

Benjamin Franklin Parkway- The Design Workshop Team’s Statement of Intent

Introduction

The health and vitality of a city is often measured by the success of its parks—great cities have great parks. Whether formal, organic, romantic, or modern, all great parks have frameworks that have one theme in common—***these are the places around which the community orbits***. Whether it is Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris, which was transformed by the addition of kiosks as architectural “follies” (pavilions in gardens) to create a place for people, art, and nature to co-exist; or London’s Oxford Circus where Westminster rejected plans on the grounds that “the pedestrianization scheme that was under consideration is not what local people want,”; or Broadway in New York from Times Square to Madison Square which was pedestrianized with paint and plastic chairs. All these significant spaces have evolved because the people refused the status quo and were ready for an evolution of their beloved public realm spaces.

Overall Design Philosophy

Urban renaissance is not easy. It is born out of facing tough conversations head-on, and all people have a right to be part of the conversation. This is an opportunity to face tough questions and topics for healing, for progress, for innovation. Our design philosophy is multi-faceted and simple- go to where the community is and harvest untold stories and perspectives to break up the monotony of a largely whitewashed history and make this a space and place for everyone. This is not just about a physical place, but also a space in time- on a website, at city hall, at a kitchen table- to catalyze change and have difficult, yet productive conversations. This level of engagement and celebration of community pride ensures that the community claims ownership of the plan for long term success, taking placemaking one step further into place-keeping.

Reflections and refractions of public space form and function change overtime in a piecemeal fashion and become so layered and complex it is difficult to ascertain the original intent or see the values of modern society and communities reflected in the space- this is where we find the Benjamin Franklin Parkway today. Philadelphia's 250-year history is punctuated by innovation, and this project will extend that lineage of community-driven innovation by harnessing the vision and passions of those who call this city home.

Our design philosophy for the Parkway transformation will maintain and elevate Philadelphia as a model 21st century city, and it is guided by the following principles:

- 1. Honor Identity, Culture and History;***
- 2. Enhance Pedestrian Comfort, Traffic and Mobility;***
- 3. Integrate Democratic Design and Inclusive Programming;***
- 4. Create a Resilient Environment Driven by Performance; and***
- 5. Build for Economic and Financial Resilience.***

Vision

The original designers envisioned Benjamin Franklin Parkway as a grand boulevard “to furnish a direct, dignified and interesting approach from the heart of the business and administrative quarter of the city, through the region of educational activities grouped around Logan Square, to the artistic center to be developed around the Fairmount Plaza, at the entrance to Philadelphia’s largest and most beautiful park.” It was, in essence, the American equivalent of the Parisian Champs-Élysées,

lined with impressive civic buildings, welcoming residents and visitors. It was an incredible example of “civic art” in the Beaux-Arts style and a monument to the City Beautiful movement.

In the 95-years since its conception, Benjamin Franklin Parkway remains the grand and important, critical connection from the heart of the business district to the artistic center of the city as designers intended. However, in the intervening years, it has become much more. The Parkway a place for peaceful demonstrations, protests, and civic engagement as well as a place for relaxation and recreation for a far more diverse and denser population than existed in the Philadelphia of 1917.

Recent urbanization trends challenge the greatness of this grand civic space. The Parkway is failing the resident of Philadelphia because commuter motorists now dominate the roads, which are multiple lane freeways that fragment the public realm by dissolving spatial definition, activation, and resilience. The park was also disconnected from the river. These obstacles stand in the way of preserving, restoring, and honoring the elegant and unified composition of the original Gréber plan, which unified city and nature.

Gréber transformed the Benjamin Franklin Parkway “from an urban boulevard to a green wedge of park reaching toward the congested center of the city,” according to David Brownlee, referenced from *Building the City Beautiful*. Our vision builds on Gréber’s boldness and simplicity. It reflects city and national values today- all people deserve a place for expression and to have their story heard. All people also deserve a high-quality and high-functioning public realm. We envision an equitable park that is free of social and environmental injustices. It is a living, breathing system. It is a place that heals and inspires. This social and cultural space will continue to be defined as the parkway transitions into a destination park, a place where everyone is loved and heard, a place where Philly goes to play and celebrate, a place owned by both residents and tourists alike.

Our vision is to honor the design heritage of Benjamin Franklin Parkway, as an important cultural landscape, while evolving the design to provide the desired pedestrian-oriented civic space that offers equitable access to all residents and city visitors. The park will be living infrastructure used for community gathering and expression. The transformed Benjamin Franklin Parkway will anchor Philadelphia as the City of Innovation where modern residents have meaningful experiences in historic spaces adapted to accommodate their new ideas.

