

## DLANDstudio + DIGSAU: Systems Beautiful

Benjamin Franklin Parkway Public Realm

### STATEMENT OF INTENT

Our hope is to champion the original intent of City Beautiful and this Parkway – its civic nature and spirit of connectedness – while learning from their challenges and shortcomings and aspiring to set new standards for modern place-making; for public realm economic sustainability and ingenuity; for natural systems in cities; for cultural breadth and equity.

This place was created as a unique civil space for people, connecting Fairmount Park to City Hall. Over time that intent was muddled by shifting priorities; a new hierarchy that placed importance on the vehicle above the pedestrian, and above connections between the civic and art.

Historic initiatives were often blind to existing conditions, electing the “bulldozer” approach; natural topography, hydrology, ecology and environment were razed to make way for the grid, the plan for Philadelphia, regardless of the impact of disturbance.

Our “Systems Beautiful” strategy adopts a more nuanced and place-sensitive tactic. It combines the approach of, and value in, systems thinking with the physical and conceptual marks made by the City Beautiful Movement. We intend to balance new and creative explorations with key ingredients from the Parkway’s forms and functions. For the next iteration of this place, our “Systems Beautiful” framework, aims to take a more holistic and inclusive look at things, studying the past and present parts to inform the whole future. For example, beyond the connections essential to city beautiful – art, architecture and landscape – we will study interconnection of infrastructure, economics, and environment.

We believe that there is value to this type of interconnected exploration of parts; value that will result in an efficient and meaningful methodology for creating a world-class Parkway public realm.

We are inspired by the rich layered history and complex evolution of this public place, the ideas of More Park, Less Way, the successes of the Eakins Oval Programs, and the promise of a more equitable and inclusive future. Ultimately, we want to craft a civic space for people. We understand that some successes are ingrained in this place’s nature. Some must be learned, applied, and cultivated. But, the most important “system” is the polis, or people, who use, experience, and live this parkway.

So, we talked to people. Here’s some of what we heard:

*“Make it more colorful.”*

*“Pedestrian friendliness... Make it a place that doesn’t have so many cars.”*

*“Make it easier to cross.”*

*“The fact that it connects several of the art museums and it’s really a focal point of pride for the city.”*

*“[More] local artists’ work... like sculptures popping out in different places.”*

*“I love how neat it is. I love how free it is. Like this is a real nice, safe place.”*

Our process – understanding relationships and drawing connections between compositional elements large and small – is a fundamental building block for reimagining this place as a more sustainable, equitable, progressive Parkway public realm. Further, our objective is to establish a unique narrative of place, upon which

we can pin a vision and incremental change – both large and small. We do not present any pre-formed solutions. The Ideas Workshop is an opportunity for exploration and possibilities.

## **NATURAL SYSTEMS**

The Parkway is currently covered with approximately 42 acres of impervious surfaces, such as roadways, compacted lawns, and sidewalks, all of which sends runoff carrying pollutants to the Schuylkill River. Impervious surfaces account for 55% of all areas of this space. Over a year, 1.7 million gallons of runoff are generated, enough to fill three-quarters of Lincoln Financial Field with water. This burden would normally cost a private landowner almost \$250,000 in annual stormwater fees.

While respecting the maintenance capacity of the caretakers of the Parkway and the complexities of new green infrastructure in heavily used, beloved spaces such as this, our vision is to create a space that rehabilitates the landscape, hydrology, ecology, and environmental function of the Parkway, while integrating with transformative improvements to traffic flow, accessibility, and equitability. By removing obsolete paving, improving soil conditions, and including an ecologically diverse plant palette within the space, the Parkway ecosystem can be transformed into an extension of Fairmount Park that makes nature visible and accessible to all.

## **EVENTS SYSTEMS**

Events occur here at all scales, from the massive to the everyday, from spontaneous to long planned, from the parade, to the march, from the race to the casual stroll. The Parkway needs to accommodate all these different scales and all the people that come here to participate.

