrating their commitment to equity through diverse and inclusive design teams, commissioning public art by artists from underrepresented groups, reinterpreting local history to highlight more diverse voices, and procuring from women and minority-owned businesses.

Lesson 2: **Gradual** **Placemaking**

Park organizations can steer and understand resident expectations and mitigate risks in capital projects through placemaking efforts and smaller-scale interventions during design and construction. Gradual placemaking can build and uphold momentum, support fundraising, introduce the desired quality standard to residents, build partnerships locally and beyond, and mitigate risks in design and communication.

Lesson 3: **Neighborliness** **and Safety**

Parks can promote a sense of neighborliness, which builds on shared social norms and an expectation of friendliness, while recognizing people's diversity and need for self-determination. The naming of parks, public art, signage, and programming provide opportunities for communicating shared norms and for a more inclusive reinterpretation of local history and assets. Highlighting the voices of marginalized and historically underrepresented groups is a way to enable a sense of welcoming and belonging without alienating other visitors.¹³

Lesson 4: **Partnerships**

Building joint projects with multiple stakeholders requires leadership that can carry the vision and ambition of a project when searching for solutions to meeting multiple interests. Philanthropies can play a vital role in supporting peer learning and coalition building, de-risking projects for local elected officials, and allowing projects to stay on a clear and ambitious course in the midst of competing interests.

OPPORTUNITIES

As Tom Lee Park welcomes residents to its riverbank, we identify two development opportunities to ensure that it meets its potential in serving as common ground for all Memphians.

First, overall connectivity and safety on the streets leading into Tom Lee Park should be improved to facilitate the park's accessibility to all users. Memphis River Parks, the City of Memphis, and other community stakeholders could partner by focusing on:

- **Facilitating Park Access:** Build on the momentum from Tom Lee Park to improve the design, quality, and maintenance of sidewalks, bike lanes, and parking facilities leading to Tom Lee Park to encourage users to arrive via mixed modes of transportation while ensuring that the gateways to the park convey a sense of safety and belonging for all.
- **Community Safety:** Apply the lessons from Tom Lee Park to stronger situational awareness and systemic response to positively impact the safety experience of the entire downtown as a collaboration between law enforcement and other safety and community actors.

Second, to sustain the potential of the park, many of the lessons and principles that have driven the development phase can be codified into practice and guiding documents. This would benefit Memphis River Parks' own programming and staff development, and the larger placemaking community of Memphis, and solidify Memphis River Parks as a national and global thought leader on the potential of public spaces.

- **Partnership Development:** Turning the lessons from Tom Lee Park into guidelines, policies, and stakeholder maps for belonging and social mixing for the local placemaking coalition.
- **Staff and Program Development:** Integrating the story of Tom Lee, neighborliness, and the park's commitment to highlighting Black voices and experiences into sustained programming and staff development practices and policies.



The Active Core of Tom Lee Park with the Sunset Canopy and a world-class playground provides opportunities for active play, services, and people watching.



CONCLUSION

Public spaces derive meaning from their use: from how visitors and residents play, rest, connect, exercise, wander, and explore along their paths or open spaces. Fostering meaning-making through the use of public spaces is a guiding principle for placemakers who seek to create welcoming, inclusive places for all. This case study of the redesign and reopening of Tom Lee Park illustrates one case of a placemaking coalition engaging residents and national partners to build a world-class public park along a city's disinvested and overlooked waterfront. Memphis River Parks was determined to do things differently in connecting the city to its riverfront and thus led the brokering and stewardship of resources and perspectives from philanthropy, placemaking entities nationally and locally, and Memphians toward a historically divisive but potentially healing community space. The Memphis River Parks' approach to developing Tom Lee Park offers key lessons for other cities and public space leaders.

In this case we identified four key strategies for creating inclusive, welcoming public spaces: **1) Design Equity and Excellence, 2) Gradual Placemaking, 3) Neighborliness and Safety, and 4) Partnerships.** Through these strategies, Memphis River Parks transformed a once moribund site into a nationally heralded public park. Memphis River Parks and its partners activated or amplified latent connections and ongoing and new conversations to bring local communities into the design, programming and launch of Tom Lee Park.



These conversations guided the coalition behind Tom Lee Park to embrace Black history and culture in Memphis as the park’s joyful, inclusive, and welcoming foundation for all.

Through strategic investments backed by strong partnerships in gradual placemaking, excellence in architecture, public art, and landscape design, communications and promotion, Memphis River Parks has created a waterfront park that offers a wide variety of programming that stimulates fun, joy, rest, and ultimately, a deep sense of belonging. This diversity in programming, the design of the physical space, and the activation of neighborliness as an operational principle strengthens the park’s ability to foster unity and inclusivity among all residents of Memphis.

Tom Lee Park today is a living embodiment of a widespread commitment in Memphis to building a stronger, more inclusive Memphis for all. The opening weekend of Tom Lee Park reflects this desire and commitment for a more inclusive city, and the role of public spaces to promote belonging. A sense of joint achievement was palpable in the atmosphere and engagement in the park on its opening weekend in September 2023, with evident collective pride in the park’s physical transformation. At Tom Lee Park, a park ranger’s endearing “Hi Neighbor” t-shirt was more than just a welcome message for park visitors. It stood alongside transformative public art and diverse public programming as a symbol of what a community can accomplish when it unites on common ground and with a common purpose.

1 Local coffee shop Cxfeeblack activates the Monument to Listening

2 Sunset Canopy, dedicated to the memory of Tyre Nichols.

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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDIT

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