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Green Design and the City
Schenley Plaza; Pittsburgh,
PA

A Joni Mitchell Rendition: They Took a Parking Lot and Turned It into Paradise

Today, Pittsburgh's second downtown encapsulating the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Hospitals, as well as other magnets (known to locals as Oakland) seems like a city on its own. Oakland has grown to become Pennsylvania's third largest metro center, behind downtown Philadelphia and downtown Pittsburgh.¹ So it is understandable that a five-acre area in the heart of Oakland transformed with the shifting ideas about the function of public space from a woodland habitat, an auto-friendly entranceway for Schenley Park, a full-fledged surface parking lot, and finally to a traffic-calming park.

Ever since its 1891 acquisition, this five-acre ravine called Schenley Plaza had been meant to serve as a "grand entranceway" to Schenley Park. After it was filled, the city held competitions for Schenley Plaza's design, provided that the design accommodates traffic.² Interestingly, automobiles were not yet common then. Shortly after the creation of the winning auto court design (see *Picture 1*), Forbes Field was built next door. Thousands of spectators, expanding universities, blooming businesses, and growing healthcare systems all created a shortage of parking in the area; and the Plaza was officially designated a parking lot in 1949. The lot still remained after Forbes Field was demolished in 1971 (see *Picture 2*).³

Reclaiming the Plaza for People

In 2000, a local partnership of institutions, community organizations, businesses, and public agencies; also known as the Oakland Task Force (OTF); developed a four-pronged plan for Oakland. The first of those initiatives, "Create a sense of place in Oakland," points at redesigning Schenley Plaza to become "[the] central 'there' in Oakland," since Oakland has

¹ Root, Douglas and C.M. Schmidlapp. "Park Lot." Summer 2004.

² Stern, Michael. "Pittsburgh's Regional Parks Master Plan: A New Ethic of Stewardship." LaQuatra Bonci Associates. 2000. <http://www.pittsburghparks.org/userdocs/Parks_Master_Plan.pdf>

³ "Schenley Plaza: Forbes Avenue Gardens, History." Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. <<http://www.pittsburghparks.org/history-4>>

“no sense of arrival.”⁴ And, instead of the automobile-friendly pre-Forbes Field plaza, OTF wanted Schenley Plaza to be focused on people. Redevelopment plans prioritized pedestrian safety with improvements to dangerous intersections, the creation of new traffic patterns, a different parking management strategy, and installations for more pedestrian signage.⁵ To replace those 300 lost parking spaces, 100 were made available through new parallel and diagonal short-term metered parking spaces on the plaza's perimeter, which would also narrow driving lanes and slow traffic.⁶

The redesign also identified several locations for on-site vendors, a possible restaurant, movable café seating, and an area for public events.⁷ Amenities include unlimited free wireless, handicap-accessible restrooms, 24-hour security, regular litter pick-up, and event programming. And various green design techniques like the planting of native flowers and London plane trees⁸, the installation of blue-grass sports turf (which tolerates frequent use), custom designed soil (for maximum absorption of storm water to prevent pooling and erosion), and an underground irrigation system (for the minimization of water loss to sidewalks and paved areas) helped reduce Schenley Plaza's maintenance costs so that more time and funds can go back into the park.^{9,10}

Resistance for Redevelopment

Other than the natural opposition from commuters because of lost parking spots, fiscal conservatives pointed out that Pittsburgh is on the brink of bankruptcy and is giving up a cash cow that pulled in roughly \$700,000 annually in place for the money-draining

⁴ “The Future of Oakland: A Community Investment Strategy, Summary of Recommendations.” Oakland Task Force, Oakland Investment Committee, Urban Design Associates. January 2003.

⁵ Root, Douglas and C.M. Schmidlapp. “Park Lot.” Summer 2004.

⁶ Senate Council Meeting, Minutes. University of Pittsburgh. 14 March 2005.
<http://www.pitt.edu/univsenate/scminutes/SC_Minutes_03-14-05.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A Pittsburgh-specific study analyzed the DNA of the remaining healthy trees in Schenley Plaza, as well as the DNA of trees from local nurseries and national distributors. The results revealed that the Plaza's tree population was very genetically diverse, moreso than the ones from nurseries and distributors. The new London plane trees that have been planted at the restoration of Schenley Plaza contribute to an insect- and disease-resistant population.

⁹ Stewart, Charlie. “Beyond Black and Gold. The East End Goes Green.” *Shady Ave* magazine.
<http://charliestewart.net/article_eastgoesgreen.htm>

¹⁰ “Schenley Plaza: Park Features; Landscaping.” Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. 2009.
<<http://www.pittsburghparks.org/schenleyplaza-features>>

redesign of Schenley Plaza.¹¹ Opposition was led by Pittsburgh City Councilman Jim Motznik, who cited the plan's \$20,000 for new traffic signals and \$10,000 annual maintenance fees. Additionally, he thought that the \$5 million awarded to the project by Governor Ed Rendell should have been diverted to more worthy projects.

