



Image Credit: design-mor

3

PARKS & OPEN SPACE

3A Urban Parks Framework

3B Parks & Open Space

INTENT

As the County's urban districts continue to grow and evolve, there is an opportunity to support and complement new development with a variety of open spaces that enhance the quality of life for those who live, work, and visit these areas. Open spaces may be publicly-owned or privately-owned, but all must be available for public use. They may vary in size and character - from larger parks to smaller plazas and pocket parks - and offer a range of experiences, including active and passive recreation, programmed activities and events, playspaces, and areas for conversation and quiet respite.

Regardless of size or type, all parks, open spaces, and trails should be welcoming, safe, comfortable and accessible to the full spectrum of park users, in accordance with the goals of the [One Fairfax Policy](#). They should bring people of all ages and backgrounds together for gatherings large and small, casual and programmed, while serving as catalysts for community connections and economic development.

Newly developed parks, open spaces, and trails should also [align with the Fairfax County Park Authority's Parks, Recreation, Open Space, and Access \(PROSA\) Strategy](#) goals. The PROSA Strategy has four main elements: improve 10-minute walk access to FCPA parks, enhance access to complete park experiences, preserve and protect natural assets, and prioritize recreation needs with an equity lens.

Both the One Fairfax Policy and PROSA Strategy will help provide park and recreation opportunities needed to reach an equitable outcome across the county, allowing everyone access and enjoyment of high quality parks, open spaces, and trails. In addition, these policies support new public parks or open spaces to balance and complement new development. Collectively, parks, open spaces, and trails should function as a larger integrated network connecting neighborhoods, natural areas, and economic centers. Trails and open spaces should connect neighborhoods and wildlife habitats by serving as natural corridors for people and animals.

This chapter describes the main typologies of urban parks and open spaces included in the County's Urban Parks Framework and identifies design principles and strategies to maximize potential benefits to the CRDs and CRAs. These design recommendations build on previous public

open space planning efforts. The design of parks and open spaces should be consistent with the recommendations in the following documents:

- The Parks and Recreation chapter of the Policy Plan element of the Comprehensive Plan, including the Urban Parks Framework appendix.
- The planned parks, open space, and trails network as described in the area plans of the Comprehensive Plan.
- The parks and open space chapter as contained in Volume II: District Design Guidelines for each CRD and CRA.
- [The Parks, Recreation, Open Space, and Access \(PROSA\) Strategy.](#)

INSPIRATION



Image Credit: Landezine

San Francisco, CA



Image Credit: Office of James Burnett

Dallas, TX

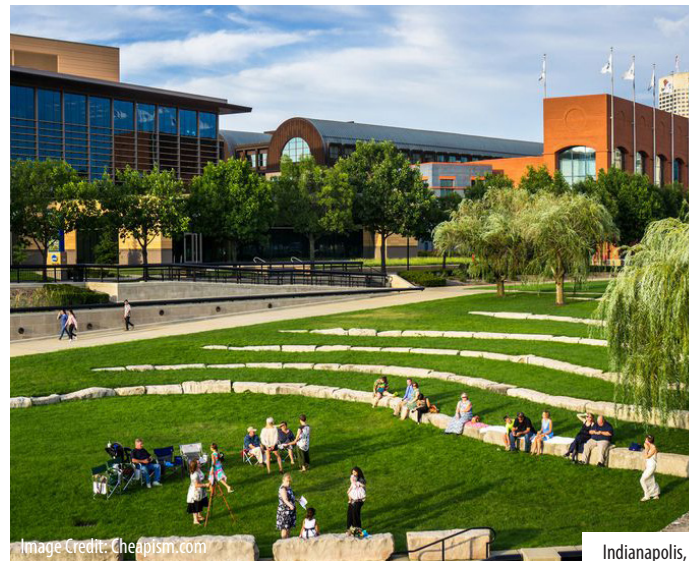


Image Credit: cheapsm.com

Indianapolis, IN

Urban parks designed to be compact, multifunctional, and relate to adjacent uses and context; design elements provide opportunities for a range of active and passive recreation and ensure that these spaces function as community gathering places

3A

URBAN PARKS FRAMEWORK

Urban parks found in the County's urban districts provide functions, uses, amenities, and visual form that are appropriate in an urban context. Residents in urbanizing areas are more likely to rely on publicly accessible parks and plazas for socializing, passive/contemplative recreation, active recreation and exercise, and access to natural and cultural amenities. Similarly, workers and visitors of the urban districts seek attractive, safe and comfortable spaces for leisure and social activities.

