

## **LOUISIANA CHILDREN'S MUSEUM AT NEW ORLEANS CITY PARK: A CHILD-CENTERED LANDSCAPE**

### **An Early Resilience Model for New Orleans**

When the landscape architects started this project in 2009 a city-wide water management plan was just emerging; few regulators and city leaders believed in the value of a “sponge city.” The design team embraced resiliency opportunities outlined in the New Orleans Urban Water Plan and designed the site to hold three feet of flood water—helping to reduce flooding in neighborhoods like Treme and the French Quarter that drain into the same canal system. By 2015 the City adopted the Water Plan, updated its stormwater code and began incorporating the principles into projects.

### **Thriving with Water**

It was imperative to the client that the museum landscape tell a water story through infrastructure, exhibits and landscape. These opportunities take many forms: from boardwalks and bridges that allow kids to investigate the shoreline and wetland plants, to an art installation that creates an immersive bridge of fog, to a conspicuous rainwater-harvesting cistern that collects roof water and uses it for irrigation, to extensive bioswales and a living lagoon shoreline that allow flood inundation and rainwater retention without impacting daily use. All these features tell a resilience story that suggests a new way to live with water.

### **The Magic of Child-Centered Landscapes**

Reggio Emilia suggests that children will engage more deeply in play and learning when it is self-directed and their ideas are valued, documented and reflected in the places they inhabit. A primary goal from day one was to integrate this focus on child-centered environments into the design process and all aspects of the site. Children have numerous opportunities for imaginative open-ended play, from building with large blocks on the courtyard lawn, to chasing water as it meanders through a runnel, or experimenting with loose natural materials in the shade of a live oak. Staff have anecdotally noted that interaction across multi-generational families has increased from their prior location. Children and families remain engaged longer in the experiences they are having together. These relationship-based hallmarks are positive indicators of holistic, child-centered design.

### **Design Concept: Hummocks and Hollows Interplay with Oaks**

The design concept integrates the magic of child-centered play with a simple expression of the local landscape—the hummocks and hollows. In the delta landscape, a six-inch topographic change enables a wholly different ecosystem. These slight variations in topography and dramatic ecosystem change are the backbone of the design concept. The hummocks and hollows concept unfolds in multiple ways across multiple scales—as small, medium and large outdoor program areas create varied play experiences and build healthy habitat.

Mature live oaks, part of City Park’s carefully managed collection, imbue the site with history and grace. The landscape architects were integral to establishing the building layout and arrival sequence, carefully coordinating with the architects, interior designers and City Park arborist to protect existing live oaks and create powerful visual relationships with the oak trees from both inside and outside. Twenty-six new live oak trees were planted to ensure the long-term health of the collection. Each live oak has its own unique character that the design team honors through responsive design and careful construction/installation techniques.

### **Kids Engaged in Sharing and Telling Stories**

The landscape invites children to engage with each other and the natural world through play and multi-sensory expression—simple, natural phenomenon of shadow play, listening to birds songs, orchestrating water flow, cooling in gentle mist, hiding (and seeking) in the cloud grasses, building nests together, working in concert to reel the floating classroom across the lagoon, crawling through the burrowing tunnel, harvesting and making food in the kitchen garden, and spotting sunning turtles and resting egrets.

Indoor and outdoor play experiences reinforce each other. Inside, the hands-on Mighty Mississippi exhibit tells the story of the river’s journey from Minnesota all the way to the Port of New Orleans and Gulf of Mexico. The water experiences transition to the outdoors where a child-operable sluice gate releases water that flows into a shallow scrim and ends where kids can jump between “hummocks” immersed in the surroundings of freshwater marsh plantings and newly planted bald cypress.

### **“A Million Fingerprints....”**

“There are a million fingerprints from our community,” director Julia Bland says. “It is fun and surprising everywhere you turn.” Integrated into the site experience are locally made products and experiences designed to prompt conversations about place. Mardi Gras beads, originally made from glass, are referenced by local artisan Mitchell Gaudet as donor spheres on the front porch railing and used to refract colorful light into the burrowing tunnel. St. Joe brick, a local staple, is used for the secret garden path. A multi-generational memorial bench was lovingly designed with the family of a long-time LCM board member who championed the project.

### **Plants as Storytellers**

The planting design immerses visitors in environments that celebrate the variety of plantings found in freshwater and brackish marshes, riparian areas and uplands. As a port city over 300 years old, New Orleans is a place where botanic specimens were imported from all over the world, slowly becoming established in the city’s storied gardens. At LCM, an upland strolling sensory garden highlights local favorites such as butterfly ginger, jasmine, gardenia and azalea alongside new favorites like Cherokee sedge, switchgrass, echinacea and salvia. A coastal restoration company became an invaluable partner by providing and maintaining the marsh plantings—including bulrush, marsh hay and pickerel weed—that showcase their work. The diverse plantings provide many interpretive opportunities for education program leaders working with children daily. Vertical vine columns in the main courtyard allow plants to stretch up on cables, shading the building and hosting pollinators and larvae for the Gulf Fritillary Butterfly, a popular sighting on staff-led “Nature Adventure Walks”. The vines are visible on the second floor of the exhibit wing through careful alignment with “kindows,” child-scaled window nooks. At the edible garden, children can follow the growth of their food from seedling to harvest, reinforcing food exhibits inside the museum. Education program leaders use the tactile landscape systems to help children interpret the site design.

### **“The New Museum has Changed our City” (and is Changing the State)**

In the first comments of his 2019 acceptance speech, re-elected Governor John Bel Edwards committed to increased support for early childhood development. The New Orleans Mayor allocated \$3 million dollars in the operating budget for quality childcare support. And, a recent regional economic group survey identified early childhood development as the top priority within the region.

The museum is a “third place” for kids and families. In the first 100 days the museum welcomed more than 60,000 guests from 44 states and numerous foreign countries. Memberships have quadrupled and expanded across 30 states. Locals come on average every three weeks, with some regulars visiting over 40 times in the first 100 days! Residents from more than 100 cities and towns across Louisiana have come to play—positive reinforcement for tax-payer investment since the State was a primary financial supporter. During the pandemic the museum is hosting over 40 pre-K and kindergarten students for classes. With significant indoor and outdoor space specifically designed for early learners, the museum remains well used as the wider community eagerly awaits the opportunity to return.