

TOM LEE PARK

PROJECT FACT SHEET



OVERVIEW

Tom Lee Park is a 31-acre riverfront park running alongside the Mississippi River in downtown Memphis. After five years of planning, design, and construction, it reopens in 2023 as the centerpiece of the city's riverfront—and a national model for welcoming, beautiful, and ecologically restorative urban parks.

Atop a man-made dike below the Memphis bluffs, its location provides views of the water and of the wetlands across its banks in neighboring Arkansas. The historic downtown of the majority-Black city is just steps away, where a Cobblestone Landing, Cotton Row, and the Lorraine Motel speak to the past and a burgeoning business and entertainment district look to the future.

The park was named in 1954 for Tom Lee, a Memphis hero and Black river worker who singlehandedly saved 32 people from drowning in the swirling currents of the Mississippi River following a 1925 steamship disaster.

Input from thousands of Memphians led to the ambitious effort to create a park that would be a "civic commons" for all Memphians and a reinvigorated public space inspired by the meandering routes of the Mississippi River. The design will add a thousand new trees (where there had once been fewer than 50) and replenish soils to make possible native plantings that attract pollinators and add biodiversity.

BUDGET

\$61 million. \$59.75 million has been raised to date (July 2022). In a public-private partnership, City, County, State and Federal government sources contributed \$33 million. Private fundraising has included gifts from local and national philanthropy, corporations, and individuals.

HISTORY

Like so many other American cities, as Memphis grew during the second half of the 20th century, it turned its back on its riverfront. For a long time, Tom Lee Park was an unremarkable, small patch of grass. Much of the area covered by the park today was used as a city dump. The park was expanded to its current 30-acre size when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed a dike in the early 1990s.

Five years ago, in 2017, the City of Memphis announced the creation of a taskforce dedicated to the riverfront's future. The task force commissioned Studio Gang to develop a framework to guide the transformation of the riverfront. Their work was informed by engagement with more than 4,000 Memphians and produced the Memphis Riverfront Concept.

The adoption of the concept as a guiding document for the entire riverfront led to the transformation of the Riverfront Development Corporation into today's Memphis River Parks Partnership. The Partnership's mandate is to steward the five-mile-long riverfront—with Tom Lee Park at the center—for the people of Memphis.

Work to execute the concept started quickly with the reinvention of two former-Confederate parks, now River Garden and Fourth Bluff Park, completed in 2018 and 2019. The River Line—a five-mile walking and biking trail that connects all the riverfront parks—also opened in 2018. The most visible and accessible riverfront park in Memphis—Tom Lee Park—was next.

With community input, Studio Gang and SCAPE developed an initial concept design in February 2019. This concept was developed and refined, including by the Youth Design Leadership program that embedded local teens in the design process, with a final vision presented in March 2020. Throughout 2020, the design progressed through schematic design, design development, review, permitting, and engineering. The park broke ground at Cutbank Bluff in November 2020 and on the park West of Riverside Drive in July 2021.

URBAN CONTEXT

Tom Lee Park is adjacent to a crescent of disinvested neighborhoods that have only gotten poorer in the last 50 years—including the lowest-income zip code in Tennessee.

A core aspect of the Memphis River Parks Partnership's mission is providing more and better amenities to the families that live in these neighborhoods. The Partnership also aims to foster greater economic equity to Memphis in its role as a civic partner in the downtown district that includes hotels, restaurants, and bars, as well as retail, apartments, homes, and museums.

The park will be completed with overall spending of 43.9% at Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprises (M/WBE), including the two firms leading the Design Team, Studio Gang and SCAPE.

STATUS

Construction on Tom Lee Park is nearly 50% complete and the park is scheduled to reopen in summer 2023. River Garden, Fourth Bluff Park, and the River Line are already complete and the renovation of the city's historic cobblestone landing is underway, also slated for completion in summer 2023.

DESIGN FEATURES

The transformation of Tom Lee Park is designed to respond to the dynamic ecosystems of the Mississippi River. A restored soil system and the introduction of hardy native plant species will attract the birds and pollinators that thrive along the river corridor. Replacing flat expanses of grass and adding topography will provide new and surprising views of the river.