The *Fairfax County Urban Parks Framework* includes several types of parks: Civic Plazas, Recreation-

Focused Parks, Linear Parks, Common Greens, and Pocket Parks. These park types encompass a diverse range of purposes, uses, sizes, and features while accommodating a broad spectrum of needs. Ideally, each area will contain a variety of urban parks in order to improve walkable access to parks, provide a variety of park experiences, support revitalization goals, and create or enhance an area's sense of culture, liveliness, and identity.

The Urban Parks Framework establishes standards for the provision of urban parks based on the park needs generated by new development and



RIGHT

Plaza with programmed pedestrian activity areas; active ground floor uses, landscaping and pedestrian-scaled lighting lend vibrancy to the space
Image Credit: thelightingpractice.com

Arlington, VA

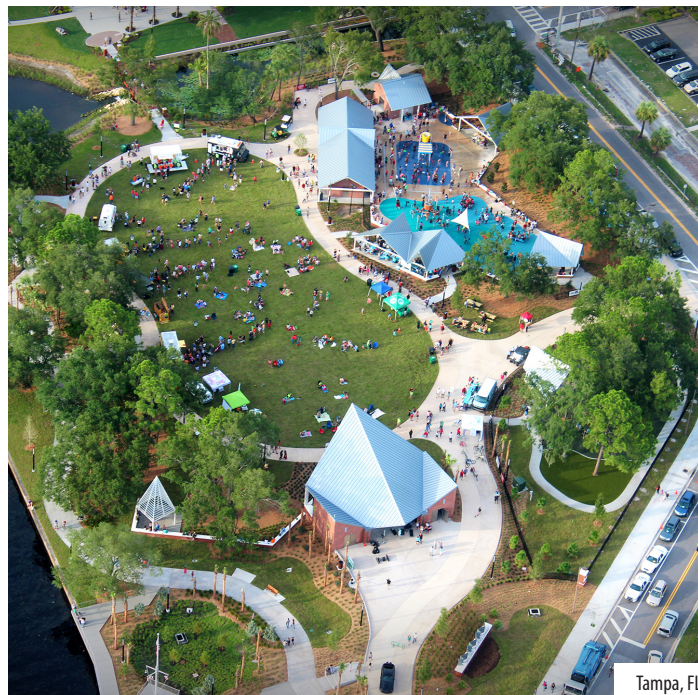
redevelopment. The precise number, size, and arrangement of urban parks will be evaluated based on the demand created by each specific development and the applicable policies and guidelines of the Urban Parks Framework, the Comprehensive Plan, and Volume II: District Design Guidelines recommendations regarding parks. For more detailed recommendations pertaining to size, access, service area and amenities of Urban Parks, please refer to the Fairfax County Urban Parks Framework located in [Appendix 2 of the Parks and Recreation Chapter in the Comprehensive Plan, Policy Plan.](#)



New York, NY

TOP

Pocket park with movable seating, shade and a water wall create an active gathering place and community amenity
Image Credit: Theodora Park



Tampa, FL

BOTTOM LEFT

Recreation-focused urban park that includes a trail, splash pad, playground, pavilions, a Common Green and a bandshell for events and music
Image Credit: Plan Hillsborough



Sydney, Australia

BOTTOM RIGHT

Linear park with active recreation amenities including a trail, dining tables, study pods, table tennis, and active water play features
Image Credit: ASPECT Studios

URBAN PARK TYPES



New York, NY

Image Credit: Fairfax County

CIVIC PLAZA:

Civic Plazas include public gathering spaces set aside for social purposes and that are supportive of commercial activities, such as open-air markets, summer concerts, festivals, outdoor exercise classes and/or special events. They are often planned at the intersection of important streets, within a town center or at other notable locations, and serve as community focal points.



Arlington, VA

Image Credit: Hughs Group Architects

RECREATION-FOCUSED PARK:

Recreation-Focused Parks include facilities such as athletic fields and multi-use courts, along with associated amenities such as trails, seating, tot lots, shade structures, water features, picnic areas and restrooms. The size of the park should be appropriate to accommodate the proposed recreation facilities.

LINEAR PARK:

Linear Parks are continuous spaces, generally designed for recreational use that may include sidewalks or trails, recreational amenities, public art, wayfinding signage, and environmental amenities. Linear greenways that utilize urban stream valleys for trails and trail connections are a form of Linear Park.



