

Amplifying the voices of Philadelphia

Team MVRDV's contribution to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway Ideas Workshop

Abstract

Team MVRDV views the Benjamin Franklin Parkway not only as a significant opportunity to create an influential, world-renowned public realm project, but also to produce an expansive and integral urban project for Philadelphia with the strength of all Philadelphians. Together, we aim to amplify voices of Philadelphia using place-making strategies and working for and with Philadelphians. By complementing sustainable solutions with concrete local ambitions, we integrate a global perspective to produce strong solutions that enhance Philadelphia's urban qualities. Based on 6 potential topics for the future of the Parkway, we illustrate 3 initial urban design ideas as a starting point for further discussion and discovery with the City and stakeholders. These are intentionally provocative to encourage discussion and gather feedback to steer the course toward a Benjamin Franklin Parkway beloved by all.

Vision: Benjamin Franklin Parkway

The objective

With the clear ambition for social reformation, infrastructural transformation, and community reconciliation, the City of Philadelphia's redevelopment of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway Public Realm has the potential to become a catalyst public space project by ensuring that people are its core focus. This will unite Philadelphians to make one park, and serves multifaceted imperatives, drawing communities together within a shared goal to create a resilient future by and for Philadelphians, that is functional, and seamless to implement, operate, and maintain.

In the wake of the events of the last two years, as a large-scale urban project, involving an area of political, cultural, and economic significance for the City, the project presents a profoundly complex undertaking. The Benjamin Franklin Parkway Public Realm project will transform the parkway to enhance pedestrian experiences, creating more 'park and less way', and reimagine mobility and infrastructure networks. Merging social resilience with environmental resilience, the potential we see in the site far surpasses its use as a green urban parkway. Drawing out a clear and distinct identity that unites and serves the multifaceted functions through remarkable, inspirational, and accessible design will create a Parkway that is an integral urban project, influential beyond the public realm to put forth a new vision for a Philadelphia of the 21st century, and set a global precedent for adaptive design.

The approach

We present an interdisciplinary and diverse team. We come together with the shared purpose to amplify the many voices of Philadelphia, creating a project that resonates with the City's distinct identity, history, and people.

By creating a high performing project that emphasizes green and slow-traffic infrastructure, combined with high quality urbanism and architecture that is both dignified and commensurate with the design of the cultural institutions and landscapes that define the Parkway, we aim to create a network of spaces, places, and systems that respond to individual user desires. These places will complement existing environments with new, and unexpected, yet resonating identities. They will be safe, welcoming, healthy, flexible, inclusive and accessible. They will welcome all Philadelphians and contribute to a strong and impactful future Parkway identity.

The vision

The design can be impactful in many different ways and scales of intervention. To develop a design that is tailor-made for Philadelphia, our team will explore and endeavor to answer two main design issues in parallel:

1. How can the Parkway become a place for and by the City?

To pursue a solution to this, we will strategically involve diverse stakeholder groups to ascertain the area's potential and purpose in order to develop a proposal that improves the spatial, functional, economic, social, and emotional quality of the Parkway, as well as its civic context. Our process commits to civic engagement strategies that aim to involve the diverse voices of Philadelphians, while also demonstrating potential new directions that can inspire reaction and response and encourage stakeholders to clarify wishes and needs.

2. What is the Parkway's message to the world?

In addition to cultivating new local qualities, we will develop a design that highlights Philadelphia in an (inter)national context, exploring questions such as: what are the existing qualities and future ambitions the city wants to emphasize? How can Philadelphia and this area contribute to a global discourse on sustainable urban development?

The combination of these two parallel pursuits, including our dedicated engagement with Philadelphians, will result in a definitive sense of place, and a compelling identity for the area, impacting the city's cohesion, and amplifying its message on a broader, global scale.

