

A DIFFERENT KIND OF PARK

The Creation of Peabody Adventure Park in Little Rock's Riverfront Park

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Time for an Change

In 2004, the City of Little Rock refinanced general capital improvement bonds which had been overwhelmingly approved by Little Rock voters. A component of the bond program was Parks and Recreation upgrades including \$115,000 to create a new playground in Riverfront Park. The new playground would replace an old and worn-out playground that had been there for a number of years.

This original play area was a wooden structure that looked like an old pirate ship suspended above a bed of sand. It was old, tired, and in poor repair. The boards had splintered and buckled in a number of areas because of the continuing exposure to the weathers. Ropes, which made up part of the play structure, were frayed and sagging.

The playground sat next to an old fountain that was monolithic, made of rough concrete, and functioned only intermittently and poorly.

Both the fountain and the playground faced the Arkansas River but were below the general ground level of the park. This

location made them relatively inaccessible to the general public. Because of their isolated location, safety issues arose. The situation was further exacerbated by the presence of a large number of people who are homeless spending their days and nights at the playground.

The original concept for the playground was to remove the old wooden structure and replace it with new equipment at the same location. The fountain was not addressed in renovation plans. After reading *American Playgrounds* by Susan G. Solomon and *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, the concept for the new playground began to change.

New Ways of Thinking

American Playgrounds describes the history of playgrounds and documents the progressive homogeneity of and decrease in “playability” of parks. The book cites a number of factors that caused this change in playgrounds including the fear of children being injured while taking risks in playgrounds as well as the threat of lawsuits if there was an injury. This led to the creation of park equipment that was brightly

colored and safe, but very unimaginative, e.g., the McDonald's playground. These new playgrounds generally did not challenge children to use their imaginations, take risks, or challenge them physically in any way.

Louv's book more critically examined the ideas expressed in *American Playgrounds* and critically focused on what society is and is not doing for children today. Because of Louv's book, the Little Rock Parks and Recreation Department came to the realization that the playground that was being planned would be new, brighter, and safer than the old, but would be only a slight improvement in challenging young children to explore, think, and even take risks. Parks staff also realized that any new playground in the old location would again be perceived by the general public as being isolated and remote.

The lessons from Richard Louv's book were coupled with the ideas of the members of the Parks and Recreation Department which led to a new concept for the park. Bryan Day, then the City's Parks and Recreation Director, had independently said that it should be all right for children to have acceptable risk on the playground, i.e., "It's okay to skin your knee while playing."

Two designers on the Parks staff, Mark Webre and Lorri Davis, created a draft design for a different type of park that allowed children to play and use their imaginations in a setting which had a minimum of purchased playground equipment. This rough schematic drawing also envisioned a transformation of the old fountain into a spray water pad or children.

The City understood that the \$115,000 from the bond issue would not be enough to create this new vision for a park. The management of the Little Rock Peabody Hotel and the Peabody Hotel Group were approached for a \$250,000 donation to help make the dream into a reality. Marty Belz, owner of the Peabody Hotel Group, enthusiastically embraced the idea. With the infusion of that donation along with \$40,000 that had been pledged by Riverfest, the City was ready to start the next phase of the project.

Let the Users Design

The preliminary plans needed to be further refined. Two important steps were taken next to aid in this. The first step was to get the park's constituents—children--to share their opinions on what the park should look like. The City publicized this opportunity in the newspaper and asked children to hear the thoughts and look at the

plans. So one summer Saturday, children of various ages met to discuss the park. The children were then asked to share their suggestions on what they would want in a playground.

The children were asked to draw pictures of what they wanted in a park, and also to talk about their drawings with members of the Parks staff so that they had the opportunity to elaborate on their ideas. The children were very insightful, and their thoughts markedly enhanced the final product.

Their ideas were both practical and innovative. For example, they noted that the tunnels that were conceived for the park should be large enough for them to run through, but not big enough for an adult to easily get through. They also noted that, if a tunnel was not straight, it needed a light coming from above. These are just two examples of the many innovative thoughts that the children presented.

The second step was equally important and came from a thought that was presented in *American Playgrounds*. That book noted that the earlier playgrounds were designed by architects and suggested getting young architects involved in the design of parks. Tommy Adams, one of the principals of the

Wittenberg, Delony, and Davidson, Inc., architectural firm, was approached and graciously loaned two architects to work on the project.

Chad Young and Brad Chilcote took the initial concepts, ideas, and children's drawings and further refined the park. They were also given a copy of *American Playgrounds* to read during this period of time. As predicted, Young and Chilcote were extraordinarily insightful in the final design of the park. They made two significant suggestions which transformed the park.

The first was the removal of the old fountain which allowed for a spray fountain to be built from the ground up. This incorporated the spray fountain more closely into the play area. The other suggestion was the addition of a pavilion overlooking the spray pad and the playground. The pavilion offered multiple new opportunities, but also was a new expense. Arkansas Specialty Orthopaedics was gracious to donate \$25,000 to the project to help build the pavilion.

Dedication to Quality

The project was then turned over to the Parks and Recreation staff to create working drawings and supervise the construction. The entire construction was done by the Parks

and Recreation staff and took over one year to complete. The initial job required building large retainer walls near the Arkansas River, so that the ground surrounding the new playground would be relatively level. This would also make the park more visible and open.

The project was led by two Parks employees, Jackie Collins and Leland Couch. Leland is, by training, a landscape architect. He refined the drawings even further and added some personal innovations to the design. Jackie is a talented craftsman who can build anything. His positive attitude and creativity kept the project going. As challenges arose, Jackie always found ways to successfully address them.

Leland and Jackie personally placed each large boulder in the climbing wall to ensure it was correctly placed and 100% safe. Because of the complexity of the job, they were able to place only 12 to 14 boulders each day. Not only did they place the stones in a way that they would be safe for climbing, but they also created different areas of difficulty so that climbers of all ages would be challenged. As the playground was being built, a private firm experience with spray pads completed that aspect of the park.

Reasons for Success

1. An outstanding Parks and Recreation Department which was able to take the initial concept for a different type of park and build it to perfection.

2. Enthusiastic leadership from City Manager Bruce T. Moore, Assistant City Manager Bryan Day, and Parks & Recreation Director Truman Tolefree. They believed in the project and supported the allocation of Parks staff and resources to build the project.

3. Arkansas law which allows tort immunity if there is an injury in a municipal park.

4. The generosity of private donors, the leadership of the City Board of Directors, and the overwhelming support of Little Rock voters.

5. The children and parents of Little Rock, and indeed the entire state, who have wildly embraced this different concept of a park.