

Extreme makeover: Washington Park edition

\$48 million remake has turned it from frightful to friendly

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The Enquirer/Cara Owsley

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OVER-THE-RHINE — Short decorative iron fences have replaced the ugly concrete walls that just two years ago surrounded old and battered Washington Park.

The view now unobstructed, people see grassy lawns and blossoming beds, carefully crafted play structures and streams of clear blue water shooting in the air. Stages suggest lively entertainment. Simple strands of lighting promise romantic evening strolls. And 124 wooden benches ensure seating for all.

In six days, Washington Park becomes Over-the-Rhine's latest symbol of transformation, revealing \$48 million worth of improvements to create a place that complements a new school, new residents, new businesses and soon, a new Music Hall.

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The interactive water feature at Washington Park is a 7,000-square-foot focal point. It consists of 130 pop jets that can be synchronized to music and lights. / The Enquirer

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A lot is being asked of the park, by promoters who hope it creates constant activity in another quadrant of Over-the-Rhine. By developers who plan to open restaurants, retail stores and more residences surrounding it. By arts patrons who'd like to safely linger before and after concerts and enjoy free entertainment on the park's lawns and stages. And by residents of the surrounding neighborhood, which has housed two generations of the city's poorest people. They just want to feel welcome as one of the region's oldest communities evolves.

A careful balancing act has brought the park this far. Now that it's built, planners say diverse programming, attention to cleanliness and safety and an openness to new ideas will be needed to keep people coming back to a park once shunned by many.

"Arguably this is the most significant investment we have made – it's key to the revitalization of Over-the-Rhine," says Steve Leeper, president and CEO of park developer and operator Cincinnati Center City Development Corp. (3CDC). "Our goal is to provide a safer and higher quality of life for all residents."

Will you visit Washington Park once it reopens?	
Yes	(582) 75.78%
No	(172) 22.4%
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Demographics changing in area around park

The deteriorating historic buildings and vacant properties along Vine Street and around the park continue as the focus of 3CDC's Over-the-Rhine redevelopment. Urban planning experts call the work since 2005 a top national example of ongoing revitalization – 249 new residential units are now occupied and 27 businesses bustling.

For the city, that means new taxpaying workers and residents, an important goal of redevelopment. Census data shows a 2010 population with higher average incomes than a decade prior (Home ownership rates have jumped nearly sixfold.)

The racial composition of the area also has changed. About 410 fewer African-Americans live in the blocks around the park, and 34

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more white people. Whites now make up a third of the population.

It's been a stark change for longtime residents like Andrew Fitzpatrick, 70, who moved to the neighborhood in 1981 and now lives on Vine Street in a \$229-a-month efficiency apartment. He and his late wife brought up two children in Over-the-Rhine.

"I miss the 'poor' restaurants, I mean, I can't afford one of those \$6 hot dogs" at the Senate restaurant, he says. "The jobs aren't here within walking distance any more, either, not nearly enough."

Still, he is not against change and says he welcomes newcomers.

"I can go anywhere and get along with everyone," Fitzpatrick says. "I've invited some of the new people to the jazz concerts at my church," St. Trinity on Race Street, across from Washington Park. "But I love all people, the young professionals included."

Some of them will talk to Fitzpatrick. Others don't. He says he is embarrassed by African-American panhandlers on Vine Street or those who urinate in public.

Bottom line: "We all have to learn how to live with each other," he says.

Planning a park to lift the whole neighborhood

To that end, the new Washington Park should help, park design experts say. A key to any great neighborhood is a public gathering place.

Developer 3CDC partnered with the Cincinnati Park Board in 2006 when it learned Washington Park School would be demolished. Just one year before, Cincinnati Public Schools was on record in the Enquirer with plans to raze and rebuild the school where it stood.

The developer and the park board needed to formulate a new park plan that would quash old perceptions of the park as a place for loiterers, drug dealers, panhandlers and protesters; where benches were broken, trees dead and sidewalks cracked. Weeds overtook flower beds and paint chipped from the once-lively Civil War-era bandstand that Over-the-Rhine residents tried to maintain because, they say, officials wouldn't.

