

Memphis

Transforming Civic Assets to Change Lives in a Majority Black City

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• DURATION

Completed

• POPULATION 2024

Memphis: 610,919 (Growth rate -2.80%)

• URA SCOPE

STRATEGY: Shared Vision

• TOPICS

EQUITY, REPRESENTATION,
TRANSFORMATION, PUBLIC SPACE, HEALTH,
COMMUNITY

• MAIN ACTORS

Memphis River Parks Partnership
Memphis Mayor, State of Tennessee, Shelby
County, Jeanne Gang, Studio Gang, Kate Orff,
SCAPE

In Memphis, where the wide Mississippi River winds past neighbourhoods long shaped by grit and grace, a profound transformation is unfolding along the riverfront. What was once underused land — six miles of public shoreline — has been reclaimed as a place of gathering, reflection, and possibility. This renewal features the new 31-acre Tom Lee Park, a space that now buzzes with the rhythms of daily life: families strolling, children playing, and elders resting beneath shady trees.

This wasn't just a beautification effort. It was an act of city-making, rooted in equity and collective memory. Led by Memphis River Parks Partnership — a nonprofit stewarding this public space — and shaped through a collaboration between the City of Memphis, Shelby County, the State of Tennessee, and acclaimed design teams SCAPE and Studio Gang, the project was guided by a single, ambitious idea: that great public spaces can serve as bridges — between people, across history, and toward shared futures.

The riverfront transformation didn't stand alone. Just five blocks inland, South City — once dominated by aging public housing — was undergoing its own \$220 million renewal, championed by Mayor Paul Young. At the time, more than 60% of South City residents lived in poverty.

Today, it's evolving into a mixed-income neighbourhood, its reinvention unfolding in tandem with the revival of the riverfront.

Together, these efforts have reimaged 340 acres of parkland and impacted 880 acres of urban fabric. And the results are already visible: in just the first six months, Tom Lee Park drew 500,000 visitors — a clear sign that people were ready to embrace a space that welcomes them fully.

In Memphis, a majority-Black city with a rich history in the fight for justice, public spaces must ensure people feel safe and valued. This park features inclusive programming, multilingual signage, and artwork by Black artists Theaster Gates and James Little, all reflecting a philosophy of belonging.

Tom Lee Park is named after Tom Lee, a Black man who, in 1925, rescued 32 strangers from drowning when a steamboat capsized, despite not knowing how to swim. His story, once quietly honoured, now reflects ideals of courage, unity, and hope in the park's design.

Now, Tom Lee Park stands as more than a park. It's a testament to what's possible when a city commits to honouring its past while investing in a more inclusive and just future.





Impact

The transformation of 31 acres of formerly unremarkable riverfront land in Memphis illustrates how intentional design and programming can generate both tangible and intangible benefits.

Tangibly, the site has been converted into a dynamic public space that welcomes over 500,000 visitors in its first six months, drawing a diverse demographic—39.5% Black, 35.2% White, and 25.2% identifying as Other. Significantly, 41% of these visitors come from nearby high-poverty, majority-Black neighbourhoods, indicating meaningful local engagement.

Intangible outcomes are equally significant. The project fostered strong partnerships grounded in shared purpose and mutual respect, enabling collaborators to pursue ambitious goals.

The design centres on equity, celebrating “Black joy” not just symbolically but through specific elements: signage and staff uniforms with “Hi, Neighbor” messaging emphasize hospitality; a community DJ replaces traditional security roles to create a welcoming, culturally resonant atmosphere; and programs are led by Black professionals.

Public art by Black artists reinforces cultural representation and encourages reflection, while recreational infrastructure supports inclusive activity.

The park’s success in creating a space for social mixing is notable. With 57% of visitors using alternative transportation and another 57% reporting they met someone new, the park demonstrates that thoughtful design can foster civic interaction across income and racial lines. Importantly, these outcomes are not incidental.

They result from deliberate strategies centred on access, representation, and equity. When a project is designed with these principles as its foundation, public space can shift from neutral ground to shared ground — a site of connection, dignity, and change.

Challenge

Memphis faces a complex set of urban challenges shaped by decades of disinvestment, economic segregation, and historical inequities. Large areas of the city’s riverfront remained underutilized for years, offering little public value despite their prominent location along the Mississippi River. Surrounding these spaces is a crescent of neighbourhoods marked by persistent poverty and racial segregation.

South City, just five blocks from the river, had a poverty rate exceeding 60% prior to recent redevelopment efforts, reflecting the scale of socioeconomic isolation in the area.

The city also grapples with some of the poorest regional health indicators in the nation, rooted in limited access to quality food, green space, and healthcare. Public space in Memphis has historically failed to serve all residents equitably, often reinforcing rather than challenging existing divisions.

Cultural representation and inclusion in the built environment have been lacking, contributing to a sense of exclusion among many communities—particularly Black residents. The story of Tom Lee, a Black man whose 1925 act of heroism was long commemorated with minimal recognition, underscores a broader history of segregation and discrimination that continues to influence how public space is perceived and experienced in Memphis today.

Solution Proposed

Tom Lee Park represents the transformation of a previously flat and underutilized 30-acre riverfront site into one of the most thoughtfully designed waterfront parks in the United States. Situated alongside racially and economically segregated neighbourhoods near downtown Memphis—including South City, which previously had a poverty rate of 60%—the project was conceived as a shared civic asset bridging social and economic divides.

Through a public-private-civic partnership, both the park and the South City redevelopment advanced in tandem. Together, they created new opportunities for health, education, and connection. The park offers active recreation to counteract poor regional health outcomes; youth internships and apprenticeships in conservation and design; and educational tools such as a Pollinator Lab with an outdoor classroom, native plant beds, and curriculum materials for schools. Spaces for reflection and public art foster learning and empathy.

The park is organized into zones inspired by native riparian ecologies, with design features that support environmental education and social gathering. Direct access was added for South City residents, now part of a 712-unit mixed-income community. The design process prioritized local voices, especially Black community members, integrating cultural narratives that reflect both pride and historical inequities.

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