Image Credit: Landezine

Dallas, TX

COMMON GREEN:

Common Greens are flexible open spaces with lawn areas that serve as the recreational and social focus of a neighborhood. These spaces may include amenities such as tot lots, playgrounds, fitness courses, paved trails, and sport courts.



Image Credit: Tighe & Bond Studio

Boston, MA

POCKET PARK:

Pocket parks are small-scale open spaces incorporated into developments or located on small, underutilized pieces of public or privately-owned land. Typically designed for casual, passive use by people working and living in the immediate area, these spaces may consist of hardscape elements, lawns, or landscaped areas and may incorporate elements such as seating, water features and art.



Image Credit: Copley Wolff Landscape Architecture

Boston, MA

3B

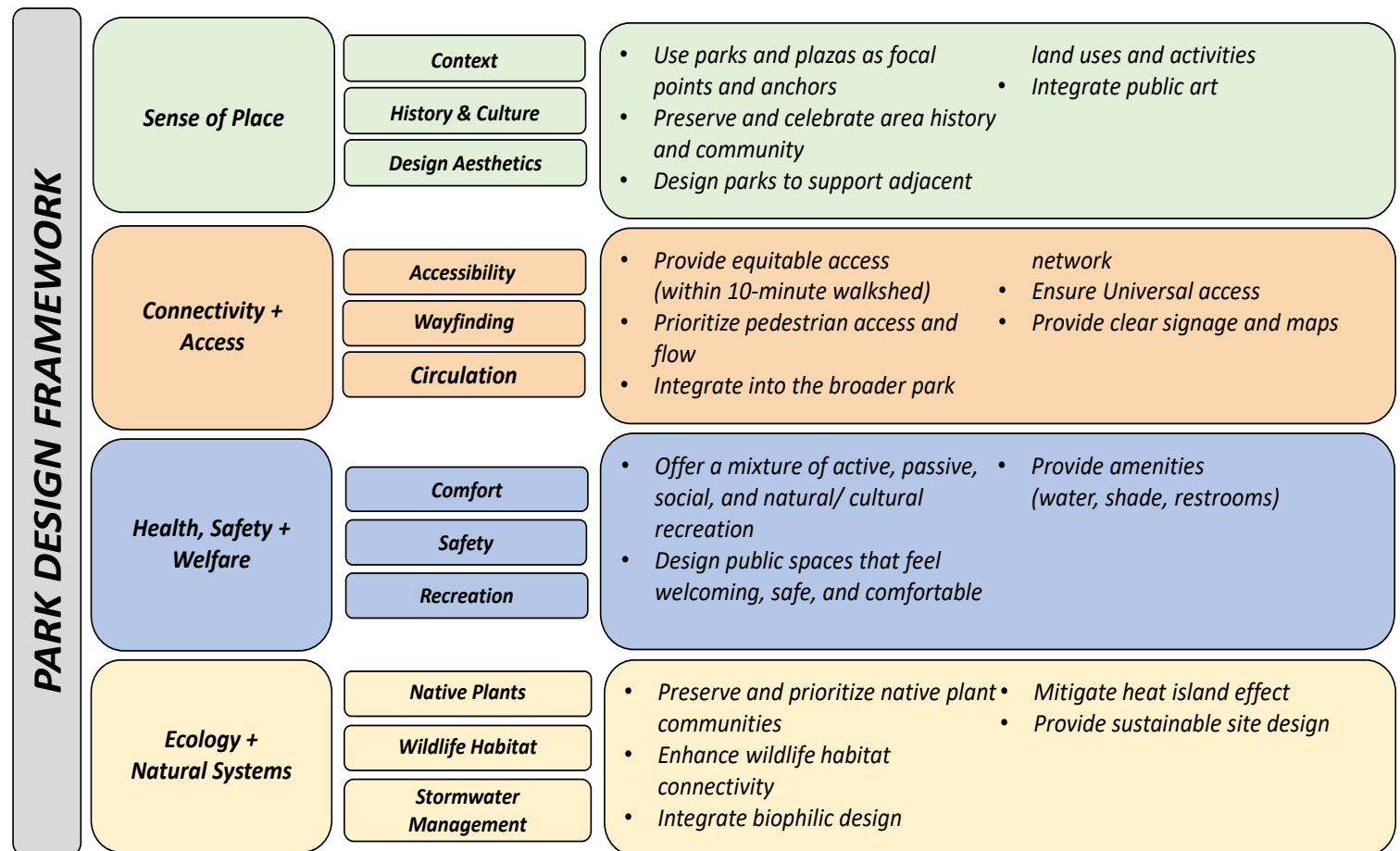
PARKS & OPEN SPACE

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES

Urban parks should serve a diverse range of uses and users while also contributing to the placemaking and economic vitality of urbanizing areas. The design of urban parks and open spaces should reflect the four general design principles and strategies outlined below.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, the term “parks” refers broadly to parks and urban park types like civic plaza, urban plaza, common green etc.