The design strengthens the connection between downtown Memphis and the river. It provides the first Americans with Disabilities (ADA)-compliant access to the river with the Cutbank Bluff and safer pedestrian crossing of Riverside Drive at Vance, Huling, and Butler Streets.

Three large open lawns define four zones of activity and amenities: the Civic Gateway, Active Core, Community Batture, and Habitat Terraces. While each has its own character, they are unified by an overarching plan that imitates the hydrology of the adjacent river.

1. The Civic Gateway is a dramatic new entrance to the park from Vance Avenue and Beale Street with:

- Carlisle Cutbank Bluff: An accessible switchback pathway flowing down the bluff to create the first ADA-compliant crossing to the river's edge.
- AutoZone Mist Plaza: A welcoming 5,500-square-foot civic, entrance plaza activated in the daytime with water mist to cool off on a hot summer day and at night with a dynamic pattern of lights in the pavement.
- Visionary Grove: An intimate 4,000-square-foot grove of Overcup Oak trees with catenary lights and flexible seating nestled in the shade.
- Civic Lawn: An open lawn of 71,000 square feet.

2. The Active Core is the heart of the park, featuring sports, fitness and play facilities including:

- River Play: A 20,000-square-foot river-themed playground featuring climbable wooden river animals and plants created by the Denmark-based playground designers, Monstrum.
- River Fit: A series of fitness stations, obstacles, and challenges.
- Hyde Canopy: A 20,000-square-foot floating timber roof structure designed to be flexibly configured to accommodate a range of activities (including sports and fitness, performances, and events).
- First Horizon Sunset Lounge and Lawn: A serene place to gather at the water's edge and watch the sunsets on the Mississippi.
- Point Bar Pavilions: Small, passively cooled timber structures with food and drink concessions, restrooms, and rental facilities, built of reclaimed wood.
- River Groves: Shaded areas for seating.
- Active Lawns: A series of central open spaces, including a 100,000-square-foot great lawn.

3. The Community Batture is a forested area that honors Tom Lee, offering quieter gathering spaces, natural landscapes, varied elevations, and including:

- "A Monument to Listening": A new multi-part art installation by the Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates, inspired by the story of Tom Lee and incorporating related social programming—funded through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Monuments Project.

- Heroes Plaza (presented by Baptist Memorial Health Care): A new plaza surrounding the preserved-in-place 2006 monument to Tom Lee by David Allan Clark.
 - Birch Forest & Meditative Walking Paths: A series of pathways through denser, more intimate groves of trees and along the hilltops with views out to the river.
 - River Overlook: Stone steps that cascade down the batture hillside that also serve as tiered seating offering spectacular river views.
4. The Habitat Terraces, offering closer connection to the riverscape, are the best places to experience and learn about the ecosystem of the Mississippi River. Features include:
- Buckman Outdoor Classroom: An open-air classroom designed to host educational programs and activities for school groups and citizen scientists.
 - Pollinator Lab: A wooden platform nested in a stand of Pawpaw trees that frames a native pollinator meadow close to the river's edge.
 - Log Scramble: A fun way to move through the Habitat Terraces between the Pollinator Lab and Sound Gardens.
 - Sound Gardens: The best views of the river from platforms nestled in the hillside to attenuate noise pollution for the adjacent roadway, forming a quieter river-focused space for sound experimentation and listening.
 - Eco-Lawn: A lawn set aside from the park's overall open space (spanning 81,000 square feet in total) to host a wider range of plantings, attracting pollinators and creating seasonal interest.

WHO'S INVOLVED

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M/E/P Engineer:	Innovative Engineering Services (Bartlett, TN)
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Lighting:	Randy Burkett Lighting Design (Washington, D.C.)
Artist:	Theaster Gates (Chicago, IL)
Playground Designer:	Monstrum (Copenhagen, Denmark)

IMAGES

[Park renderings available here.](#)

[Construction images available here.](#)

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