

FOREGROUND / **PLANNING**

RALEIGH FINDS ITS INNER SELF



THE SOUTHERN HUB IS INVESTING IN ITS URBAN LANDSCAPE.

BY MARK HOUGH, FASLA

On the last Sunday afternoon of summer in Raleigh, North Carolina, people packed the streets of downtown for SPARKcon, a four-day “creativity festival.” The event brought out street performers, bands and dancers, and rows of vendors hawking T-shirts, craft beer, and other local goods. One booth was set up to promote Dorothea Dix Park, the 300-acre property next to downtown currently being master planned by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA). People wearing virtual reality goggles staggered and spun to get the full effect of a view only they could see: a lush lawn on the side of

a hill overlooking downtown, where two unicorns slowly walked with a princess dressed in white. The imagery was unabashedly idyllic, portraying the future heart of the new park as being both unique and magical.

Planning for Dix Park is a recent endeavor, but it is already a big deal in Raleigh. People in the city have been coveting the property’s green hills, open fields, and scores of huge trees for decades. The site had been the campus for a state-owned psychiatric facility, Dorothea Dix Hospital, named for the 19th-century mental health advocate, before it closed in 2012. Once the city bought the property three years later for \$52 million, turning it all into a public park became a popular next step. And though the park, along with other recent projects progressing in downtown, will undoubtedly attract more businesses and residents, it remains to be seen how well Raleigh will move beyond its complicated past and become the great 21st-century city it strives to be.

Raleigh and neighboring Durham and Chapel Hill make up the Triangle region, for decades one of the nation’s fastest-growing areas. Approximately 450,000 people live within Raleigh’s city limits, a growth

of more than 100,000 since 2005. As with many other midsized southern cities, suburban sprawl gradually engulfed adjacent rural communities, along with thousands of acres of farms and woodlands, while creating seemingly endless stretches of subdivisions and strip malls. The U.S. Census Bureau responded to this growth by creating a larger metropolitan area for Raleigh that spans three neighboring counties. More than 1.3 million people live there today, and it has been projected to be home to nearly one million more by 2040.

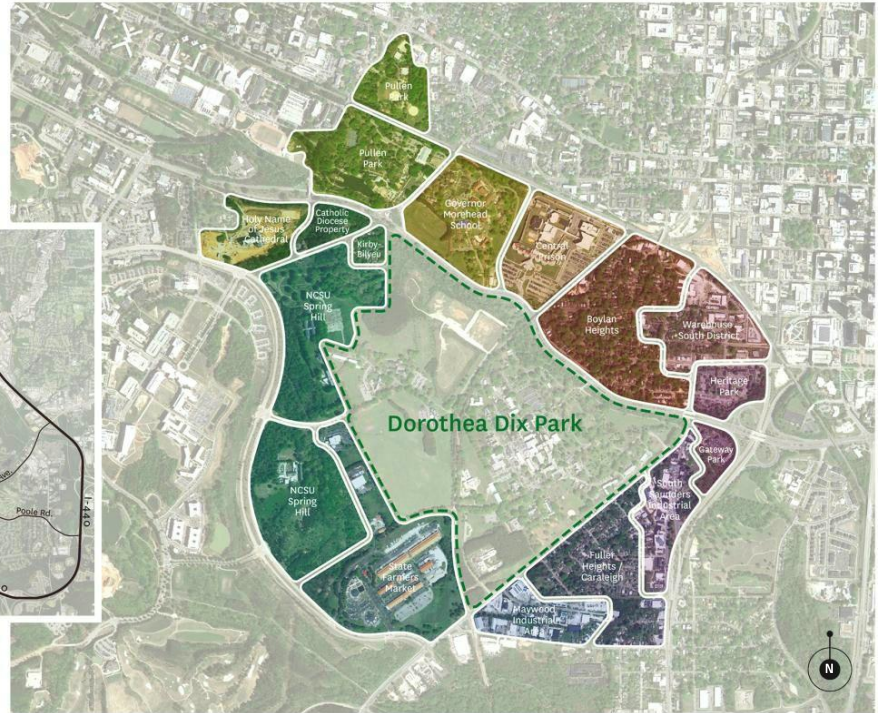
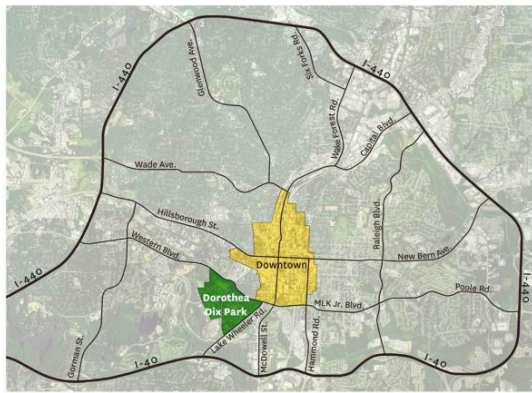
Attention shifted back toward downtown after Raleigh’s 2001 mayoral election. Charles Meeker became mayor and sought to reverse recent patterns of unchecked development. Meeker wanted public transit, smart growth, and downtown revitalization. He understood the value provided by good urban design and, in 2003, his administration created the Urban Design Center (UDC) to focus on development strategies in downtown. Two years later, Mitchell Silver, Honorary ASLA, who previously held planning positions in both New York City and Washington, D.C., and is now the commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, was hired as Raleigh’s planning director.

