



# FACT SHEET

## FAST FACTS

- Grand opening: Labor Day Weekend 2023
- Size: 31 acres
- Cost: \$61 million
- Website:
  - [tomleepark.org](http://tomleepark.org)
  - [memphisriverparks.org](http://memphisriverparks.org)
- Social:
  - @memriverparks (Facebook, Instagram & Twitter)
  - #tomleepark

## OVERVIEW

Tom Lee Park is a newly transformed riverfront park running alongside the Mississippi River in downtown Memphis. After five years of design and construction, including a significant community engagement process, the new park opens on Labor Day Weekend 2023 as the centerpiece of the city's riverfront—and as a national model for inclusive and ecologically restorative urban parks.

The project lead and client is Memphis River Parks Partnership, a 501c3 managing the Memphis riverfront on behalf of the City of Memphis. The master planner and architect for Tom Lee Park is Studio Gang. The landscape architect and park designer is SCAPE. A full list of collaborators is included in this document.

With spectacular views of the Mississippi River and Arkansas wetlands beyond, Tom Lee Park's design is inspired by the dynamic landscape and flow of the Mississippi. The park is named for Tom Lee, a Black river worker who became a hero after singlehandedly saving 32 people from a sinking steamship in May, 1925. Lee's legacy of generosity, community and compassion informs the park design and its program.

Just steps away is Memphis's historic downtown, where Cobblestone Landing, Cotton Row, and the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel speak to the city's past while a burgeoning business and entertainment district look to the future.

Input from thousands of Memphians informed the design of the transformed park, which will be a new civic commons where everyone feels welcome to gather, exercise, play, relax, and attend events along an ecologically revitalized river corridor. The project adds signature public amenities to the site, plants more than a thousand new trees (where there were less than 50) and replenishes soils to nurture native plantings that attract pollinators, enhance biodiversity and support the Mississippi River Flyway.

## **BACKGROUND**

Memphis was founded as a river city, but like many American cities, it turned its back on the then-industrial waterfront. For many years, Tom Lee Park was an unremarkable swath of turf—even at one point used as a city dump. The park was expanded to its current size by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the early 1990s.

In 2017, the City of Memphis created a taskforce dedicated to the riverfront's future. That taskforce commissioned Studio Gang to develop a master plan to guide the transformation of six miles of the riverfront into a unified network of public spaces reconnecting Memphians with the Mississippi. Community engagement—including conversations and workshops with organizations and individuals from all of Memphis and a survey completed by more than 4,000 Memphians—was integral. Published as the [Memphis Riverfront Concept](#), its adoption led to the transformation of the Riverfront Development Corporation into today's Memphis River Parks Partnership.

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—opened in 2018. The most visible and accessible riverfront park in Memphis—Tom Lee Park—was next.

Tom Lee Park's concept design was informed by the Youth Design Leadership program that embedded local teens in the design process (led by Studio Gang in partnership with KnowledgeQuest, a local nonprofit). Following schematic design, design development, review, and permitting, the final design was presented in March 2020. Ground was broken in December 2020; construction continued through 2021 and 2022. The park is anticipated to open to the public on Labor Day Weekend in September 2023.

## **URBAN CONTEXT**

Aside from Downtown Memphis (38103), the zip codes that surround the riverfront are some of the poorest in Tennessee. 40% of children who live in poverty in Memphis live in one of these neighborhoods.

To create opportunity and better outcomes for people in low income neighborhoods, we must create places where people across demographics share the same space at the same time. Tom Lee Park, because of its geography and its history, has a unique opportunity to be one of those places.

# DESIGN NARRATIVE

The transformed Tom Lee Park is designed to connect Memphians with the river and with each other, to provide new public amenities and support the dynamic ecosystems of the Mississippi. Architecture and landscape work together to smoothly facilitate the movement of people into and through the park, and to capture—on land—the sense of motion and change that the river exemplifies. Sheltering structures made of timber, a river-themed playground, and landscape features create exciting destinations for recreation, outdoor education, dining, performances, and other activities—elevating them with the living backdrop of the Mississippi. Sculpted topography frames new views of the river, planted with a hardy native plant palette. Beneath the park, a restored soil system underpins a new framework of trees, shrubs, grasses, and perennials—including hundreds of oaks that will support, in turn, a vast array of bird and insect life.

A centerpiece of the new Tom Lee Park is the Sunset Canopy, a large timber structure designed to host community activities and events year-round on the courts below—including basketball, yoga classes, dance lessons, and concerts. The Canopy has been dedicated by the Memphis-based Hyde Family Foundation to the memory of Tyre Nichols. The court beneath the Canopy will be painted with a geometric design by Memphis born and raised artist James Little. Like the other architectural features across the park, the design of the canopy is inspired by the industrial structures that once operated on the riverfront. Its material aesthetic embraces the historic palette of the city and the patina that will come with time.