These events have taken their toll on the city. The traffic logistic, the lack of infrastructure, the impact on the space and on the surrounding neighborhood are all issues that must be addressed as part of this planning effort.

Our plan will focus on a few key issues:

1. We have to decide whether the Parkway is more a place for people or a place for cars; whether it is a more of a gathering space or a highway.
2. We need to amortize and strengthen the connections to the existing cultural institutions. These are critical partners in the vision.
3. We need to create permanent infrastructure to support these events. This would include power, telecommunications, and sanitation systems.
4. We need to create a network of services and amenities to support all forms of activity along the parkway. These include recreational activity, restrooms, cafes, or a food kitchen.

The parkway is already a beautiful and active place, but these activities need to be more fully supported for the place to be as great as it can be.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE & TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS**

The original vision of the project as a civic space, a grand gesture. Over time, many small changes have fundamentally altered the place. Today, it functions as a space to move vehicles first, to the detriment of people, social space and events.

Infrastructural Goals & Explorations:

1. Restore the street network, ensure connectivity remains through the Parkway, as was the original intention of both the parkway and historic plan for Philadelphia
2. Restore dignified civic, and people-oriented space, with a grand promenade down the center of the parkway, from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to City Hall
3. Leverage the reconnected street network to explore restoration of Logan Square
4. In the Parkway, explore moving vehicular traffic to the outer edges, connecting and filtering through the street grid
5. Explore twinned roundabouts allow for traffic to move through the space, connected to the street network, and without the need for long queueing lanes, signalized intersections, and other visual interference that would detract from the civic nature and beauty of the parkway
6. Pennsylvania Avenue redesigned as a beautiful tree-line boulevard
7. New street layout functions efficiently, through a host of event, large and small, without major disruption to connectivity or movement

## **ECONOMIC SYSTEMS**

Millions of people create stories on the Parkway; as we work to reimagine the possible for the Parkway, this is the opportunity to create the story that's never been told. The one where the Parkway is the catalyst and accelerant for truly just and equitable economic development and community wealth creation for Philadelphians.

This will require an intentional examination and dismantling of the systemic and structural barriers to equity - from methods of governance and decision-making, to measurements of risk, definitions of cultural and artistic value, and challenging the existing canon tied to ideas of beauty, form, and function. What are the existing SYSTEMS that need to be reshaped and/or dismantled to achieve an equitable just end?

The Parkway can achieve that intention through a mixture of repositioning existing and developing new physical assets, investment vehicles, programming, and governance relationships. The centerpiece is the intersection of A) how do we execute on a vision of a pedestrian parkway and B) why is that vision one that HAS to advance equitable economic development - or in short hand, how can no CARS = more flexible ECONOMIC opportunity.

The Parkway needs to invest in scalable community-scale infrastructure - from the electrical outlets, toilets, and accessible seating to larger power, water, broadband, and natural systems infrastructure needed to provide high-quality, commercial grade services to and on the PKWY and build the conditions for revenue generation and enterprise acceleration.

Money generated at the Parkway must support the Parkway's operations and maintenance of its facilities and infrastructure, etc.

Whether the concept calls for revenue generating programming, a Community Investment Fund that attracts large philanthropic, impact investor, and community investor support, a place-based incubator/accelerator that invests directly in Philadelphians and their enterprises, or a re-examining of public financing that allows the Parkway to make a bet on itself and its future, the outcome has to be one where it becomes a district that builds wealth - social and economic - for all Philadelphians.

## **ARTS & CULTURE SYSTEMS**

The Parkway has been called Philadelphia's most artistic mile. This planned Boulevard allowed for the location of Beaux Arts types of institutions and cultural assembly back when it was created. Housing many of the cities

most prestigious arts institutions, the Parkway cuts through Philadelphia's street grid and through this overlap of competing geometries, a series of dynamic and interesting interstitial parcels are created.

