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J magazine: How did Tulsa create a nationally known park?

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TULSA, Okla. — Oklahoma, with its cattle and its oil and all its sweeping plains, isn't the first place people think of when they think of world-class parks.

Certainly not a world-class park on the water.

That's changing, and fast. All because of Gathering Place. The simple name reflects the simple, if not easily attainable goal of the visionary and primary funder behind the project, Tulsa oilman and banker George Kaiser.

“All over our country, we are becoming more divided by race or class or economic inequality and, most recently, by politics,” Kaiser said. “The Gathering Place was developed to bring together people throughout the Tulsa area to rediscover that we are all bound together by commonalities, especially the hopes and dreams we have for our families.”

By that measure, the park has been a resounding success. Since opening in September 2018, the 66.5-acre recreation area along the Arkansas River has drawn more than four million visitors.

It's collecting all kinds of accolades, too. Time magazine and USA Today listed it among their top new attractions in the country in 2019. National Geographic named the park's playground — with its towering slides, sensory garden and water features — one of 12 mind-blowing playgrounds in the world.

The Urban Land Institute last year selected Gathering Place as one of its 11 Global Awards for Excellence winners.

Even city officials in Jacksonville have taken note. Within a few months after Gathering

Place opened, then-City Council Member Lori Boyer and Jill Enz, Jacksonville's park development and natural resources manager, made the 1,128-mile trek to Tulsa to visit the park.

"It is a fabulous park, I mean it is wonderful," said Boyer, who is now CEO of Jacksonville's Downtown Investment Authority. "There were just so many artful, special elements that to me it makes you almost feel you are in a theme park, in the sense of the level of maintenance, but it doesn't have the artificial contexts of the theme park. ... It left a very significant impression."

The park

In this community in northeast Oklahoma of 400,000 people — 1 million if you count the suburbs — the closest thing to a big city parkway is Riverside Drive. The four-lane roadway begins downtown and runs south along the Arkansas River for about 10 miles.

It's the best drive in town, and for years the best view along the way was a white southern-style mansion fronted by a massive expanse of lush green grass.

The George Kaiser Family Foundation spent \$50 million to purchase the mansion and several adjacent properties along a 1.5-mile stretch of Riverside Drive near downtown. That's where the heart of the park resides, with its award-winning playground, nearly three-acre pond, and Great Lawn.

The Boathouse on the south end of the property rises high above the park, providing visitors to its sprawling rooftop pavilion and Vista restaurant great views of the Tulsa skyline and the action in the park below.

Anchoring the north end is Williams Lodge, which at first blush looks like it belongs in a National Park. It is much more than that, though, with its massive natural stone walls and plush furniture.

Visitors can buy ice cream, coffee and pastries at the Redbud Cafe on the bottom floor, or climb elegant stone steps to a huge, glass-enclosed room that overlooks the park and the river. It has become home to knitting groups, cozying couples and bookworms. When it's cold outside, a fire crackles inside a two-story fireplace.

Land bridges built over Riverside Drive provide pedestrian access to the city's trail system and the park's sports courts and skate park on the shores of the Arkansas River.

The land bridges not only solved a practical problem for park designers — how to link the east side of the park to the west side — but added an aesthetic flair to a municipal road improvement project that would have taken place someday with or without Gathering Place.

Tulsans making the drive up and down Riverside Drive today zoom through 200-foot-long tunnels as park visitors 30 feet above relax in the sky garden or stroll to the river's edge.

“The ORU (Oral Roberts University) students are the first I heard use the term, and they said to me, ‘This is Tulsa’s Disney World,’ ” said Tony Moore, Gathering Place’s executive director. “I kind of smile, but it’s the closest thing folks in Tulsa feel as far as being at a world-class attraction.”

But it’s no Walt Disney World, Moore said, and he should know. He held leadership positions at Disney World, SeaWorld and the Tampa Zoo before accepting his new job in Tulsa.

“Gathering Place is totally different,” he said. “It is not for-profit. It’s heavily based on a social mission, designed with civic plans of uniting a community.

“The similarities are safety, quality, customer service ... you want folks to keep coming and returning.”