The design strengthens the connection between downtown Memphis and the river. It provides the first step-free, ADA-compliant access to the river at the Carlisle Cutbank Bluff and safer pedestrian crossings of Riverside Drive at Vance, Huling, and Butler Streets.

A series of open lawns divide and define the park's four zones: the Civic Gateway, Active Core, Community Batture, and Habitat Terraces. While each has its own distinct character, they are unified by an overarching plan inspired by the hydrological forms of the Mississippi River.

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 from the upper bluff to the park provides the first ADA-compliant crossing to the river's edge.
- AutoZone Plaza: A 5,500-square foot entrance plaza activated by water mist during day and a dynamic pattern of lights at night.
- Visionary Grove: A 4,000-square foot grove of oaks with hanging lights and flexible seating.
- Civic Lawn: An open 71,000-square foot lawn.

The Active Core is the heart of the park and includes:

- Sunset Canopy in memory of Tyre Nichols: A 20,000 square foot "floating" roof supported by six bundled steel columns that protects sports and activity courts below.

- **River Play:** A massive river-themed playground with climbable wooden river animals and plants created by the Denmark-based playground designers, Monstrum, in collaboration with SCAPE.
- **River Fit:** A series of park fitness stations and obstacles.
- **First Horizon Sunset Lounge:** A serene spot to gather at the water's edge as the sun sets over the Mississippi River.
- **Point Bar Pavilions:** Two curving, passively cooled timber structures with food and drink concessions, restrooms, and storage.
- **River Groves:** Shaded areas for seating.
- **TVA Central Lawn:** A series of open spaces, including a 100,000-square foot great lawn.

The Community Batture, named for the alluvial land between low tide and high ground, is a forested area honoring Tom Lee with quieter gathering spaces, natural landscapes, and varied elevations. It includes:

- **A Monument to Listening:** An permanent art installation by artist Theaster Gates inspired by the story of Tom Lee. Funded through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Monuments Project.
- **Heroes Plaza:** A new plaza surrounding the preserved-in-place monument to Tom Lee created by the artist David Allan Clark in 2006. Presented by Baptist Memorial Health Care.
- **Birch Forest and Meditative Walking Paths:** A series of pathways through denser groves of trees and along hilltops with views out to the river.
- **River Overlook:** Stone steps cascading from downtown to the park do double duty as tiered seating offering spectacular river views.

The Habitat Terraces are perched on the river edge, allowing visitors close-ups of the ecosystem of the Mississippi River. Features include:

- **Buckman Outdoor Classroom:** An open-air learning space hosting 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 between the Pollinator Lab and Sound Gardens.
- **Sound Gardens:** Attenuating noise pollution, platforms nestled in the hillside provide quiet, river-focused spaces for sound experimentation and listening.
- **Eco-Lawn:** A lawn set aside from the park's overall open space hosts a wider range of plantings, attracting pollinators and creating seasonal interest.

See pictures, renderings and more information about park design at [tomleepark.org](http://tomleepark.org).

## **BUDGET**

The park budget is \$61 million. In a true public-private Partnership the budget includes contributions from City, County, State and Federal sources matched by nearly \$30 million in private donations from leading local and national foundations, corporations, families and individuals. More than 180 "Visionary" donors will have their names inscribed in the park forever.

The park will be completed with overall spending of more than 43% at Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprises including the two women-owned firms leading the design team, Studio Gang and SCAPE alongside a suite of minority-led contractors and subcontractors.

## **TEAM**

- **Memphis River Parks Partnership – Project Lead and Client**
  - Tyree Daniels, Board Chair
  - Carol Coletta, President and CEO
  - George Abbott, Director of External Affairs
- **Studio Gang – Master Planner and Architect**
  - Jeanne Gang, Founding Principal and Partner
  - William Emmick, Design Management Principal
  - Chris Bennett, Senior Project Leader
  - Tim Shouder, Project Leader
- **SCAPE – Landscape Architect**
  - Kate Orff, Founding Principal
  - John Donnelly, Technical Principal
  - Brad Howe, Design Director
  - Will Tietje, Senior Associate
  - Tanner Perrin, Associate
- **Montgomery Martin Contractors – Contractor**
- **Kimley-Horn – Civil Engineer**
- **Thornton Tomasetti – Structural Engineer**
- **Innovative Engineering Services – M/E/P Engineer**
- **DataBased+ – Sustainability Analysis**
- **Randy Burkett Lighting Design – Lighting Designer**
- **Theaster Gates – Artist**
- **James Little – Artist**
- **MONSTRUM – Playground Designer**