The overall design philosophy

Our team is committed to creating a new, shared vision for the Parkway based on an integrated design approach. Creating a successful project will involve multiple perspectives, design disciplines, and strategies. This combination includes a comprehensive sustainability strategy, incorporating UN Sustainable Development Goals, as well as metrics indicating their successful implementation. It will involve considerable civic engagement, first by bringing underserved individuals to the table, and then coordinating a process that builds in equity to distill and amplify the ideas and potential that lies in the city. Our team will synthesize the ideas in an iterative design process, continually discovering, developing, testing, and adjusting them - alongside key professionals and stakeholders - to work toward a comprehensive solution. Our initial ideas for the Parkway are therefore meant to be thought-provoking starting points of this iterative dialogue with the city rather than comprehensive proposals. They align with the following foundational directions:

Sustainability

- Align with the Philadelphia's long-term vision for a healthy, efficient, and green Philadelphia for all
- Incorporate a 100% sustainable project ambition aligning with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals
- Adhere to the highest current environmental standards, utilizing the expertise of 10 internal BREEAM and LEED assessors to develop effective and strategic decisions for a sustainable future parkway

Civic engagement

- Match the goals and ambitions of the project with the local needs of both its surrounding physical urban systems, and future users
- Create a plan that suits the local context and needs of the city, bringing diverse communities together, utilizing their critical feedback as design drivers
- Empower users and residents with a civic engagement approach that encourages them to invest in their environment to see their needs represented
- Build in frequent, meaningful, and energizing engagement and conversation opportunities with as many stakeholder groups as possible, gathering direct information to enrich project design
- Centre racial equity in engagement efforts, actively dismantling historical injustices
- Consolidate stakeholder groups representing a diverse range of local knowledge, expertise, and interests, being conscious of local sensitivities, to form:
 - A Taskforce Group (Composed of Client representatives who represent the city, and its Cultural Activation Committee, comprising main cultural and educational institutions, foundations and community-based organizations as well as a NextGen + Expert Advisory Group - young (local and non-local) experts from different fields, professionals from Philadelphia and beyond from the fields of arts and design, innovation, creativity, social sciences, technology, and finance)
- Establish outreach efforts that are a call to action for inclusive dialogue, comprising multiple modes of outreach:
 - Mobilize a city-wide outreach to embody the ambitions and values of the community as a whole around a shared vision by:
 - Engaging and accessible digital and analogue tools to enable local residents of all ages and backgrounds to give feedback, and demonstrate how this feedback is incorporated
 - Provoking excitement and buy-in through techniques including events, meaningful conversations, recruitment, education, tactful approach, and transparency
 - Presenting ideas in diverse ways and languages
 - Generate partnerships with local community leaders in order to leverage and strengthen existing networks by:
 - Incorporating resident knowledge and organizational experience
 - Building capacity within communities by involving people known and trusted by the community
 - Creating a framework for meaningful forms of civic engagement that can ripple out to all edges of a community
 - Target outreach in order to foster creative collaboration with stakeholder groups by:
 - Strengthening existing interest on certain topics
 - Identifying opportunities for new collaboration models
 - Meeting stakeholders where they concentrate in their daily routines to ease participation

- Determine the most suitable outreach tools and methods in collaboration with the task force groups. Possible digital and analogue tools can include themed, specific workshops, online and paper surveys with appropriate translations, web and print material, radio spots, pop ups, in-person activities and build sessions, walk and talks, joining existing events, organizing public events and workshops, virtual experiences, collective model building, focus groups and active and communicative observation
- Lead with the imperative to distill and amplify, and not to prescribe, planning for input and interactions in the following stages:
 - Discovery phase: What are you proud of? What is the power of this city?
 - Design phase: (Round 1) scenario development hand in hand with feedback from multidisciplinary, public, and stakeholder workshops, talks and surveys (Round 2) final schematic design, obtain further input from the public on key design features
 - Provide project updates, brainstorm through different options alongside stakeholders, test directions with them, consult them on all aspects of the process

Iterative process

- Structure the entire design process to test and produce iteratively
- Develop manifold ideas for the parkway and provoke constructive dialogue with the greater public and task groups
- Plan in several feedback rounds to distill needs, opportunities, technical possibilities, and ambitions for the parkway into more and more condensed design proposals

