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How Omaha transformed an urban dead zone into a thriving riverfront park

For designing a community-oriented park, HDR and OJB are the winners of Fast Company's 2024 Innovation by Design Awards.



BY [PATRICK SISSON](#) 2 MINUTE READ

Peering across the open lawns and performance pavilions of Omaha, Nebraska's new civic centerpiece, the Downtown Green, it's hard to imagine that a more incongruous landscape previously covered this part of the Missouri riverfront. But part of the design savvy employed by design firms HDR and OJB in reenvisioning this 72-acre green space was solving the puzzle of parkland that nobody could figure out for decades.



[Photo: courtesy HDR/OJB]

“If it was easy, it would have already been done,” says HDR principal Doug Bisson, whose hometown firm helped solve the knotty puzzles that kept this space from realizing its potential.



[Photo: courtesy HDR/OJB]

Back in the '70s, this prime downtown real estate was divided among three distinct parks. Gene Leahy Mall, a sunken series of walking paths and lagoons set below grade, was hard to access. Heartland of America Park, initially built as an extension of ConAgra's adjacent headquarters, was cut off and removed from the waterfront. And Lewis and Clark Landing, built on the site of the Arasco lead refinery, lacked any trees and wasn't very inviting.

"You had three separate parks, none of them connected very well, and designed almost to preclude active use and enjoyment," says Bisson.



[Photo: courtesy HDR/OJB]

The \$300 million renovation HDR and OJB designed—the winner of Fast Company's [2024 Innovation by Design Awards](#) in urban design—required as much engineering and problem-solving as it did design vision. In addition to leveling off parks built at different heights, special vibration monitors were used to make sure the neighboring stone buildings from the 1800s weren't damaged during construction. The buried grounds of the former lead refinery required an entirely new clay liner and an adept balancing act to make sure the addition of new trees,

light poles, and an entirely new science museum didn't disturb the liner. And if that wasn't enough, a high-power electrical line that serviced downtown ran through the center of the site—engineers designed a special duct system to prevent any movement.



[Photo: courtesy HDR/OJB]

RiverFront now boasts a sculpture garden, expanded playfields, and custom-designed Arches Playground, all landscaped with hundreds of new trees and rainwater-harvesting native landscaping. It's hosted 2.5 million visitors since reopening in 2022 and has generated \$500 million in economic impact, but Bisson believes the impact on the ground is much greater.

“The park has completely exposed the diversity within the community,” he says.

“You see all walks of life, all income levels. You see cricket being played, quinceañera photos, everything and anything. I think Omaha now looks like a much larger city because of that diversity.”

This story is part of Fast Company's [2024 Innovation by Design Awards](#). Explore the full list of companies creating products, reimagining spaces, and working to design a better world. Read more about the [methodology behind the selection process](#).