

BOLD GRAPHICS

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For gentleman designer, Shane D. Inman, president and senior principal designer of The Inman Company, interior design is an inspired lifestyle where he lives for his clients and their luxury, detailed projects.

The people's park

Text: R. Collins

The urban parks within Chicago's 26 miles of lakefront have remained unique public, cultural, and ecological assets on the fringes of the metropolis for more than a century. They constitute a waterside reprieve from the bustling built landscape and are diverse in their offerings, with visitors being able to participate in everything from community gardening, golfing, and paddle boarding, to picnicking, fishing, and birdwatching for upwards of 250 species.

Of Chicago's many parks, Jackson Park, with its perforations of lagoon, harbor, and world-renowned institutions like the Muse-

um of Science and Industry and the nearby University of Chicago, and the adjacent South Shore park area and its on-site cultural center, are two of the city's oldest and most culturally significant parks by many standards. Jackson Park, a Chicago Landmark, was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux for the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition and it is a key piece of the city's designed waterfront network, as is the South Shore, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Together, the parks now serve a diverse population of Chicago's South Side neighborhoods alongside their variety of active

and ecological functions. As historic parks living in a contemporary urban setting, they are also challenged to balance preservation with the needs of current users and potential future changes to their interfaces. An extra layer was added to this challenge when a proposal to locate the Obama Presidential Center in Jackson Park in 2018 arrived alongside another proposal that would consolidate the Jackson Park and South Shore golf courses into a single 18-hole championship golf venue designed by Tiger Woods.

With a packed potential future for the parks on many minds, city constituents went to work envisioning a framework plan

that would assess the needs of current park users, preservative opportunities, and ways in which the parks could support the new additions. The resulting South Lakefront Framework Plan was a community-centered vision for the 627 acres of park space that was undertaken by the Chicago Park District and a variety of experts, landscape and architecture historians, engineers, and designers.

Among them was SmithGroup, an architecture, engineering, and design firm with 15 offices across the United States—including Chicago—and one in Shanghai. Since its founding in 1853, SmithGroup has remained firmly on the edge of modern design and industry, with special internal groups devoted to research and innovative design technologies. The firm has designed one of Henry Ford's first manufacturing plants as well as NASA's Lunar Sample Receiving Laboratory, and the firm works in design markets from government and healthcare to higher education, waterfront, historic preservation, and more.

For the South Lakefront Framework Plan, which was built off a previous plan from 1999, SmithGroup facilitated a series of public meetings and stakeholder strategy sessions to gather the needs and wishes of residents and then convert them into com-

munity-serving design recommendations. These could guide future decision making while maintaining the parks' legacies, environmental integrity, and inclusivity.

"It goes back to 1999; we worked with the community on a previous version of the South Lakefront Framework Plan, which was for Jackson and Washington Parks, and that was at a similar time when there were a lot of big proposals happening in those parks," said Gregg Calpino, PLA, LEED AP BD+C, landscape architect, principal architect, and director of SmithGroup's Madison and Milwaukee offices.

As a designer on the previous plan from 1999—one of his first projects with the firm—Calpino recognized the importance of creating a similar grassroots-community-engagement process, and especially at a time when the area was increasingly recognizable through the attention surrounding the Obama Presidential Center and golf course renovation by the Tiger Woods team. As with increased expectations, the team was met with increased interest in the prospective design plans.

"The community loved that we were brought back in, because they remember that, but in this case we also had other influences; the Obama Center brought a certain level of spotlight and expectations with it

and it brought big crowds too," Calpino said. "The first night everyone expected that we would do that same thing, so we were set up at South Shore Cultural Center and we had breakout rooms that had tables and facilitators and then we had 700 people show up."

With more than 600 acres to contend with, a brightened national spotlight, and a wide variety of stakeholders to service through design, the design team's early work consisted of simply listening to the surrounding community and trying to join facets of the new institutional proposals with their needs, according to Kris Lucius, LEED GA, ASLA, principal landscape architect at SmithGroup.