Integral design methodology

- Create provocative future scenarios early in the design and engagement process, creating strong imagery to stimulate enthusiastic brainstorm sessions, to forge a strong idea of a future identity for the Parkway, alongside all parties
- Combine various systemic urban issues with the ambitions of Philadelphians into integral design scenarios, feeding into the final schematic design
- Merge ideas into one integral design proposal and transformation strategy

Guiding principles for the Parkway's public realm

In our team's initial study of Philadelphia, as well as the brief for the Benjamin Franklin Parkway Public Realm, we identify the following critical ambitions for the transformation of the Parkway: accessibility; green infrastructure; attraction; vibrancy; inclusivity, sustainability and resilience, innovation and memorial; phasing and flexibility. Using these principles, we will endeavor to align our processes with them, and, alongside the client and the wider stakeholder groups, define their metrics of achievement in the final design. Transforming these principles into opportunities, together we will create an attractive, unconventional, inclusive, and fun urban environment built to adapt to changing climate conditions.

6 key topics

Based on our initial analysis and broader ambitions, we have identified 6 potential focus topics for the Parkway's future. These are not exhaustive but rather serve as stimuli for the collective dialogue about the potential future of the Parkway. These include:

- Lush waterfront park entrance
 - What if the Parkway becomes a lush entrance to the largest waterfront park of the United States, providing a clear link to the Schuylkill River, showcasing climate adaptation, water quality, biodiversity, carbon neutrality, and healthy living, as well as providing a revitalized image of the waterfront?
- A people's campus
 - What if we draw together cultural institutions and educational facilities into a civic, educational campus open to all citizens and visitors, providing a place for exchange and information, and a showcase for social resilience and inclusivity?
- Parkway as an urban parkway
 - What if we create an urbanized public space with green roofs, and human scale public spaces, as well as a precedent model of sustainable urbanization and densification of a cultural quarter, with inclusion as a central direction?

- The Parkway as a cultural catalyst
 - What if we create an optimized event square with active edges and 365 day programming in collaboration with local initiatives, becoming an iconic platform for large cultural events, and an international destination?
- The Parkway as a food connector
 - What if we create a testing ground for urban agriculture and food events, continuing Philadelphia's richness in food culture and knowledge, becoming a precedent model of food security and health?
- The Parkway as a super-connector
 - What if we create a new node for healthy mobility, connecting all surrounding neighborhoods and becoming a locus for the active lifestyle in Philadelphia?

3 design directions

Based on further conversations with the city and stakeholders during the site visit, the ideas workshop, as well as an initial survey, we have developed 3 basic concepts for the design of the parkway

- "The Green Machine":
 - Builds on the historic concept of connecting the city to nature through the Parkway
 - Draws the lush, green natural characteristics of Fairmont Park into the city to enhance biodiversity and resilience, creating an exciting natural park for all Philadelphians
 - Creates a direct entrance from city center to the city's surrounding natural landscape, to the river, forging a strong link and contributing to a cooler, cleaner and sustainable Philadelphia
 - Turns the parkway from a green boulevard to green park, a place to jog, to walk, to meet, to rest while surrounded by the Parkway's flora and fauna
- "The Active Grid":
 - Merges the Parkway with the city's historic green grid
 - Invites all Philadelphians to connect to the Parkway in a healthy way
 - Creates a collection of diverse "blocks" of programs and active spaces
 - Is an urban Parkway that triggers a variety of uses, interactions and memory of the past layers of urban fabric of the city
 - Transforms the Parkway from a 1-directional, underused green space into a site that (re)connects directly with the city, invites you to play, to create, to exchange, to celebrate with all Philadelphians
- "The Civic Agora":
 - Extends the spirit of Oval+ to the whole Parkway and continue the museum steps as an active "urban stoop" around this flexible space
 - Provides a collective space for the city, and an inclusive platform for vibrant programs and facilities, that can be choreographed by and with the city's actors
 - Accommodates edges that can be programmed to create a new "stoop" of the city, to activate the area more permanently with daily urban programs and specials
 - Becomes a Civic Agora; a flexible urban theater amplifying the cultural diversity of Philadelphia
 - Forms a grand stage for diverse activities and events throughout the year

These concepts are by no means final or fixed. They will serve as departure points to ignite conversation and obtain an understanding of stakeholder needs and aspirations. We will further iterate alongside the City, Philadelphians, and key stakeholders.

