

founded the Flora Conservancy of Forest Park, a nonprofit organization that mobilizes volunteers, master gardeners, and students to work with park authorities to install and maintain landscape projects in the master plan. Saving the city at least \$450,000, based on earlier bids, Flora Conservancy teams got to work, planting 27,800 perennials at Pagoda Circle during four days in 2000. Weil and Flora Conservancy's managing director, Andrea Schnapp, recall that many people considered the job too big for a corps of volunteers. "We proved them wrong," Weil says. The conservancy continues to undertake planting projects along the waterway, including areas north of Steinberg Rink and around Deer Lake.

A significant part of the waterway system's reconstruction has been restoration of the World's Fair nexus, a large area that encompasses the Grand Basin, Art Hill, and Post-Dispatch Lake. Often referred to as the "heart of the park," the area is to be reestablished as gathering places for events ranging in scale from weddings and picnics to public concerts and festivals. Post-Dispatch Lake has been expanded, and two new islands—one for picnics and the other for habitat—have been added. A boathouse now draws boaters and provides eating facilities. An improved lagoon connects the boathouse to the Grand Basin, which is being restored to its grandeur of a century ago. Promenades lined with Holmstead elms, pavilions, landings, new basin walls, 40-to-60-foot-high water fountains, and special lighting all contribute to a spectacular setting.

Typical of the work at Forest Park, the restoration of the Grand Basin and the Post-Dispatch Lake is benefiting from a collaborative effort, says Jim Fetterman, ASLA, vice president of The Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum (HOK) Planning Group, the firm managing the large project. The HOK Planning Group profited from the original design work by Hoal and Oehme, van Sweden & Associates. CH2M Hill worked on the project's hydrology, fountains, plumbing, and electricity and designed the spillway through which the Grand Basin and the Post-Dispatch Lake join the reborn river's

Perspective

It's a Pale Shadow of a Real, Functioning River

By Heidi Hohmann, ASLA, Iowa State University

IF THE RIVER RETURNS PROJECT were a new design, its greatest weakness—the artificiality of the water system—would be clear. Some critics would decry the ersatz river as a pale shadow of a real, functioning riverine system, while others would complain that the mechanized nature of the park should be revealed, rather than hidden under a thin veneer of "ecological design." As new design, the project would, critically, be dead in the water.

But the River Returns project is not new design—it's a renovation, one attempting to fix a hundred years of misinformed decision making in an urban



park. By this I don't just mean the site's outrageous hydrological problems; somewhere along the line St. Louis also missed Olmsted's harangue about public institutions not belonging in landscape parks. As a result, Forest Park has over the years incorporated in its design a zoo, two museums, a planetarium, an ice rink, an opera house, a fish hatchery, and a golf course, as well as athletic fields ad nauseum. Though most of these elements have evolved into beloved park features, considered together they make the park a physical and programmatic potpourri. As a result, the landscape has receded from the park's design, becoming merely backdrop for these other institutions. So it's a sound idea to reestablish the river—a landscape—as both an "open space spine" and a real park destination.

To a large degree the idea works. As I drove, half lost, through Forest Park's winding roads on a bleak Sunday morning in November, the new water system rapidly became my navigating device, a highly visible feature I could use to orient myself. Not having seen Forest Park's previously pockmarked condition, I can't judge the degree to which the park has been turned around, but I can say the landscape was a lively place when I visited. Walkers, joggers, bikers,

and birdwatchers used the new trails along the river, despite the cold temperatures and leaden skies.

The redesigned river displays multiple personalities along its meandering route. To the east, Bowl and Jefferson Lakes are traditional water features: irregularly shaped fishing ponds situated amid shady lawns. Deer Lake, where a savanna landscape of towering swamp white oaks and expansive grasslands is being restored, is the project's requisite ecozone. Just upstream is the more highly designed Pagoda Circle, where a historic bandstand is situated in a sea of waving grasses, mounded shrubs, and colorful perennials. Though it may eventually blend well with the expansive grasslands of adjacent Deer Lake, Pagoda Circle is currently a little overblown, an almost steroidal composition by Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, an odd hybrid of Victorian carpet bedding and a contemporary prairie school aesthetic. In contrast is the more naturalistic Post-Dispatch Lake farther upstream.

Nestled along its banks is the new boathouse, a seemingly burgeoning profit center, its restaurant jam-packed with Sunday brunchers.

The western end of the river—its ostensible headwaters—is dominated by the Grand Basin, a huge Beaux-Arts style pool and promenade that define an axis between the art museum and the golf course. It's a monumental space lined with walls and balustrades of cast stone, all classically proportioned, beautifully detailed, and solidly constructed. But the space feels more melan-

cholic than exuberant, because the (re)construction of such an expansive, opulent, and optimistic landscape seems somehow false and out of step with today's skeptical, postindustrial, twenty-first-century society. In other words, I'm not really sure what the design of the Grand Basin means in contemporary culture. Is it a restoration that pays homage to the past? Or is it a reconstruction that expresses our yearning for something no longer attainable?

Such questions might equally apply to the rest of the River Returns project, because the tension between the past and the present is not just located at the Grand Basin. It is also found in the master plan's desire to "return," if in name only, the long lost River des Peres, and to "restore," if in small patches only, the presettlement savanna landscape. These are admirable goals, but do these restorations—ecological or historical—evoke feelings and ideas that are truly meaningful and relevant today? Or are they simply artificial voices from an imaginary past? Overall, this project makes me wonder if renovation and repair of a landscape must be synonymous with restoration. Or can we see a way to bring nineteenth-century parks into the twenty-first century—without looking backwards?