Importantly, the park plan should contribute to the neighborhood's efforts to reduce crime. In 2000, police responded to 3,135.5 crimes per 1,000 people in Over-the-Rhine and nearby Pendleton. Although the number of crimes dropped 39 percent by 2010, the rate remains twice as high as the average city neighborhood. And serious crime incidents increased again last year.

Developer 3CDC and the Park Board hired Human Nature Inc. to create and implement a new master plan. The Walnut Hills planning group, led by Chris Manning, had just completed the board's centennial plan, making city parks catalysts for rebirth, classroom laboratories and art galleries, tourist destinations, community living rooms and safe havens. They'd also be revenue

generators – the perfect spot to host an event.

Washington Park would be a chance to implement that plan. It would combine history that tourists love – Civil War-era monuments, a bandstand and open views of special buildings – with interactive, state-of-the-art play areas for kids and dogs, stages for shows and a broad civic lawn for community events or fundraisers. To achieve the living-room feel, they'd add more trees, benches, walkways and game tables.

“We ended up in a place very similar to the buildings they are renovating in Over-the-Rhine,” Manning says. “You sense that history is important and has been honored, but there is this breath of fresh air and newness.”

“It's kind of representative of the timeline of human interaction with this place.”

They led focus groups of dozens of neighborhood residents, businesses and organizations. They also took trips to the new Millennium Park in Chicago and numerous parks in New York. Specifically, they studied Bryant Park, a 6.5-acre midtown Manhattan park now bustling with a film series, restaurant, young professional happy hours, carousel, circus entertainment and story time for kids, and 24-hour public restrooms.

In 1979, 500 violent crimes happened within that park's bounds. Park leaders cracked down on crime the following year and in the late 1980s began its massive transformation.

“The whole city was successful after we were. Eventually the threat of crime became something we don't think about,” says Dan Biederman, president of Bryant Park Corp. and a national urban park consultant.

Important to the local group's plans was demolition of the existing park's swimming pool and basketball court. That allowed the park to expand from six acres to eight, occupying two full city blocks between 12th and 14th streets. Some residents fought the decision – neighborhood kids still swam and shot hoops there – but it met the majority of stakeholders' desire for a massive civic lawn and additional parking spaces.

A 450-car parking garage would be built under the new portion of the park, providing secure access to neighborhood visitors.

Balancing act required for park to succeed

3CDC has a careful balancing act ahead, creating a place that feels safe and lively, but also respecting the peace of neighbors, a key concern of Bonnie Neumeier, a resident for 40 years and co-founder of the Drop Inn and Peaslee Neighborhood centers.

Unlike its dramatic makeover of Fountain Square, which revitalized a public space surrounded by corporate Cincinnati, Washington Park is in the middle of what has historically been a residential neighborhood.

“Washington Park used to be a peaceful, passive park,” Neumeier says. She’s worried programming will disrupt residents with loud noise and bright lights, and park personnel will order homeless people and undesirables out of the park.

3CDC plans to handle noise and lights by enforcing park hours of 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Planned weekly bluegrass, jazz and rhythm & blues concerts will end by 10 p.m. and Saturday movie nights by 11. Park management also will collect and respond to feedback from residents in the first few days of programming, says John Fox, 3CDC’s vice president of events and programming.

The role of six 24-hour park ambassadors, hired by the park board, will be to pick up trash, give directions, troubleshoot problems and welcome guests.

“Some people are skeptical about about how it’s all going to work out,” Fox says. “The only way we can prove them wrong is just to do the best we can at being welcoming and open.”

Safety is also a concern of those coming from around the region. The park already is designed to be open, giving clear views along pathways. 3CDC has installed 40 video cameras throughout the park, monitored by city and park police. It employs security personnel 24 hours a day in the garage.

During events where alcohol is served, 3CDC will hire required patrols. Otherwise, no dedicated police officers are assigned to the park.

“The best way to make people feel welcome and safe in the park, is just to have a lot of people there,” Fox says. “That’s part of why we have events.”

