

The nation's most exciting park project is taking shape in North Carolina

The 308-acre Dorothea Dix Park wants to be a model for civic space

By **Patrick Sisson** | Jul 9, 2019, 12:19pm EDT



If you've ever wondered how different cities' signature parks, like New York's Central Park or Chicago's Lincoln Park, would look if they were designed in the 21st century, keep your eyes on Raleigh, North Carolina.

Dorothea Dix Park, currently taking shape on a former mental hospital campus adjacent to the southern city's growing downtown, may be the nation's most exciting park project right now. It's being described as the Central Park of North Carolina—and it's not hard to see why.

How many cities get to build a new, 308-acre downtown park on protected land that's mostly been spared the last century of urban development and redevelopment? How many get to do so after projects like the High Line, Beltline, and others have showcased the promise and peril of contemporary parks as engines for both redevelopment and displacement?

In February, the city council approved a new master plan for the Raleigh park from Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, the landscape design firm behind Brooklyn Bridge Park and Maggie Daley Park in Chicago. It features a multifaceted design incorporating community spaces, botanic gardens, water features, and secluded woods.

"Operating a park while planning a park, this isn't how things normally happen," says Kate Pearce, planning supervisor for Dorothea Dix Park in Raleigh. "This will continually challenge us to be bold, but it'll also be a testing ground for new ideas."

While a spokesperson for the firm wouldn't comment on the plan—"the project is just emerging from the planning stage and not yet a landscape design"—others have described it as balancing between two visions, acting as both a bridge to a more bustling 21st-century civic center and an escape into nature in the middle of the city. The city's parks department and the public-private conservancy that will manage Dix will begin updating park infrastructure this year, in anticipation of

breaking ground on phase one next year. There's no final price tag on the project, but Pearce has previously said similar projects cost about a million dollars per acre.

Modern parks create place, and define a lifestyle

City leaders hope the park will be not only a major amenity for current city residents, but also a magnet for talent and development. Mayor Nancy McFarlane, who helped spearhead the push to purchase the land and develop the park, says part of the drive to develop Dix is rooted in economic shifts.

"Twenty years ago, you recruited the business, and then everybody moved," McFarlane tells Curbed. "Now, it's the reverse: In a global economy, we're finding that people pick where they want to live first. Economic development is about providing the quality of life to attract the best talent."

In Raleigh, McFarlane says, "we're surrounded by top-tier universities graduating great talent. My job is to get them to stay, and Dix Park is a huge piece of offering them the quality of life they seek."

But in the push to build the city's next great public space, will Dix Park disrupt communities adjacent to the park, especially in lower-income areas? New green developments, especially signature parks, have been seen as both a benefit and an accelerant for gentrification in other cities. Neighborhoods near the park, especially Fuller Heights, Caraleigh, and Carolina Pines, offer affordable living options that don't have many protections from speculation or rising property values fueled by the new park. "This kind of green space is a great way to create value in urban space without having to make as significant an investment," Winifred Curran, a DePaul professor who teaches sustainable urban development, told Curbed. "It's easier to build a park than a housing complex."

Like many other U.S. cities, Raleigh, one of the fastest-growing cities in North Carolina, is in the midst of a prolonged development boom raising serious concerns about affordability. Roughly \$2 billion in downtown commercial development has been delivered, planned, or announced since 2015, and a leading developer just pitched a \$2 billion multi-use soccer stadium complex that aims to reshape Raleigh's downtown.

Pearce says the entire team working on Dix has been mindful that a successful park needs to be successful for those who live here, and must care about the sustainability of place as much as it does ecological sustainability. In addition to the lengthy community outreach that helped shape Dix Park's master plan, a two-year process that engaged more than 65,000 residents, the city is currently working on what it is calling an "edge study" to determine how park development, and adjacent real estate development, can be harnessed and steered to create a more equitable future.

"I think in Raleigh—especially with the development trends and the fear of displacement and the actual displacement that's happening—housing is a big issue," Jacquie Ayala, a member of a park advisory committee made up of local residents, told Next City. "What we want to do is make sure that folks who have historically not had opportunities, that we can use the park as a place to really foster that true community development."

Dix can be more than a park, says Pearce. It can be a platform to address issues of housing and social justice. Park and city staff are already looking at creating programs such as workforce training or teen volunteer corps that could lead to permanent jobs.

"We could have just designed the park and the 300 acres and that would be it," says Pearce. "But because it's so important to the city, and it has a rich history and legacy, we've been intentional thinking about how it'll impact the city."

Turning a space on seclusion into one of inclusion

Creating a new signature space for Raleigh and its residents requires connecting with the surrounding community. The land's history makes that a unique challenge. Named after Dorothea Dix, a pioneering advocate for better prisons and treatment for Americans with mental illness, the hospital site has always stood apart from the city. Original developers chose Dix Hill because it was seen as a "place of perfect health with a commanding view of Raleigh." Purchased by the city for \$52 million in 2015, the campus has long been self-contained and shut off from the surrounding urban landscape, ringed by roadways.

"Dix Park was so cut off from the community, many people who have been in Raleigh their entire life never entered it," says Pearce. "Because it was a closed mental health hospital

campus, due to stigma, it wasn't on the radar, it wasn't a place you should or would go." But that seclusion has proven to be a benefit.

"We want to continue its role as a therapeutic center," says Pearce. "That's the legacy we've tried to address in the master plan, and something we've tried to use to transform the place. The goal is to change the narrative and bring the community inside."

Mayor McFarlane wants the city to improve transit access and offer more car-free options to get to Dix. That means more bike and pedestrian connections, as well as adding a stop to the in-development bus rapid-transit system and a link to a nearby rail line.

A great park for the future of the entire community

As workers begin upgrading the park and look ahead to the first phase of the park's design, there's also the question of what happens to existing buildings on campus. While the mental hospital has shut down, roughly 200 state workers, employed by the Department of Health and Human Services, still show up to the campus each day. By 2025, all state work will have stopped, and the park conservancy will have a total of 85 buildings and roughly one million square feet of indoor space to redesign, reimagine, and program.

The beginnings of the new section of Dix Park may be found in a project to convert a campus chapel into a community space.

Right now, a big part of building the new park is making locals aware of the possibilities. Last year, organizers planted a massive field of sunflowers, which became a social media sensation and drew many to Dix for the first time (the plantings will be repeated this year).

Dix Park will grow, and redefine, the city's park system, says Pearce. The sheer scale and possibilities of Dix—tested with a recent hip-hop music festival, Dreamville, organized by J. Cole—will help the department evolve.

Pearce believes that as the contours of the city's great new public space take shape, it's these kinds of events that encourage the community to take ownership of the city's new communal backyard.

"How will Dix park change surrounding space and be this democratic space for everyone?" says Pearce. "The park will be of the city, and push the city forward. But, as we're creating a great park for the future of the community, if we don't look at how it impacts the community as a whole, we're going to have unintended consequences."