ABOVE

Matthew Urbanski, ASLA, of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates presents to Raleigh’s mayor, Nancy McFarlane (second from left), and others at a Dix Park interview.

FOREGROUND / PLANNING

RIGHT AND BELOW
Context maps showing
Dix Park's connection to
adjacent neighborhoods
and Raleigh's system of
roads and highways.



“My initial assessment of Raleigh was that it was a friendly, midsized city that refused to act its size,” says Silver. “I said it needed to go from Mayberry to metro.” People at the time were discussing how to improve downtown parks and open space—including the Dix property—but Silver broadened the conversation to include the entire public realm, which, he says, was a term no one in the city seemed to be using. “I basically had to explain what a city center was,” he says. As others pushed for downtown density, he advocated for more specific changes such as wider sidewalks. “Fifteen to 20 percent of the urban core should be dedicated to open space,” he says, adding, “Raleigh at the time was more like 10 percent.”

An early project for Silver was a redesign of Fayetteville Street, a primary downtown corridor that had been converted into a 1970s pedestrian mall, underused, concrete-laden, and closed off. The new streetscape, which opened in 2006, once again accommodated vehicles and was immediately considered successful. “Before this, there was very little residential—or any development—in downtown,” says Grant Meacci, ASLA, who was the Urban Design Program Manager at the UDC before leaving to start a similar position in Charlotte. “With this project, we gained the support of the public to do more. People started thinking about living downtown, which they had never done before.”

Fayetteville Street’s redesign is said to have launched \$2 billion of new investment in downtown. But there have been stumbles along the way. Plans to install a major work of art and a city square designed by the Spanish artist Jaume Plensa were canceled when members of the city council pushed to eliminate certain elements, prompting Plensa and the project’s donor to pull out. Critics lamented losing a project that could have provided similar impact as Plensa’s beloved Crown Fountain in Chicago’s Millennium Park. Instead they ended up with City Plaza, a bland, hardscape civic space that opened in 2009. Although it is wildly successful when full of people for concerts and other big events, the plaza feels sadly hollow otherwise.

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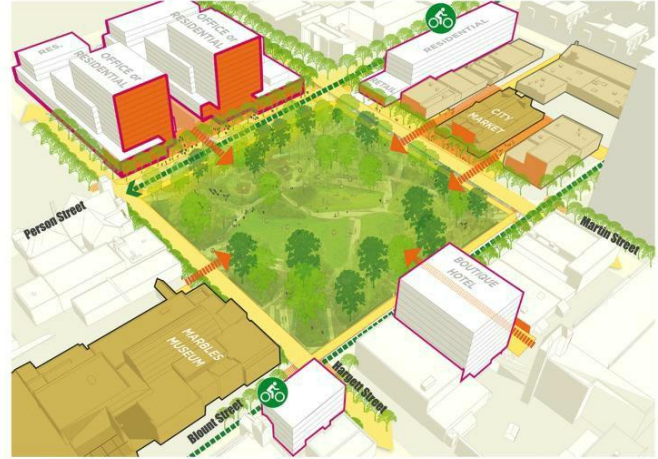
"I KNEW THERE WAS A SOUL TO RALEIGH."

—MITCHELL SILVER, HONORARY ASLA

RIGHT
Moore Square's relationship to its immediate context.

BELOW
Downtown Raleigh's urban grid features a system of historic squares and contemporary greenways.

Around 8,200 people now live in downtown Raleigh, more than twice its 2000 population. Taking into account the ongoing building boom and extremely low vacancy among residential properties these days, downtown is expected to grow to more than 11,000 people by 2022. Silver says that when he began recommending changes to downtown, "Some people would say to me: 'You'd better keep Raleigh Raleigh; you'd better not make us like New York,' so I knew there was a soul to Raleigh that people didn't want to lose." But he also thought it needed more vibrant and functional open spaces.