Precedents

Projects and spaces that represent the envisioned approach and atmosphere for the 3 design ideas entail the following:

“The Green Machine” is combining classical park features such as lawns, dense tree areas, paths and water features, found in traditional parks such as Regents Park in London, with an innovative approach to urban water management, climate adaptation, and urban cooling, such as the Tidal Basin Ideas Lab in DC. Illustrating how this lush park can contribute to the sustainable ambitions for the future of the Parkway, several exemplary MVRDV projects serve as starting points for the Parkway’s transformation discussions:

- **The Weaves**, a lush river park in Seoul that enhances biodiversity and slow traffic accessibility along the waterfront
- **The Hague Canals**, created together with local neighborhood organizations, to reopen The Hague’s 17th-century canals
- Competition entry “**Salón Verde**” in Madrid where a three-dimensional green plaza and water pools adapt to the seasons and cool the city during heat peaks
- **Marble Arch Hill**, a temporary green hill that refers to the site’s history as former corner of Hyde Park, attracting new users to the currently underused site, adding cooling green, event and exhibition space, creating new views in and to the city

“The Active Grid” is transforming the car-centric space of the Parkway into human scale urban “rooms” just as the Place de la République in Paris does. Here, a variety of such rooms can offer a great diversity of urban spaces and uses, combining outdoor realms with new urban programs that attract activity 24/7. Such activator programs within the “rooms” of the parkway can be permanent or temporary pavilions and installations, as those of the Serpentine Gallery in London’s Kensington gardens. The Active Grid can also include landscape features such as flower fields or blocks of urban forest that create the intimacy of tree canopies such as the ones of Madison Square Park emphasized by Teresita Fernández’ installation ‘fata morgana’. Illustrating the potential of combining urban fabric with “urban artefacts” that reflect the history of the site while activating its use over time include:

- MVRDV’s masterplan for the **Floriade** in Almere, Netherlands, which constructs a sustainable urban grid that initially hosts a horticultural exhibition, transforming gradually into an urban quarter
- MVRDV’s **Ragnarok** in Roskilde, Denmark, a building with minimal footprint that fosters musical creativity by providing an inclusive environment through clear connections between education, leisure and performance.
- MVRDV’s **Glass Farm** in Schijndel, Netherlands and the **Crystal Houses** in Amsterdam show how we can carefully integrate built structures that interpret the memory of a place into innovative and remarkable buildings that become attraction points while merging into their surroundings

“The Civic Agora” is inviting its users to creatively occupy and activate the center of the Parkway site, the flexible Civic Agora is an extension of the spirit of Oval +. We imagine the character of this central space to be an inviting sequence of various intriguing public spaces such as Superkilen in Copenhagen or Domino Park in Brooklyn, offering a broad range of different uses and programming for and by different groups in the city, both temporary and permanent. The concept of the Civic Agora is similar to the principle of the Gleisdreieck Park in Berlin, where the community can use the open public realm in a flexible way while urban programs on its edges ensure liveliness and safety. Locating built uses underneath terraces frames and activates the “agora” (specific uses to be defined during the design process). MVRDV projects that demonstrate this include:

- **Tainan Springs** in Tainan City, Taiwan and **Love Street** in Gwangju, South Korea, illustrate how users activate the Parkway agora, highlighting the inclusive and adaptive character and potential all-season outdoor uses of the space we imagine here. Water features such as the ones of Tainan Springs can function as attractors for inclusive, healthy outdoor activities in summer for cooling and in winter for skating.
- MVRDV’s **The Couch** project in IJburg, The Netherlands, a tennis club building with folded roof that functions as an informal spectator platform, illustrates how terraced edges of the agora can activate the Parkway and create new views and meeting spots along the new “urban stoop” of the city.
- Temporary structures such as MVRDV’s **The Stairs** in Rotterdam could kick-start and create the atmosphere of this concept early on in the process

Our combined team eagerly anticipates developing these initial ideas and discovering others alongside all involved stakeholders and Philadelphians.