But his was the only councilman vote of opposition, and the plan moved forward.¹²

Results

After three years and an estimated \$10 million for construction,¹³ the completed Plaza was generally well received. There was not a big crunch for parking spaces after all due to alternate parking lots and peripheral spaces located around the Plaza.¹⁴ Also, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and Oakland Investment Committee of the Allegheny Conference (made up of the University of Pittsburgh, UPMC Health System, Carnegie Mellon University, Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Library, the R.K. Mellon Foundation and the Heinz Endowments) have teamed up to raise money for construction costs.¹⁵

Evaluation

Socially and environmentally, the redevelopment of Schenley Plaza was successful. Addressing the latter, native plant choices and irrigation systems led to less maintenance and the overall Plaza design adapted to Oakland's tendency to flood. Addressing the former, the initial wishes to have Schenley Plaza serve as a "grand entranceway" into Schenley Plaza were fulfilled. The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy cites that Schenley Plaza hosts more than 200 activities and special events a year, making the spot welcoming to any visitor.¹⁶ And the OTF's intent to have Schenley Plaza serve as the central "there" in Oakland was also met. A 2008 poll held by the University of Pittsburgh's student newspaper, *The Pitt News*, named Schenley Plaza "the best place to hang out on campus."¹⁷ And the Pittsburgh Parks

¹¹ McNulty, Tim. "Murphy endorses Schenley Plaza plan." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Newspaper article. 7 Nov. 2002.

¹² Root, Douglas and C.M. Schmidlapp. "Park Lot." Summer 2004.

¹³ "Here & There: Park Lot." 2006. <<http://www.heinz.org/UserFiles/Library/h-SU06-Here-there.pdf>>

¹⁴ "Senate Community Relations Committee." Meeting Minutes. 11 Jan 2006.

<http://www.pitt.edu/univsenate/committees/community/Community%20Real%20Minutes_01.11.06.pdf>

¹⁵ Lowry, Patrica. "Oakland loses parking, gains town square in plaza plan." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. 5 Sept 2003. <<http://www.post-gazette.com/neighborhood/20030905plaza0905p4.asp>>

¹⁶ "The 2008 Season: Schenley Plaza." Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. 2008.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Conservancy cites that in May, for the first time, Schenley Plaza was visited by more than 1,000 people a day.”¹⁸ With this figure, the Plaza used as a park serves over three times as many people as a Plaza used as a parking lot.

With the redevelopment of Schenley Plaza, Pittsburgh is one step closer to pedestrianizing an area that is frequented by students and Oakland employees. New pedestrian traffic signals and narrower intersections, as well as 24-hour security and a welcoming atmosphere all contribute to a pedestrian-friendly environment.

Even though the purpose of a park does not concern money, the only unsettling part of Schenley Plaza’s redevelopment lies in its revenue. The timing of the redevelopment plan is questionable since Pittsburgh was in a budget crisis. Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and their partners were able to raise enough money to cover construction costs, but were they also able to cover infrastructure costs? If not, how were they funded? I was unable to find any sources online that could reconcile the lost revenue of the lot with the current revenue of the Plaza’s peripheral spaces. Also, 2006 source notes that “Plaza partners envision revenue-generating activities for the site,”¹⁹ but fails to define those activities. Only one of the four food vendors, Asia Tea House, has stayed on the site, while two kiosks have gone through at least one turnover since the Plaza opened, and the last one is usually unoccupied. Could this be due to lack of sales? I was also unable to find out why the Plaza still has not hosted a restaurant, though many articles leading up to the Plaza’s grand opening have promised one. Economically, it does not seem to benefit the city, but the restoration of Schenley Plaza definitely improves the safety and quality of life of students, employees, and visitors of Oakland.

¹⁸ McMasters, Melissa. “Schenley Plaza, Three Years Later.” Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy Blog. 30 June 2009. <<http://pittsburghparks.wordpress.com/2009/06/30/schenley-plaza-three-years-later/>>

¹⁹ Greene, Jonathan. “Parking lot to park: \$10 million Schenley Plaza restores and reinvents Pittsburgh’s village green.” POP City. <<http://www.popcitymedia.com/devnews/schenplaz.aspx>>

Picture Index



This early aerial photograph clearly illustrates the formal arrangement of Schenley Plaza. Schenley Fountain was on axis with the center green and terminated this grand space.

Picture 1: Early aerial photograph of Schenley Plaza as an auto court. Forbes Field is in the far right.²⁰



Picture 2: Aerial photograph of Schenley Plaza as a parking lot in 2003 (over 30 years after Forbes Field was demolished).²¹

²⁰ Stern, Michael. "Pittsburgh's Regional Parks Master Plan: A New Ethic of Stewardship." LaQuatra Bonci Associates. 2000. <http://www.pittsburghparks.org/userdocs/Parks_Master_Plan.pdf>

²¹ McMasters, Melissa. "Schenley Plaza, Three Years Later." Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy Blog. 30 June 2009. <<http://pittsburghparks.wordpress.com/2009/06/30/schenley-plaza-three-years-later/>>



Picture 3: Aerial photograph of Schenley Plaza restored as a “grand entranceway” in 2006, opening day.²²



Picture 4: Aerial photograph of Schenley Plaza in 2009, after three years of service as a green space. (Taken during a free WYEP concert, when Schenley Park received the most visitors.)²³

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.