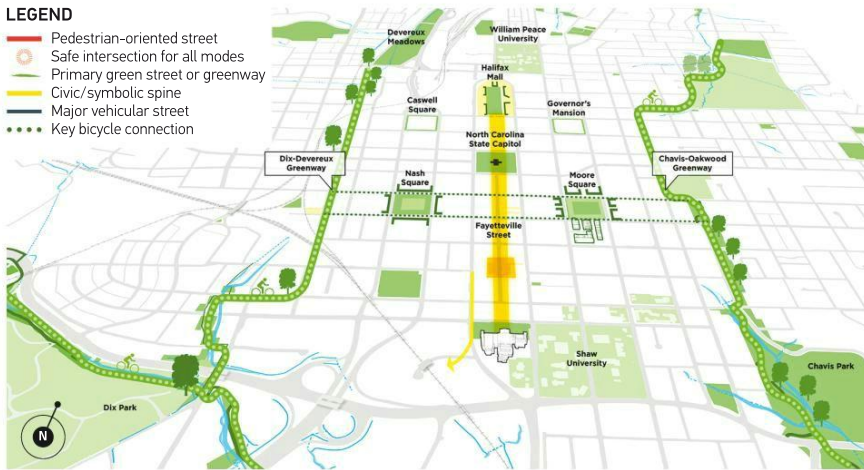
One space that will help fill this need is the renovation of the historic Moore Square, one of five laid out by the surveyor William Christmas in his 1792 plan for Raleigh. The city was built as a grid of streets framing a central block-size square holding the state capitol, with four four-acre squares set equidistant from the center, designed to provide open space for the city's residents. Over time, two of the squares became devel-

oped, leaving Moore and one other as public space. Building on a master plan done by Counts Studio out of New York City, Sasaki was hired in 2015 to redesign Moore Square. Sasaki's design clarifies what had become a convoluted arrangement of paths and underused spaces. It will accommodate a more aggressive program and update what had become a drab and tired landscape. Building on recommendations from the master plan, a detailed strategy has been undertaken to preserve several massive, character-defining oak trees—some more than 200 years old—that line the square.

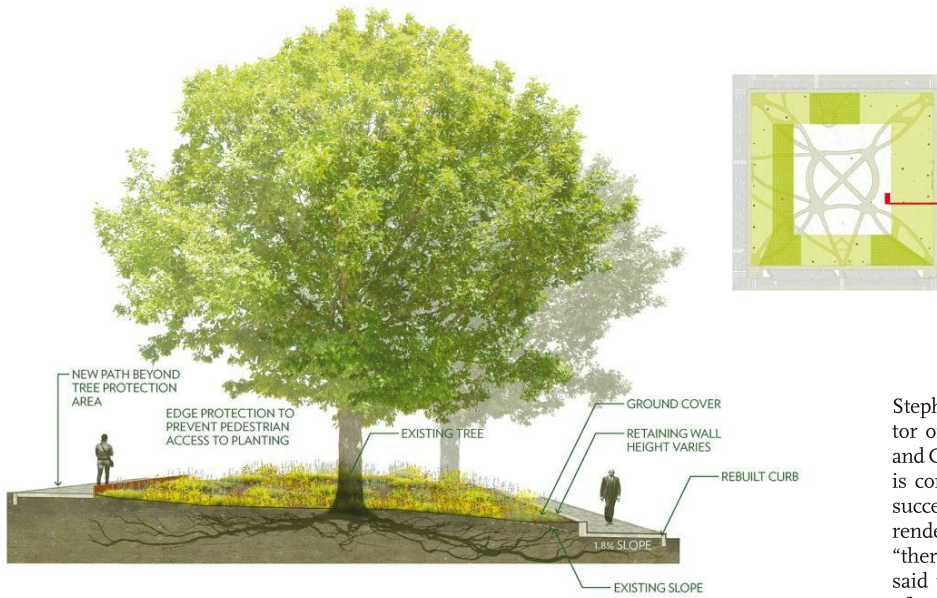
The redesign also responds to the site—and the city's—complex cultural history. The post-Reconstruction growth Raleigh experienced coincided with the systematic racial segregation cruelly enforced by Jim Crow laws, which, on a large scale, saw white families move into segregated neighborhoods north of downtown. At the same time, freedmen and other African Americans settled in the city core and to the south. A black middle class was established downtown, as a stretch of

LEGEND

- Pedestrian-oriented street
- Safe intersection for all modes
- Primary green street or greenway
- Civic/symbolic spine
- Major vehicular street
- Key bicycle connection



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ABOVE
Saving historic oaks at Moore Square was critical to both the master plan and Sasaki's design.

