

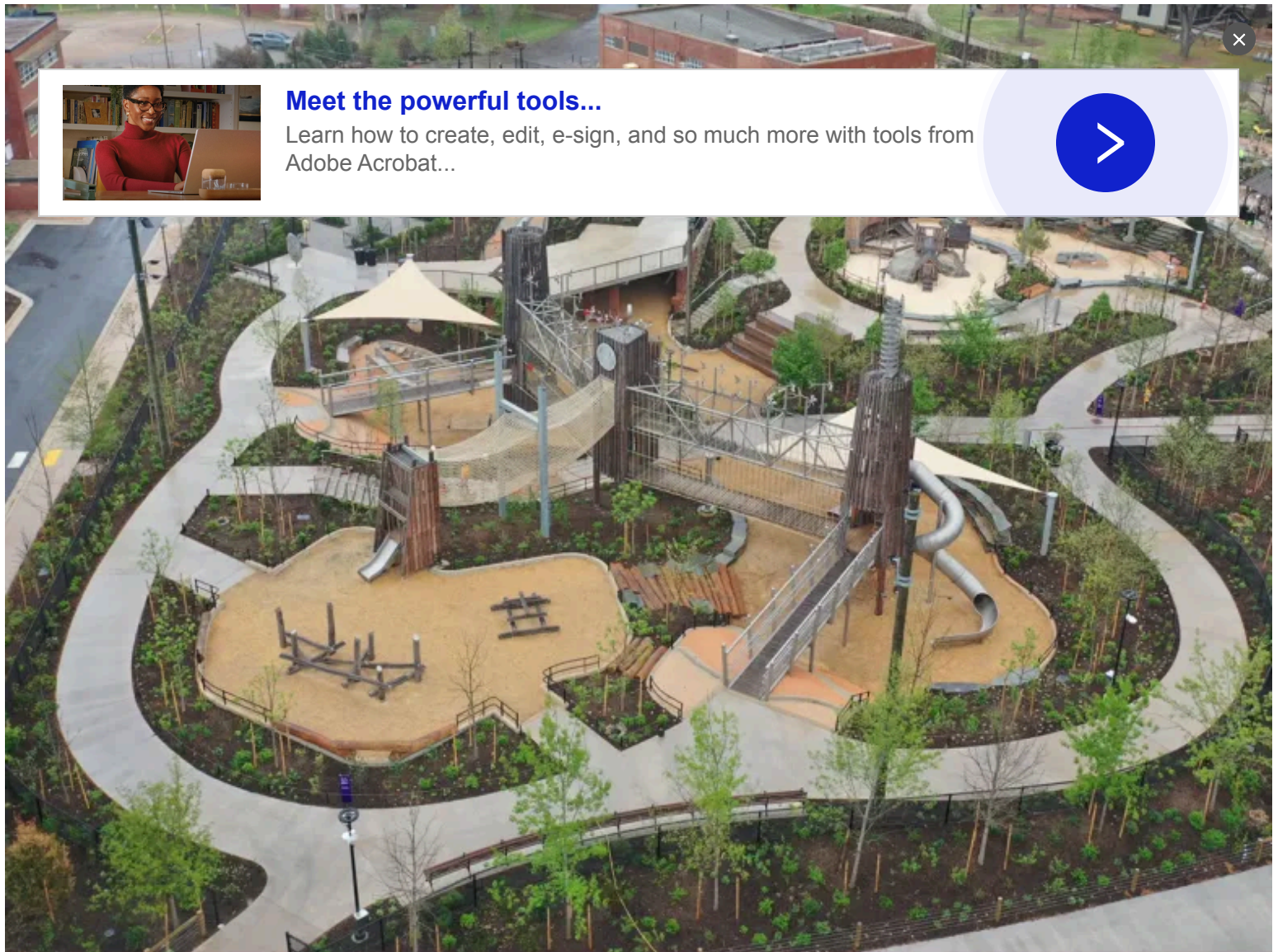
WAKE COUNTY

“An In-Town Vacation Experience”: Talking with the Designers of Dix Park’s Gipson Play Plaza

The downtown Raleigh-adjacent play space draws inspiration from local history and ecology and aims to engage visitors of all ages and abilities.

by **Chloe Courtney Bohl**

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Credit: Courtesy of the City of Raleigh

Gipson Play Plaza in Dix Park is opening this June—waterfall, sand pit, sensory maze, multi-story climbing tower, mega-swing and all.

Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, a Brooklyn-based landscape architecture firm, designed the 20-acre play space based on inspirations from North Carolina's history and natural landscape and a philosophy of adventurous, free play. The designers added elements that encourage kids to scramble, take risks, and even get a little messy. But they weren't only designing for children: the plaza has areas for picnicking, grilling, and exploring that suit all ages.

Ahead of the grand opening, INDY spoke to partner Matthew Urbanski and senior associate Hillary Archer of MVVA about the park's design.

INDY: Take me back to when you first began envisioning and designing the play plaza.

Archer: I'll never forget the day I was tasked to be the project manager. Just knowing how important it is for Raleigh, it's such a significant site. There was an enormous collaborative effort with our team, 20 different consultants from around the country—a lot were local—and the city client team and the [Dix Park] Conservancy. ✕

Urbanski: This project comes out of a master plan that we started around 2016. It was intriguing because it was very well-positioned in Raleigh, a 15-minute walk from downtown, but also a 300-acre rolling site. You can't get that anymore, normally. There was all kinds of interesting history, from the plantation era through 150 years of hospital era through what we hope is at least another 150 years of park era.

We're always trying to make what we're doing tailored and responsive to the local ecology, the culture, landscape, and needs of the community. We have a phrase we call missing experiences, where we look at a community and say, 'What could we bring here that will fill in a blank that maybe people don't know they have, but when it happens, they're going to feel like it's magical?'



Credit: Courtesy of Michael van Valkenburgh Associates

In looking at the master plan, there were challenges around how to take an inwardly-focused 300 acres that's got an institutional feel and ultimately invite people in, take down the barriers real and imagined, and make this a a vital nexus point, a gathering place for everyone in all stages of their lives.

We thought about putting a play area at the entrance to the park immediately. The feedback we got was, 'Well, that's great, but we also want a civic space, a place for performance and an announcement of the park.' I think there was a bit of a misunderstanding at first, like, 'What do you mean a playground?' Like, some molded plastic in the middle of a mulch ring? People didn't know yet what we meant. So we came up with this hybrid play plaza idea.

Tell me about some of your favorite elements.

Urbanski: Once we had the civic idea, we thought, 'Nothing better than a fountain.' Especially in Raleigh, with it being so hot. And if it could become a play fountain, that would be good.

Then we went into the public process. We always love to ask people, 'What are your inspirational areas in the region?' We were directed to go west and look at the rocks and the waterfalls. We were directed towards the east and all of the beautiful plants there. And we were directed to go look at the Yates Mill, a neat historic element right down the road, and all of these things started to become a mashup in our minds about what we could do. Instead of having your typical fountain in the middle, we would do a waterfall inspired by nature, and also by Yates Mill.

It would be engaging—something beautiful you could just look at, or splash around and play in. So we created this theatrical display with water, animated with extra splashing. You could walk behind it, because who wouldn't want to walk behind a waterfall? And that feature gives you a clue, as you come in from Lake Wheeler Road or the parking lot, that there's something beyond.



Credit: Courtesy of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates

Archer: The site was super flat [in the beginning]. These were old ball fields where historically there were softball games between the patients of the hospital and the public.

Urbanski: But it was a play area!

Archer: Exactly. It was a recreation area, and we kept that spirit alive. But ultimately we added 18 to 20 feet of new topography.

Our entire design phase happened during COVID, and I'll never forget Matt trying to come up with an idea of how we could use stone to create this fountain. He was using pieces of wood in his basement, making this little physical model with a piece of cellophane for the water. It was a great moment in our process.



Credit: Courtesy of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates

Let's talk about the play space. Looking at the images, I'm seeing lots of natural materials and this big structure for kids to climb and explore.

Urbanski: In Raleigh, Robin Moore and Nilda Cosco run this workshop called the **Natural Learning Initiative**, and we've collaborated with them for, like, 30 years. They embrace this idea of more adventuresome play, so that choice was rooted in the community. Plus interest in gardens, horticulture, nature. And then there's the local woodworking tradition.

We wanted to use the slope of this ridge that we made [for the waterfall] and make a play environment that incorporated water into play—because of the heat and the fun and inventiveness and the passive learning that could come out of manipulation of water. We came up with this idea of combining two types of play: imaginative play, little houses and pretending you're a shopkeeper, and then water play, which can be quasi-scientific, with Archimedes' screws and shunts and water chutes.



Credit: Courtesy of City of Raleigh

Our collaborators in Germany, Richter, made this beautiful [play structure] inspired by a historic mill, with paddles and water wheels. We placed that into a garden that would have trees and shrubs layered over it to provide shade and make it feel almost like one of these rural mills you find in the hills of North Carolina.