**GRAPHIC 10:
PARK DESIGN
FRAMEWORK**



DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

1 SENSE OF PLACE [S]

Well-designed parks that thoughtfully relate to the surrounding context create a sense of place to foster social interactions, increase civic pride, and support active, healthy lifestyles.

S-1 – Configure blocks to locate public parks in high visibility areas and distinguish them from private spaces.

Urban parks should be:

- Located to create a safe environment.
- Sited to create strong connections to the street and pedestrian networks.
- Provided in areas with high pedestrian traffic.

S-2 – Use parks and plazas as the focal point for commercial development and public space.

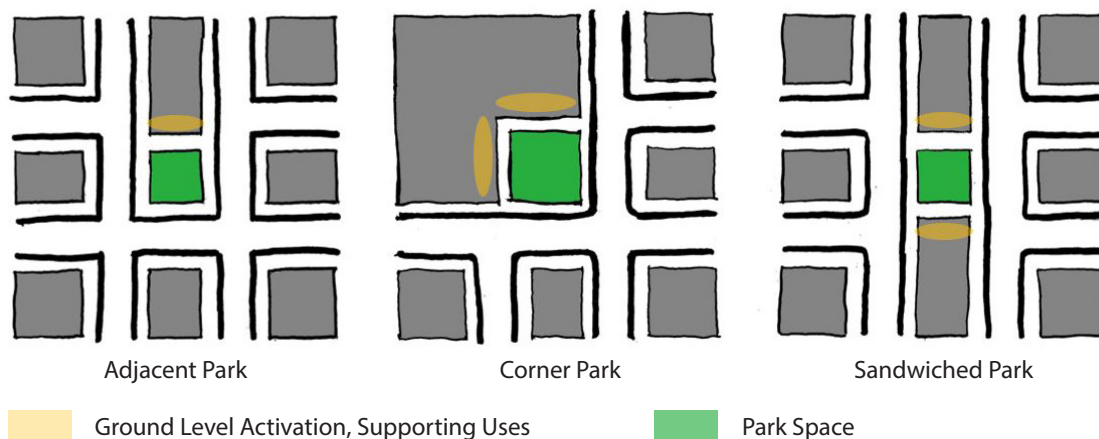
- Buildings and amenities should be organized around parks and plazas.
- Publicly accessible parks provided by private developments should be oriented towards streets, trails, or adjacent commercial and public uses.

S-3 – Create and frame prominent view corridors to provide grand views of focal points and areas of activity.

The corridors should be spatially significant. Examples of focal points may include:

GRAPHIC 11: URBAN PARK BLOCK CONFIGURATION

- The “Adjacent Park” configuration orients the park at the terminus of the block which provides retail and other supporting uses on at least one edge while the remaining sides front adjacent streets or public right of way.
- The “Corner Park” and the “Sandwiched Park” configurations offer ground level retail on at least two edges providing a more activated and energized space while also improving safety by exposing fewer of park edges to adjacent roadways.



RIGHT

Activated open space with areas for play and relaxation
Image Credit: Bethesda Magazine

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

- commercial activity or use
- public art
- water features
- historical and/or cultural monuments

S-4 – Establish identity by incorporating features of historical, cultural, and natural importance. Link historical and cultural heritage to the park design by:

- Using interpretive educational signage
- Incorporating symbolic materials
- Including public art to connect to heritage

BELOW

Integrated bioretention area and boardwalk in a linear park
Image Credit: Woltz Landscape Architects



Alethia Tanner Park, Washington, DC

S-4 – Parks and their surrounding built environment should complement each other.

- The design of open spaces should respond to and support activities related to adjacent land uses. (e.g., outdoor seating areas enable patrons to enjoy food or beverages from adjacent businesses.)

S-5 – Enliven public areas, define spaces and create “outdoor rooms” with these elements:

- Distinctive paving materials, paving patterns, and/or accent banding.
- Colors and lighting that frame spaces.
- Furniture that can be rearranged, reclining, or reconfigured for different purposes.