How can these opportunities become more inclusive and equitable? How do we distribute between temporary installations and permanent installations?

We propose to reframe these interstitial parcels as centers of gravity or "force fields" – the areas surrounding the museums, institutions, memorials, statues, fountains and artwork that are distributed all along the parkway. Our plan asks how these spaces can begin to communicate with each other and begin to stitch together a coherent system of interconnected institutions.

We imagine spaces for public art installations spaces that engage the community. These spaces might be curated sculpture gardens, pop up markets for local businesses and artists to display their wares another level of interaction. All of these interactions and opportunities offer a larger philanthropic opportunity for both short and long-term support. Our arts and cultural system proposes a network of "force fields" to share space with these institutions engaging the public and strengthening the bond between institutions.

## **DESIGN EXPLORATIONS**

The next iteration of this place must aim to heal and be restorative; must champion the original intent; must be thoughtful, prudent, and insightful in its reincorporation and layering of systems lost; must be dedicated to inclusivity, asking critical questions, listening; revolutionary in its ideals and details.

Ultimately, we aim to bring a new balance to the parkway.

Throughout our Ideas Workshop proposal, we highlight parkway-specific observations, opportunities, and constraints as a way of creating a discourse with our planning and design processes. Our design explorations are as much about how we think as they are about particular solutions we might propose. No proposal can be successful without the proper input from and collaboration with the community, the stakeholders, and the City.

Our conceptual design explorations and proposals (expressed in accompanying graphic materials):

### **INVITE NATURAL SYSTEMS**

1. Explore reintroduction of natural systems that can enhance performance of engineered systems and enhance the sensory experience of place.
2. Improved interaction between natural and human systems.
3. Mapping of historic waterways and flood planes to guide future action, planning.
4. Improve air and water quality while reducing burden on City combined storm-sewer system.
5. Diversify existing ecosystems.
6. Draw design inspiration from natural forms.

### **WELCOME NEW PATTERNS**

1. Consider past plans, reinterpret them, learn from them, and use lessons learned as foundation for progressive and proactive design.
2. Consider how the influence of different cultures, technologies, and economies impact the space.
3. Suggestion of forms, places, and pathways; instead of a grid for cars and development, a grid for people, nature, art, and recreation.
4. Make new connections so that new places, and relationships with new places, can grow and evolve.

## SUMMON BEAUTY OF LINE

1. Lines take many forms from the line of trees, angled agricultural beds, sewer lines, flood zones, red-lines, curbs, major axes of boulevards. Some are more apparent than others.
2. Lines can be recognized and interpreted - the poetry and elegance of the grand gesture accentuated.
3. Lines can be inhabited as places for people, art, speech; as platforms for expression
4. The inherent beauty of simplicity of the axis between the Philadelphia Museum of Art and City Hall should be boldly preserved and enhanced.
5. Primacy of public space that is flexible and open to different possibilities is suggested by this bold gesture.

## FORCE FIELDS

1. Centers of cultural, recreational, natural, economic gravity can influence their surroundings. We considered how this concept might create new relationships and activities across the parkway and how it can inform design moves.
2. The parkway and surrounding area have important cultural and educational institutions and recreation centers that can extend programming to the parkway.
3. Overlap of these centers can create new programs and define space for connection.

## STITCH WOUNDS

1. Stitch wounds created by uninviting and inflexible systems, such as broad roadways, that do not benefit the whole of this place.
2. Thousands of small decisions have injured the parkway. The parkway as expressway suggests the need for a big, yet phased, vision to reinterpret this path.
3. Connections – physical, recreational, cultural, economic – using a variety of techniques, can help address these wounds and bring communities and the city back together.

## COMMON CONNECTIONS

1. Reconnect the heart of the parkway for pedestrians while allowing traffic flow along the edges.
2. Create a new civic core and infrastructural frame for event space.
3. Create an unparalleled view corridor.
4. Free flow of core pedestrian movement can create safer, more comfortable, fluid connections.