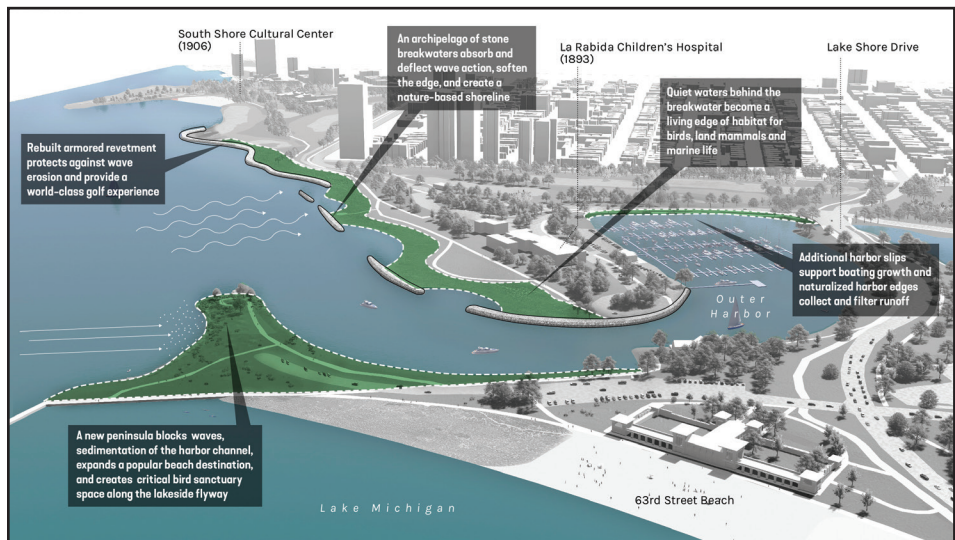
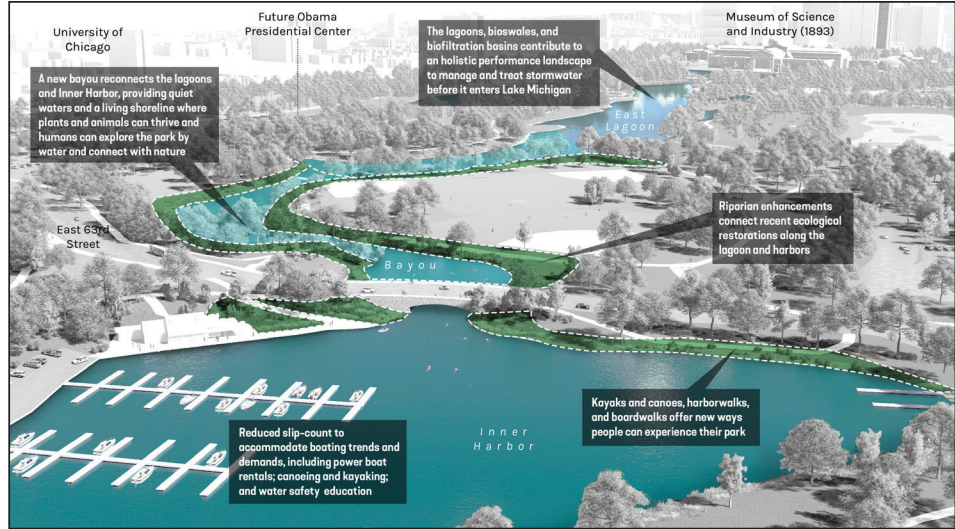
"So much of it beginning right out of the gate was hurry up and listen," Lucius said. "We had maybe 40-to-50 different stakeholder groups from the various marinas, yacht clubs, harbors, and people who do sports you've never heard of every Tuesday afternoon and for each group you're talking about the most important aspects defining their life that they do within that park whether its sailing or pickleball or reading."

The architects also had access to about a century-worth of material from the Park District to guide their understanding of park history, and they reached far back, beyond the 1999 framework plan, to Olmsted's orig-



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inal schematics for the parks when examining their designed history. While renewing Olmsted's idea that parks serve a democratic and restorative role in city life, the team was even more purposeful to define an inclusive vision for their future. This aspect was especially informative and important for Lucius, who noted that, as is to be expected, the land, society, and people it serves have changed significantly since the late 19th century.

"Early in the project we were pulling our boards together with these gray, black, and white photos of the things that happened in the parks and the value that we saw in that. But in talking to the community, which is predominately Black, hearing from them that they don't see those photos the same way that we do, they feel really dissociated from that history, because everybody's white in those photos," Lucius said.

"Just restoring something on the basis of its broader cultural value would have alienated a large segment of the population that uses that park and lives amongst that park every day. It underscored the need really quickly for us to add added layers of value to it, because everybody is going to be seeing things through starkly different eyes," Lucius added.