S-6 – Integrate public art into all park types

- Pay special attention to prominent park spaces like Civic Plazas, Common Greens, and Linear Parks.
- Explore “playable art” and other dual-purpose artistic installations.
- Refer to Chapter 6 for further guidance on public art.

S-7 – Water features should be incorporated as landmarks, focal points, and places to play that enhance the park or open space. Additional details regarding water features are provided in Section 6D (“Water Features”).

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

2 CONNECTIVITY AND ACCESS [C]

Parks that are logically ordered and seamlessly connected through a public spaces network improve connectivity within a community. Successful public places are accessible to all and create a seamless arrival, departure, and navigation experience.

C-1 – Locate parks within a 5-to-10-minute walking distance of residential areas and other uses.

- Integrate these spaces into a network to enhance walkable access.

C-2 – Connect pedestrian walkways with public and private pedestrian infrastructure

- Facilitate pedestrian access within and beyond the park site.
- Integrate walking loops into larger park networks for recreational use.

C-3 – Provide spacious areas for pedestrian flow and circulation

- Focus on areas with heavy pedestrian traffic or expected influx of visitors.
- Ensure that paths are minimum of 8-feet wide, but preferably 10-feet wide.



Columbus, OH

TOP

Open space activated with programming for all ages
Image Credit: Scioto Mile

BOTTOM

A modern, interactive fountain in a downtown plaza
Image Credit: Fairfax County



Sundance Square Plaza, Fort Worth, TX

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

C-4 – Ensure Universal access in park design

- Integrate ramps, level landings, textured surfaces, and seating.
- Support visitors of all abilities.

C-5 – Create a strong sense of arrival at park entrances.

- Use design elements like seat walls, monument signage, flanking piers, signature landscaping, or columns to create attractive park entrances.
- Install clear park entrance and directional signage, along with informational maps, to

enhance navigation and create inviting spaces at all access points.

- Refer to the Wayfinding section for further guidance on creating effective visitor paths and signage.

C-6 – Provide clear park signage and delineate public parks from private spaces.

- Reference the [Publicly Accessible Private Open Space \(POPS\) Sign Standards](#) for sign styles and content.

C-7 – Public access easements should be recorded for the purpose of permanent public access and to create a connected, publicly accessible park or open space.

- These easements may be granted to Fairfax County, FCPA, or other public entities depending on individual circumstances. Public access easements should encompass the whole of the space counted toward urban park space and accommodate the spectrum of public recreational uses expected in urban parks. In addition, opportunities to allow adjacent developers to improve the site should be considered if maintenance responsibilities can be agreed upon.

BOTTOM

Material selection and plaza design visually enhance the pedestrian environment and help delineate spaces and uses
Image Credit: BCT Architects



Arlington, VA

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

3 HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELFARE [H]

Parks should provide safe and comfortable experiences for all users, offer unique features and park elements and experiences, support healthy lifestyles, and promote or enhance natural and cultural resources.

H-1 – Design parks to offer a variety of recreational experiences, such as active, passive/contemplative, social, natural, and cultural recreation.

- Balance recreation types for health benefits.
- Provide flexible spaces for diverse recreational activities.
- Frame spaces with topography, seat walls, art, and landscaping.
- Consider local context for unique recreational opportunities.

Examples of different recreational experiences are provided in the [Fairfax County Park Authority's Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Access \(PROSA\) Strategy](#).

H-2 – Design public spaces to feel welcoming, safe, and comfortable and provide recreation for the full spectrum of park users, in accordance with the goals of the [One Fairfax Policy](#).