How it happened

Jeff Stava, executive director and trustee of Tulsa’s Gathering Place LLC, spent five years overseeing the design, construction planning and permitting of the park before one shovel of dirt was turned.

He would be the first to say he could not have done it alone.

“There is not really a book on how to build a big park,” Stava said. “We spent a lot of time touring the country talking to people who had built parks in urban environments, talking to those (community) leaders.”

Two parks of particular interest to Stava and his staff were Brooklyn Bridge Park in New York City and Maggie Daley Park in Chicago. They were designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc., the same landscape architecture firm that designed

Gathering Place.

Selecting the right design and master planning team was critical to Gathering Place's success, Stava said, because those jobs are about more than drawing pretty pictures.

"They can't just be creative," he said. "They have to have a substantial and robust project management and construction team to actually be able to build the park."

In preparing to build Gathering Place, Stava didn't limit his travels to parks in the United States. Too often, he said, America's public parks are designed to avoid exposing children to risks, and in doing so eliminate any challenges or opportunities to grow.

So he went to Frasdorf, Germany, home of Richter play equipment company.

"By looking in Europe, you can create very safe play equipment but play equipment that really pushes and teaches in an outdoor environment, and that kind of play has really been lost in the United States," Stava said. "Everything (at Gathering Place) is deliberately designed to engage, educate and challenge kids."

Tulsa had an advantage most communities don't when undertaking such a massive project — a generous benefactor. The George Kaiser Family Foundation funded \$200 million of the \$465 million park, and solicited another \$200 million in corporate and philanthropic contributions.

A total of \$100 million went into an endowment that funds the operations and maintenance of the park.

"That is kind of the secret ingredient for Tulsa," Stava said. "But I do believe when you have the right vision and you have the right product ... that was a lot of why the philanthropic community engaged so well, because they saw it as a reason to put Tulsa on the map and to give back to Tulsans."

Gathering Place also benefited from having Moore, the park director, hired a year-and-a-half before the park opened.

"Before the furniture for the lodge was selected, I took every single fabric for the furniture, and I would pour hot coffee on each one. What did not repel hot coffee, I threw them out and had them work with fabrics that are more practical," Moore said. "Those types of things you don't get done unless you are at the table."

The city of Tulsa spent \$65 million on infrastructure in and around Gathering Place. The park, which was donated to the city's River Parks Authority, is believed to be the largest private gift to a public park system in the United States.

“George (Kaiser) always wants to have anybody who's benefiting ... they need to have skin in the game,” said former Tulsa Mayor Dewey Bartlett. “I said, ‘Well, there will certainly be a lot of capital improvements that we can provide, anywhere from streets, bridges, water lines, sewer lines.’ All that is a big, big deal.”

And there is more to come. The city will invest approximately \$27 million to build a new pedestrian bridge over the Arkansas River that will connect the park on the east side of the river to city trails on the west side of the river. Gathering Place, meanwhile, continues to grow. Phase two of the project will include a children's museum, expected to open next year. Phase three is still in development. When the park is complete, it will include more than 100 acres.

Jacksonville Connection

Boyer, the CEO of the DIA, said she's already seen enough of the park to be inspired. She and Enz are working to incorporate elements of Gathering Place along Jacksonville's St. Johns River waterfront.

The city plans to use some of the same equipment found in Gathering Place's sensory garden in the children's interactive music area that will be part of the Musical Heritage Garden near the Times-Union Center for the Performing Arts, Boyer said, and talks are underway to have Richter build a ship for the Exploration of the St. Johns River exhibit.

“I think we went for inspiration and for things we could bring home and incorporate,” Boyer said of the trip she and Enz made to Tulsa. “And I think we both came up with some physical ideas of things, elements of the park that we really liked and we wanted to incorporate one place or another.”

The same goes for operational features of Gathering Place. The park, for example, has a beer garden-like patio that raises revenue through the sale of food, soft drinks and, yes, beer.

Food truck owners aren't just required to get a permit to sell at Gathering Place, they also pay the park a fee.

These are the kinds of revenue generators that perhaps Jacksonville's park system should consider exploring, Boyer said.

"To my knowledge, we don't do a lot of that," she said.

Kevin Canfield is a staff writer for the Tulsa World. He has covered local government, including downtown development, for nearly two decades.