We envision the transformation of Parkway to Park: The Evolution of Philadelphia’s Garden. This will be Philadelphia’s civic heart, the greatest urban park in the world, the connective tissue between Center City and Fairmount Park, and the platform for Philadelphia ingenuity.

Guiding Framework for the Parkway’s Public Realm

In our conversations with the people of Philadelphia, stemming from the kick-off meeting, one thing is clear- the foundation of the vision is to build a place is for people, not vehicles. Our approach to offer a multi-year, realistic living framework for transitioning the parkway into gardens will serve as a communication tool letting the people choose how fast or slow the transformation takes place. We will ensure that this is their plan, not ours. These five guiding moves are bold, yet realistic, effective, and innovative; they will honor the community’s needs and desires.

More Park, less Way - Enhance the Pedestrian Experience, Traffic and Mobility

Make the Parkway a place to come into, not through. Onsite data collection and analysis indicates vehicles achieve speeds that double the speed limit, decibel levels are louder than three-lane expressways, and one-third of motorists use the Parkway for bypassing the interstate during their commute. Based on the traffic study, we determined, the surrounding grid can accommodate the Parkway's traffic. Therefore, why not direct vehicles to use the street grid as well as disconnect Interstate-676 from the Parkway? These moves will disperse traffic reducing the impact of automobiles on pedestrians in the park. Thirty percent of existing traffic is produced by the 21st Street-interstate connections. Consider eliminating these on- and off-ramps thus eliminate this major traffic impact. Note, the 16th street exit is only five blocks away. Parkway streets can then be "right-sized" to facilitate transit, pedestrian, and bicycle circulations at speeds under 35 mph, thus reducing road noise and dramatically increasing pedestrian safety. Harris Steinberg described his memories of coming to the Parkway during his youth, "it was a place you came to enjoy the quiet." The Parkway can become that space again - tomorrow or slowly overtime.

An Art Promenade - Philly's Canvas for Change

Bring art and education to the street. Currently the Parkway is characterized by its edges. We observed a need to turn the park inside out. Let the park be defined by its center, and let that character expand towards the edge. Through a series of interconnected gardens, bring art out of the museums and into the street in a more equitably accessible way. We envision street murals, art installations, and performance areas as well as digital and physical educational signage becoming key initial elements towards implementing this move.

This canvas is already happening in small pockets, but a grander move sets the stage for a permanent transition. We propose first temporarily eliminating traffic from central spine of the Parkway through tactical urbanism intervention that can eventually be permanently implemented based on community feedback. During the first phase, people will learn about the project but most importantly, in a simple gesture, take ownership of the Parkway. These early phases can include temporary structures for farmers markets or food trucks. Later phases could make permanent traffic and mobility changes, which allows the parkway to become permanent gardens with kiosks and "follies" that generate pedestrian massing, programming and pauses within the garden areas.

Resilience, Equitable, Flexible, and Adaptable - Event Gardens

A program of proposed activities may be the most important factor for the long-term success of the Ben Franklin Parkway. Paths and plantings are the backbone of the park, but people are its lifeblood. The people who regularly visit public green spaces come for varying reasons. Their presence is a welcoming attraction for others. While special events are an important aspect of parks, other programs should be developed to provide a balanced and continuous attraction to visitors, strengthening the park's mission.

Introducing a series of differentiated gardens will be a nod to Philadelphia as the "city of neighborhoods." The identity and programming for each garden is informed by "how people from diverse neighborhoods want to use the Parkway." Create differentiated gardens along a defined pedestrian promenade that weaves through the Parkway and its cultural institutions and extends to the Schuylkill River. With varying scales and uses, from small neighborhood gardens to a larger events garden (Eakins Oval), each garden is equipped with baseline amenities. Furthermore, every effort would be made to integrate sustainable operations and maintenance strategies for the gardens. Since each garden is local and unique, this allows individual gardens to be implemented independently and phased over time.

During our ideas workshop, we envisioned reimagining of Shakespeare Park as a reading garden adjacent to the library, celebrating the history of dance around the world at a newly created Tango Green, and providing reasons for residents to visit Logan Square. Other ideas included an international physics garden, a technology garden (repositioning of Aviator Park) adjacent to the Franklin Institute, a water garden providing green stormwater infrastructure and environmental education), and an international games garden featuring games from around the world. These spaces can join with the art gardens of the Rodin, Barnes, and Calder museums to create, as Gréber originally envisioned, a wonderful network of beautiful, joyous, and didactic landscapes for all the people of Philadelphia. It is in these gardens that the Parkways give great educational institutions – the Franklin Institute, The Rodin, The Barnes, and the Calder all come together around a common vision and mission. This is where Philadelphians come to learn.