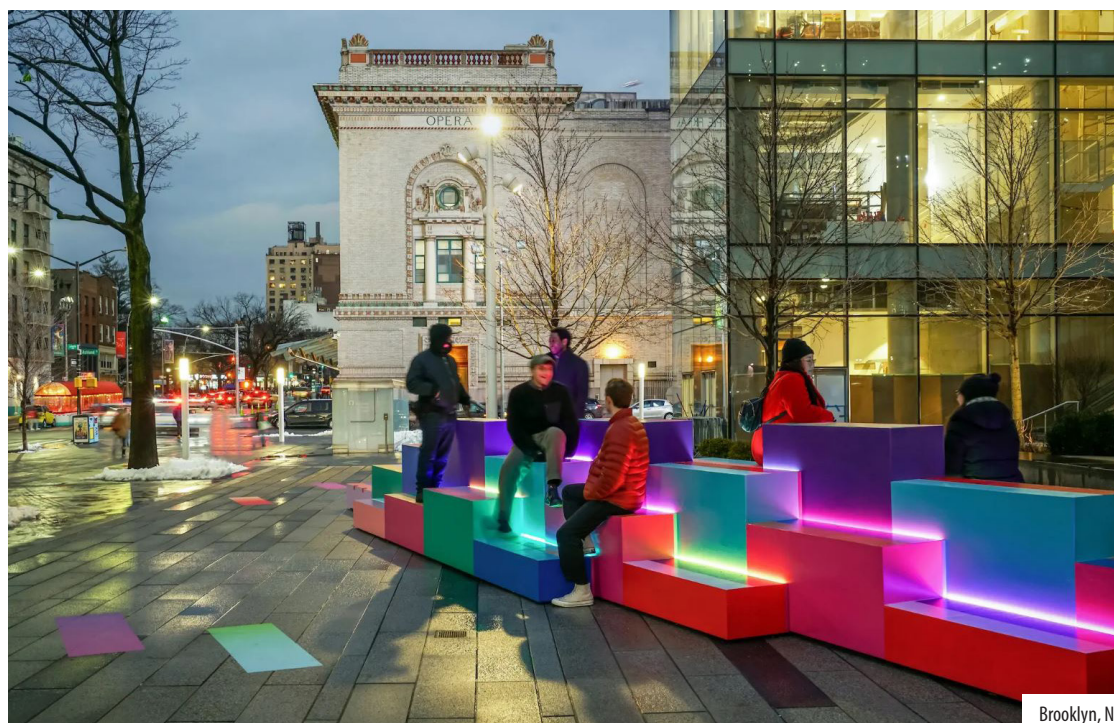
Seattle, WA

TOP

Water feature creates a playful, welcoming environment for families
Image Credit: parentmap.com

BOTTOM

Interactive art installation animates a Brooklyn plaza
Image Credit: 6sqft



Brooklyn, NY

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

BOTTOM

Integrate biophilic design and green infrastructure creates a refuge for people and wildlife in the midst of this bustling downtown neighborhood.
Image Credit: GreenWorks



Portland, OR

- Include playgrounds, tot lots, play structures, playable art, and interactive water features.
- Place seating and amenities near play areas for caregivers to supervise children.

H-3 – Create viewsheds into parks.

Provide lines of sight and encourage natural surveillance (“eyes on the street”) through:

- Strategic placement of doors, windows, balconies, and street-level uses.

- Keeping park views unobstructed from walls, plantings, building corners, or down narrow passageways.

H-4 – Incorporate multifunctional site amenities.

For example, a bench may also serve as a sculptural art element, or a sculptural element serve as play equipment.

H-6 – Plan for formal and informal uses.

- Include spaces for recreation, walking, sitting, and community activities like performances, movie nights, farmers markets, kiosks, bulletin boards, cafes, and street vending.
- Ensure provision of electric service for events like festivals or farmers markets.

H-7 – Design parks to concentrate activity areas in places with a balance of sun and shade. Include features that encourage activities beyond daylight hours and throughout the year. Such features could include:

- Appropriate lighting
- Electrical outlets
- Movable seating and chairs
- Weather protection and shade
- Outdoor heaters
- Wi-fi service

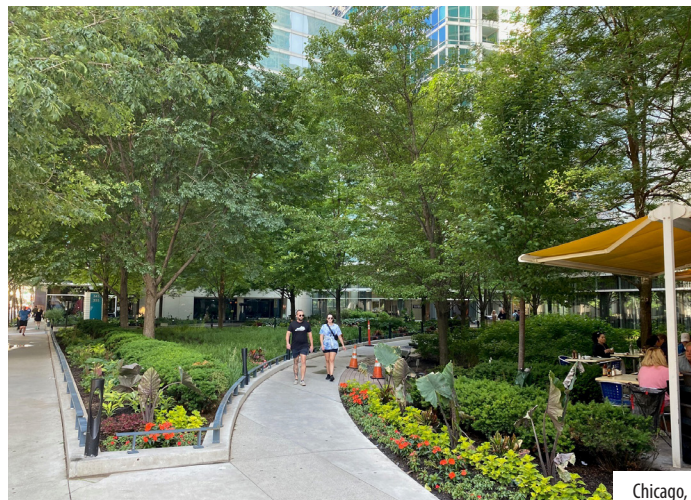
DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

H-8 – Provide lighting for safety including pathway illumination, pedestrian and entry lighting, and/or security lighting.