Basic categories by Olmsted were re-envisioned in the new plan, such as areas for "recreative or individual use," "gregarious or social use," and "extertive or athletic use," according to Lucius, but these also carry a contemporary, multi-dimensionality that allows the parks to remain adaptive for the ways they will change in the future.

"Part of that was layering performance into the landscape and making sure that everything we do is doing two or three things at a time," Lucius said. "It's one thing to say we're going to build a canal in there, but that plan might not come to life if it only rests on one hook, because there's fewer funding options and fewer people to rally behind it. But if you can get that idea to click at five or six different levels, you'll get more of a broad investment and a higher likelihood of being implemented."

Aquatic plants from wetlands and living shorelines, for example, can improve water quality along the South Lakefront's bayou and lagoon, while a weir at their junction can control the flow of water, fish, and paddle craft from lake to lagoon. Picnic groves and playing fields can also be ecological mitigators when they are interlaced with rain gardens and biofiltration basins. Active and passive spaces seamlessly combine in a solution that tucks the outfields of Hayes Field in Jackson Park into the tree line of a flexible meadow to utilize more land and encourage longer park stays.



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When turning to the combined Jackson Park and South Shore golf courses, the team recommended weaving community acclimated spaces like pathways around the course and integrating spaces that promote biodiversity for an ecologically rich and an aesthetically pleasing experience. Another recommendation favored reduced rates to make the course more accessible, in effect providing solutions for community, proposed changes to the park's design, and maintaining landscape health. As complex parks with their own internal ecosystems, it was also important to understand their natural makeup, from arboreal canopy to shoreline condition, and the architects spent periods on-site simply studying the land itself.

To support the water-based ecology, the plan includes new breakwaters and beach cells to protect older segments of lakefront revetment from wave impact—such as near La Rabida Children's Hospital—while providing new wildlife habitats and educational opportunities to park goers. New lakefill at the 63rd Street Beach minimizes wave action and harbor sedimentation similarly. As an interactive measure, the plan also integrates these eco-structural additions with new bridges and boardwalks along the restored banks of the Jackson Park lagoons, and these lagoons could be reconnected with the park's inner harbor.

On the recreational end, the team included new soccer fields that were requested by residents, as well as a new track to accommodate a multi-sport turf field in Jackson Park that could host more events and better running speeds. Besides improved connections between picnicking spaces and amenities, the team valued maintaining unprogrammed spaces where visitors can take advantage of unscheduled natural surroundings, such as on the outskirts of the parks, where gentle berm and tree coverage carves restful spaces for picnicking, playgrounds, and gatherings.

In their entirety, the Framework Plan's recommendations overlap to position Chicago's Jackson Park and South Shore as dynamic, usable spatial groupings where urban neighborhood, natural areas, and community needs meet; and the heightened importance of preserving the best of the parks, while positioning them for future change, was a meaningful addition to Calpino's experiences on the Framework projects thus far.

"I was challenged, moved, and exhilarated; everything you can imagine as a landscape architect. It's probably the hardest project I've ever worked on, potentially, but probably the most rewarding as well because of all of that," Calpino said.



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As a framework measure, the Chicago South Lakefront Framework Plan was a comprehensive, multi-dimensional examination of existing park land and the future roles it could support. As such, it works to protect the needs of park users, while opening solutions for new usage.

“We got as specific as you could, because in a lot of cases, this document has been treated as the arbiter of some land-use and decision-making, so you don’t want to be so prescriptive, because you want to leave a designer room to finish the design, but for the community—this document brokered

a lot of conversations so you didn’t want to be so open-ended that it opened up pure interpretation,” Calpino said. “It’s a fine line of framework plans; some framework and master plans are schematic, and this had a bit of all of it.”

As of July 2020, the Chicago South Lakefront Framework plan is the official approved plan of the Park District. The Obama Presidential Center and combined golf course have yet to break ground, but the Framework Plan takes them into consideration, providing a tool for future reference when getting started. So far, the plan has

served as a guide for a beach house at the South Shore that is currently under construction, as well as work on the Lakefront Trail. It has even served as a guide for holistic lakeshore mitigation after a stormy 2019 to locate which projects needed immediate repair-funding, according to the architects. Currently, SmithGroup’s work continues with the Park District to assess the condition of shorelines, harbors, and other waterfront features to best position them for the future of Chicago.

“I was challenged, moved, and exhilarated; everything you can imagine as a landscape architect.”

—Gregg Calpino, PLA, LEED AP BD+C



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