And then there's the sand pit. We learned that sand and water are super great for kids, they're manipulatable surfaces, something that you can get messy with. This is a little bit subversive, and slightly against helicopter parenting and overly-controlled play environments. The kids are going to get covered with sand. But we have nice bathrooms built into the hill, with a changing area to get the kids out of their wet clothes.

Tell me about the sensory maze and the picnic grove.

Archer: We really wanted to make sure we were designing for all ages and abilities. This was about exploring all the senses. So a lot of the shrub species and trees have fragrances when they're flowering, or colors during the fall. The play equipment, which doesn't really look like play equipment, are all pieces that have sound or tactile engagement, a lot of different materials for that, stone, metal. We have a mirror maze within the sensory maze. We have an infinity allée, where we play with how trees that are planted in rows stack against mirrors. The gravel is crunchy underfoot, but it's an ADA accessible material, so anyone in a wheelchair or with a cane can make their way through. There's also benches, and lighting at night.



Gipson Play Plaza sensory maze Credit: Courtesy of City of Raleigh

Urbanski: Another thing that came up endlessly [during the planning process] was eating. So we added the barbecue area [AKA the picnic grove], and we worked with a local fabricator called Raleigh Reclaimed who was able to reclaim post oaks that were harvested from the site and make the benches. That will be fun. It makes it more of an in-town vacation experience, where you could go there, and the kids could go play, and the adults could sit around and hang out.

The other thing that's important there is the planting. In a few years it will really be ensconced in planting in a way that will make it feel more inevitable.

Any other elements of the play plaza that really stand out to you or excite you?

Urbanski: We wanted to do something very locally authentic for materials. And we came across this blue argillite stone in Denton. We really wanted to use that because of how beautiful and unique it is [to North Carolina]. As you move through the play area, you'll see that stone all around the site.

The way we shaped the land, we were able to create ramps and bridges and make a wheelchair accessible route up and through the towers in the playscape.

And then there's an area that's an overlook that's going to have tables.



Credit: Courtesy of City of Raleigh

Is that the outpost for helicopter parents?



Urbanski: That's exactly what it is! The secret, unspoken objective is to draw the parents away from the kids. It'll give them visual access so they feel like they can let them go.

Archer: Matt talks a lot about risk, and embracing risk. It's an important part of play, because it allows kids to grow and to get outside their comfort zone. You need risk to have a meaningful, memorable play area.

What was it like working with the Dix Park Conservancy, the city, and all the residents who gave their input throughout the design process? Was there anything you wanted to do that you had to really convince them of? Or did the public suggest elements that weren't part of your original plan?

Urbanski: The enthusiasm of the Gipson donors and the quality control of the Conservancy and their members gave us a broad view of what's possible. They're not parochial. At one point, I mentioned this park in Paris, and then they all went and visited it, like, the next week. It was crazy. So these are people that have a lot of ambition, and they have helped from the financial side, but also the vision side. And then the city's enthusiasm and willingness to step out of the normal has been great.



Credit: Courtesy of Michael van Valkenburg Associates

Archer: Overall, the community engagement process was very democratic, and I don't think there was a lot of heartburn from either side. Compared to some of our other projects, it was not contentious.

One thing that comes to mind is that, after some cost estimates, we considered postponing the [91-foot-long] swing to a later phase. And actually it was the mayor and the community who were like, 'No no no, don't touch the swing! The swing has to stay.'

And so it did. We had to do some rejiggering of the budget, but the swing is one-of-a-kind, custom, and it has an accessible swing as well. It looks out at the grove, and I envision that a lot of the teen and young adult visitors will hang out in that area. It's a lot quieter. It feels like you're in someone's backyard, in a way.

I'll admit, when I read "91-foot mega-swing" on the page, I was picturing 91 vertical feet, and I was excited. But this is cool, too.

Archer: Yeah, that would be a trapeze.

Urbanski: I'm always trying to make really high swings. It's hard from a playground safety and rules perspective.

I'm thinking about all of these design choices you've described, particularly the rolling hills and the trees and plantings, that really seem to create a sanctuary away from the city. I imagine those elements will also make the space feel a little bit endless because you can't see everything at once.

Urbanski: That's the appeal. The ridge and the waterfall lend a sense of discovery, because you move through and around things. A 20-acre site could be something where you just walk into the corner and you see the whole thing, that's all she wrote. Or it could be a sense of discovery and movement and mystery, and that's what we wanted to have.



Credit: Courtesy of Michael van Valkenburgh Associates

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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