- Ensure well-lit parks, plazas, and open spaces with downward-directed lighting using full cut-off optics.
- Prioritize proper lighting for trails serving commercial areas and transit access.
- Develop a photometric plan for county review during rezoning or site plan approvals.
- Pathways, trails, and park spaces that are intended for evening use should be lit uniformly at an average of 1.0 to 1.5 Foot Candles (FC).

H-9 – Design plazas, pocket parks, and other open spaces to protect pedestrians from vehicles, weather, and adjacent undesirable uses.

- Use features like on-street parking, trees, landscaping, low walls, bollards, and art to visually and physically buffer pedestrians.
- Ensure any low walls used for seating are 18 to 24 inches high and at least 18 inches deep.



TOP

Layered landscape creates a lush environment in an urban setting
Image Credit: Fairfax County

BOTTOM

Water feature within a pedestrian plaza
Image Credit: Foster + Partners



DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

H-10 – Coordinate early in the conceptual design process to ensure that existing and planned infrastructure and utilities do not encumber the development of park amenities and facilities.

- Avoid placing underground stormwater detention systems under improved park spaces as they limit the park amenities and plantings that can be provided in these spaces.
- Be cautious with underground utilities, duct banks, and easements to ensure full park functionality.
- If park placement above infrastructure is unavoidable, carefully position access panels and above-ground equipment to minimize visual and functional impacts.
- Include existing and proposed utility easements on the CDP/FDP to identify potential conflicts with park improvements.



BOTTOM

A welcoming pocket park forms the focal point of the development
Image Credit: visithoustontexas

Houston, TX

4 ECOLOGY AND NATURAL SYSTEMS [E]

Parks are places where people can connect with nature and improve their physical and mental health. They can define visual character, offer shade, support ecological systems and create wildlife habitats, improve air quality, reduce the urban heat island effect, and mitigate the impacts of climate change. For ecological and natural systems inside and around parks to thrive, special consideration needs to be given to habitat creation with a focus on biodiversity and connectivity, water quality, and health of soils.

E-1 – Minimize disturbance to existing vegetation and topography, including healthy soil.

- Provide adequate soil volume to support long-term tree health.
- Ensure healthy soil containing optimal nutrients and organic matter to support plant growth.
- Incorporate existing natural features like terrain, topography, mature trees, and environmental elements into park designs.

E-2 – Prioritize native, pollinator, and bird-friendly plants in plant selection.

- Maximize use of native plants and incorporate diverse plantings for aesthetic richness.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

- Consider factors like native species, local ecosystem, future climate, water needs, light, soil conditions, adjacent use patterns, and maintenance requirements when choosing plants.

E-3 – Design for enduring natural systems.

- Use a diverse palette of locally native trees, shrubs, grasses, and perennials in a park space to increase biodiversity.
- A network of park spaces with diverse plantings improves habitat connectivity by creating a variety of microhabitats.

E-4 – Integrate biophilic design principles and green infrastructure that can improve heat mitigation, air quality, water quality, and stormwater management. Green infrastructure includes:

- Bioretention ponds
- Bioswales
- Permeable surfaces and pavements
- Green roofs
- Tree conservation
- Floodable parks
- Green spaces