BELOW
Sasaki's plan clarifies geometries of the park, adding needed program and open space.

one street near Moore Square became known as Black Main Street. As suburban migration continued, however, downtown neighborhoods declined as neighborhoods to the north thrived.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median family income in the tract of downtown containing Moore Square jumped from \$18,829

in 2010 to \$47,917 in 2015, a 254 percent increase that limited the availability of affordable housing and reflects the fundamental impacts of gentrification. In addition to this, tensions rose in 2013 when reports of threatened arrests against charity groups feeding the local homeless population—something prohibited by local ordinance—became public. The situation was resolved, but it made clear the complex population dynamics that were involved.

Stephen Bentley, the assistant director of Raleigh's Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources Department, is confident Moore Square will be successful. "When we rolled out the renderings to the public," he says, "there were countless people who said the design was beautiful and often that it reminded them of a famous place like Bryant Park." Moore Square is scheduled to be under construction for most of 2018. Properties within blocks of the park will soon go on the market, targeted for mid- and high-rise developments, certain to stoke gentrification fears in the community.

This type of urban project is fairly new to Bentley's department. Since 2003, Raleigh has raised nearly \$230 million specifically for parks and greenways from three separate bond measures, each passing with at least 70 percent approval, Bentley says. Until recently, nearly all of this money followed the masses of people flooding the suburbs. The city has expanded the length of its greenways in that time to more than 120 miles, the vast majority of which are located in the suburban areas to the north of downtown. Now, however, he says, many of the projects they are working on will build connections between the greenway system and downtown parks.

"Equity was always front of mind on the design of Moore Square," says Gina Ford, FASLA, a former Sasaki principal and lead for the project's design phase. "The question became, how do you change a place, or have it adapt to change, and still be respectful of the community that is there and its history? There was a lot of nervousness expressed about the homeless population there, and them being displaced. Where will they go? What will that look like, and will everyone still feel at home here?" Multiple constituent groups were invited into the process. "We've never seen a city commit to that level of inclusive public engagement," Ford says.

"Raleigh loves its parks," says Nancy McFarlane, who was elected to succeed Meeker as mayor in 2011 and has



SASAKI

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ABOVE
Aerial view across
Dix Park to the
downtown Raleigh
skyline.

a similarly progressive agenda. She was a key player in acquiring the Dix property and was closely involved in the consultant selection process. “Michael [Van Valkenburgh] really understood that we want this park to feel like Raleigh, but we also want to send a message to the entire country that this is the next great urban park,” she says. “We don’t know exactly what that means yet, but we know that he gets that part of it.”

Michael Van Valkenburgh, FASLA, also sees a pattern. “Every time we make a big park project, we are making it for someone who has never commissioned anyone to design a park before,” he says. “Why I think they succeed nearly every time is there is something in the maturing of the culture of a place that brings it to the point where they say, ‘In order for us to be a great place to live, we have to have a great park.’”

As with Moore Square, the Dix property has a rich and decidedly southern history. Before becoming the

campus for what was initially called Dix Hill Asylum and opened to its first patients in 1856, the property was home to a sprawling colonial plantation and slave quarters built in the 1770s atop the large hill that would one day overlook Raleigh’s growing skyline. “There is a lot of history with the park, maybe too much,” says Van Valkenburgh. “You need to be respectful and aware of it, but parks are about the future. That doesn’t mean they ignore their history, but they function very differently than a museum.”

Raleigh has an anemic public transportation system, and the master plan will need to address how people will get to the park, and also where to park once they get there. This remains an issue in the downtown core, too. People pack local highways to attend events downtown and then park in one of the many garages with lifeless facades and gaping driveways on the streetscape. There is hope, however. In Wake County, where Raleigh sits, voters approved

a bond that would cover nearly half of a \$2.3 billion transit plan that includes improved bus service and 37 miles of commuter rail. The city of Raleigh also successfully passed a referendum in the fall of 2017 that will raise more than \$200 million for transportation projects.

For McFarlane as mayor, there are important things to be working on for Dix Park in the meantime. “It’s not just about coming up with a master plan,” she says. “It’s about building up generations of stewards. This community feels very connected to that landscape in many different ways. I run into people all the time that grew up going there and have all these stories about how they have used it their whole lives. Through this planning process, I want people who have never been there to be part of the process too...and to feel ownership in the place, and have a love for it.” ●

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