At the extreme, Josh Spring of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition remains skeptical that the park’s high ideals will be realized. He fears it will be like the Gateway Corridor on Vine Street, where he says the community’s poor and minority residents are treated like outsiders. They wonder what access will be like to public restrooms in the park.

And similar to the situation at Fountain Square, Spring is concerned about 3CDC’s control of Washington Park.

“They’re telling us we have to go through a private company to use a public park,” he says.

Park superintendent of planning and design, Steve Schuckman, says park policies won’t change despite 3CDC’s management of the park and its events. And its restrooms, though hours have not been established, will be open to all.

“People will see that nothing has changed with 3CDC,” he says. The group’s board includes Enquirer president and publisher Margaret E. Buchanan and vice chair Joseph Pichler, retired Kroger Co. chairman and chief executive. His son, Josh Pichler, is the Enquirer’s executive business editor.

Fitzpatrick, the long-time Vine Street resident, has some concern that Over-the-Rhine natives won't fit in the new park plans. But he likes the renovations and remains optimistic the park will embrace them all.

New relationships already taking hold

Some relationships already are forming to help make the park a welcoming place to all.

Leeper and other 3CDC leaders reached out to Peaslee, a 28-year-old organization providing educational and cultural programming for youth in Over-the-Rhine and Pendleton.

Two dozen children ages 4 to 10, enrolled in Peaslee's Early Learning Center, will attend the July 6 opening of Washington Park, says Kathy Hunt, Peaslee executive director.

"Washington Park might be a new resource for our children and families to expand their view of community," says Hunt, who is aware of the tension involving 3CDC and some people and groups in the community.

"There is a realization we need to try, we need to give them the benefit of the doubt on Washington Park."

Another agency that has worked closely with 3CDC for several years is Emanuel Community Center, located in the 1300 block of Race Street, just to the east of Washington Park.

Emanuel led creation of the park's first public event, OTR Flags, an installation of 120 hand-painted silk flags on the park's edges. A broad cross-section of neighborhood residents painted the flags.

"We are bringing Over-the-Rhine together – new residents and established residents," says Nicole Ware, Emanuel chief executive. OTR Flags, Ware adds, "engages the community in a healing, redemptive and positive re-opening of Washington Park."

A youth-based circus troupe based at Emanuel, My Nose Turns Red, will perform July 6 at the park opening and again in August at the Over-the-Rhine Community Festival, another park grand opening event.

There is other precedent for positive interaction across the seeming class and race gulfs of Over-the-Rhine. The new K-12 School for Creative & Performing Arts, which opened in 2010 across 12th Street from Washington Park and across Elm Street from the Drop Inn Center, has formed a positive relationship with the region's largest homeless shelter.

The school provides tickets for Drop Inn Center residents to attend performances in its auditorium. String performers and singers have performed many times for center residents. Some SCPA high school students now volunteer at "the Drop" after their initial exposure, and groups of parents and students have toured the center following performances.

“Some people thought we would have a problem, but we don’t,” says Fanni Johnson, the center’s emergency shelter director. “We have a wonderful relationship that’s getting better all the time.”

Programming is key for bringing in people

Fox and his team, with lessons from Fountain Square and Bryant Park, are working hard to program the park with diverse events, accepting input from across the neighborhood and region.

A full day of events will be scheduled on Saturdays and Sundays in July through September for dogs and their owners and kids and their parents. Sports leagues will happen on Wednesday nights. Musicians play Wednesday through Friday evenings. And then there’s movie night each Saturday.

Special events also are planned. Cincinnati Opera will host pre-show receptions. The World Choir Games will offer free “Friendship Concerts” this week and next. The band Over the Rhine gives a free concert July 22. The City Flea, an urban flea market concept, happens three summer Saturdays.

The annual OTR Community Festival, postponed during construction, happens again Aug. 4. And Celtic and MidPoint Music festivals will overtake the lawn in September.

Fox expects to regularly host recess for Emanuel and SCPA kids and pop-up performances by local arts and theater groups.

But the park also is designed for activities no one has even thought of yet.

“Part of the fulfillment we get is watching the community use these spaces,” Manning says. “They will find ways to use that space in ways we’ve never imagined.”