Reimagine the Parkway as a megaphone to promote sustainable, performance-based landscapes and celebrate Philadelphia's rich horticultural heritage. Show how open space can be maximized to clean water and air, mitigate the urban heat island, sequester carbon, and promote social and environmental equity. Use pollinator gardens, rich floral displays, exuberant use of native, and water conserving plants as examples of this vision. Use technology to make the unseen seen through embedded sensors and digital outlets, such as displays and web applications, which allow further understanding, research and innovation.

**Celebrate the Waterfront - Reconnect the Park with the Schuylkill River,
Celebrate the Neighborhoods - Return Logan Square to the Community**

We observed a need to activate the river's edge by introducing new views and areas of access to the Schuylkill River. The primary axial view of the Parkway connects City Hall to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. New cross axis connecting the Parkway to the Schuylkill River would break up the linearity of the Parkway and activate a currently underutilized piece of green space along the river. By taking steps to move away from the linear nature of the Parkway, it becomes less of a place to pass through and more of a place to visit and contemplate.

Water has always been important to Philadelphia, so let us honor this relationship and celebrate the city's connection to the Schuylkill River. Gréber's cross access from the Parkway to the river was never realized. We will explore ways to connect the gardens and the river, such as river steps, a Schuylkill beach, a river taxi and pier as well as grand viewpoints to take advantage of this important community asset. Furthermore, Philadelphia is the international leader in sustainable water management through green infrastructure. Let us make the Park the hub for telling that story and show how successful stormwater management can be implemented across the country and world.

Reinstating the design intent of Logan Square by removing the traffic circle and returning the square to the community would further enhance this vision. Swann Memorial Fountain is beautiful, but it sits isolated because museum visitors and residents are not likely to cross traffic to visit the heart of the square. The adjacent Neighborhoods deserve to have their community square.

Precedents

A few successful transformations of beloved urban places exist across the world. We have chosen to include ones that we feel accomplished bold ideas and resulted in the meaningful transformations.

Paris' Champs-Elysees: The goal of the transformation was to retain the cultural significance of the architectural landmark for the site and the city. Key design intervention included the design of kiosks as architectural "follies" that infuse a consistent identity throughout the large project area. The follies host a range of uses (café, art exhibition, gift store, museum) and generate additional revenues for the city. They also engage the public in the design of the individual follies through a stakeholder-sponsored international design competition. The kiosks also frame Parc Monceau- the event gardens.

London's Oxford Circus: The goal of the project was to address poor air quality, congestion, and busy traffic in the area. Westminster rejected those plans on the grounds that "the pedestrianization scheme that was under consideration is not what local people want," The traffic and mobility pattern was transformed through road closures between Oxford Circus and Great Portland Street to the east and Oxford Circus and John Princes Street to the west through experimental traffic orders (ETOs). The traffic, however, continued to flow along Regent Street, north and south of Oxford Circus.

New York's Broadway: Conceived as a project whose success would be measured not only by its new aesthetic but also the long-term physical, psychological and economic benefits on its community, the reinvention that pedestrianized Broadway from Times Square to Madison Square stands as a model for how the design of our urban landscapes can improve health and well-being of its users while providing an important stage for public gathering,". Given the traffic volume, significance of the place, The City Leadership closed it overnight with paint and plastic chairs and implemented tactical urbanism on a huge scale.

Chicago's Civic Commons and Polis Station: Conceived from conversations between residents and police officers that led to the idea of reorienting the local police station to become a site of social connection for the community, to build better relations between the police and neighbors. The project features a basketball half-court on an underutilized section of the police parking lot that has since become so popular as a gathering spot for safe play that the community is now working to expand the site into a full court and park. The project sits as an open-source idea for others to "Just run with it for your community." According to Carol Coletta, senior fellow with The Kresge Foundation's American Cities Practice, "The work is meant to inspire a wide range of stakeholders—cities, designers, communities—to look at their own assets and envision how they can do more."

Conclusion

The ideas presented here offer the people of Philadelphia a choice. With plans in the works that would increase the presence of automobiles on Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphians are at a crossroads. We believe that through a collaborative implementation of the ideas presented here, it would be possible, over time, to eliminate cars on the Parkway thereby transforming the Parkway into a Park – Philadelphia's Garden.

But the choice is not ours. What do Philadelphians desire? Increased automobile accessibility? The status quo? Greater calmed multimodal accessibility? A park without automobiles? The choice is yours.

It is our intent to explore and test these choices together, through a rich and robust engagement process to chart the future direction of this treasured and iconic community asset.