Tysons, VA

TOP

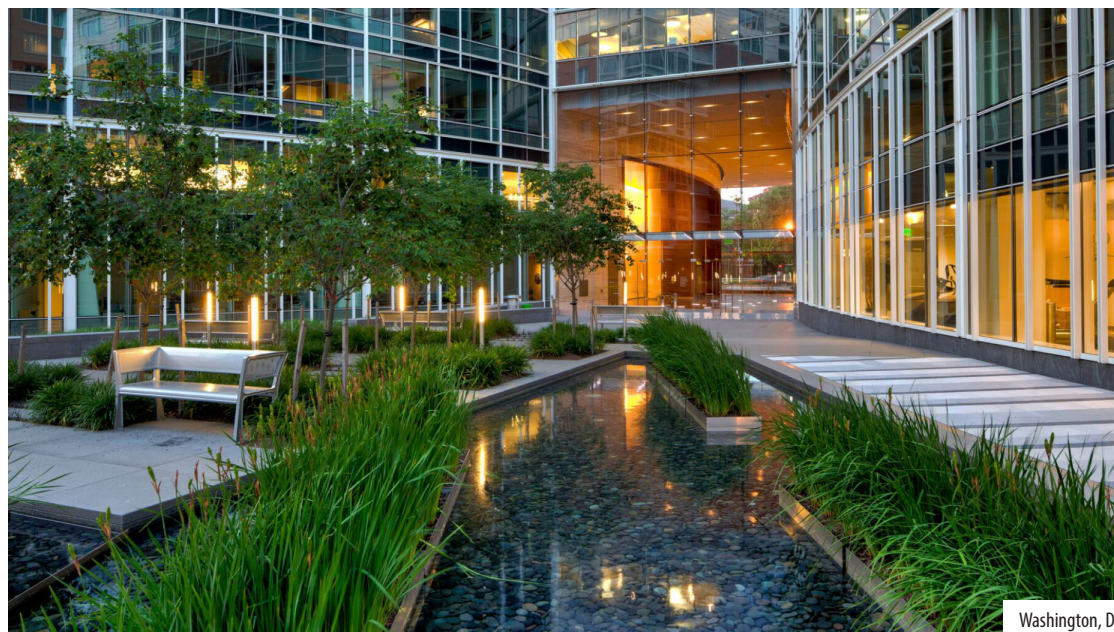
Native plants and existing topography are incorporated within the park design

Image Credit: Fairfax County

BOTTOM

A water feature above an underground parking garage filters and collects rain water for irrigation

Image Credit: Sasaki



Washington, DC

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

E-5 – Provide sustainable irrigation practices.

- Use automated irrigation systems in landscaped spaces when necessary.
- Prioritize rainwater collection and recycled gray water for irrigation.

E-6 – Soften park edges with vegetated buffers composed of trees, shrubs, perennial grasses, and/or natural berms to separate the park and/or open space from roadways and the rest of the built environment.

E-7 – Use sustainable materials wherever feasible.

Recommended materials include:

- Permeable pavers in hardscaped areas to promote natural water infiltration and reduce runoff.
- Recycled aggregate materials (e.g., crushed concrete or crushed concrete or recycled asphalt) for pathways and sub-base layers (These materials should be placed separately from trees and natural resources proposed to be preserved.)
- Cool pavements that reflect solar energy and enhance water evaporation to reduce the heat island effect.
- Certified sustainable wood (e.g., FSC-certified) for site furnishing
- Locally sourced materials to minimize transportation emissions and support local economies.



BOTTOM

Locally sourced, stabilized gravel used in this pedestrian plaza will allow stormwater to permeate into the underground water table
Image Credit: Organic-Lock

Indianapolis, IN

DESIGN PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES (CONT'D)

5 KEY TERMS

- **Active recreation:** experiences that encourage physical activity and play, such as using sport courts, fields, playgrounds, trails, and fitness equipment.
- **Complete park access:** the ability of residents to get to parks that provide a variety of recreational experiences within a 10-minute walk or 5-minute drive from their home.
- **Healthy soil:** good or healthy soil should provide good nutrients to plants and have good water retention. Good soil structure provides a medium for plant roots and building structures. The minerals and microbes in soil are also responsible for filtering, buffering, degrading, immobilizing, and detoxifying organic and inorganic materials.
- **Natural/Cultural recreation:** experiences that provide opportunities to connect with the outdoors and nature, as well as present-day and historical heritage, such as enjoying nature trails or wildlife habitats, or visiting historical and cultural landmarks.
- **One Fairfax:** a joint racial and social equity policy adopted by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, School Board, and the Park Authority Board. It commits the county, schools, and Park Authority to intentionally consider equity when making policies or delivering programs and services.
- **Passive/Contemplative recreation:** experiences that offer a place for relaxation, reflection, and mindfulness. Park amenities for this type of recreation experience include outdoor seating areas, walking paths, trails, and gardens.
- **Privately-owned Public Space:** a type of public space that is privately-owned but open to the public, typically through the execution of a public access easement or other public land rights.
- **Public access easement:** an easement over private property granting the right of access and use to the general public and authorizing the County to regulate traffic and enforce maintenance thereon for the purpose of protecting the public health, safety, and general welfare.
- **Social recreation:** experiences that encourage people to gather, engage in shared activities, and foster relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, such as enjoying picnic areas, community gardening, or going to an event. They facilitate community interactions and connections.
- **Ten-minute walk:** 10 minute (½ mile) walk to a public entrance of a publicly accessible park.