

The Architect's Newspaper

Makeover Along the Old Muddy
First phase of OJB Landscape Architecture's sweeping Omaha park overhaul will open July 1
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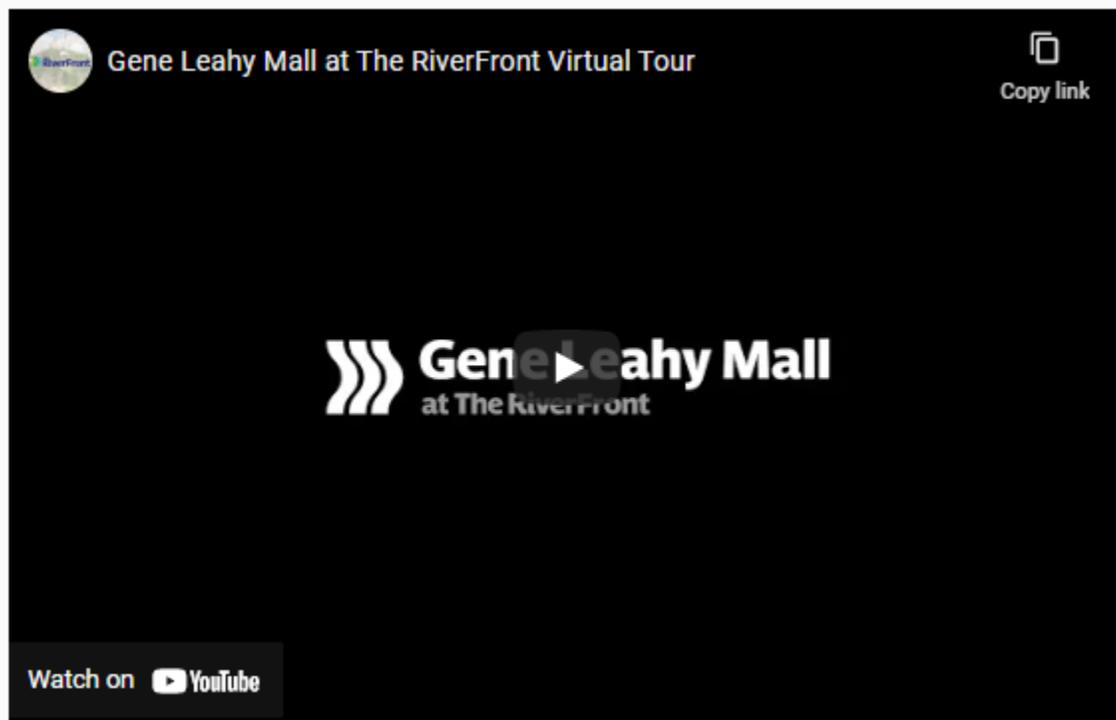
View of the soon-to-reopen Gene Leahy Mall in downtown Omaha. The park has been closed since early 2019 to make for an extensive redesign. (Courtesy MECA)

The very large lagoon in the middle of downtown Omaha is no longer.

Beginning July 1, visitors to the 9.6-acre Gene Leahy Mall (née Central Park Mall) will find that the meandering, postcard-perfect water feature has been dredged and filled—its resident wildlife long ago rescued and relocated—to make way for a 50,000-square-foot expanse of open lawn space flanked by a concert-ready performance pavilion. The dramatic changes at Gene Leahy Mall carried

out as part of a soon-to-be-publicly-unveiled redesign led by OJB Landscape Architecture haven't been without local pushback, particularly with concern to its scenic centerpiece lagoon. Yet downtown Omaha's rectangular urban green space, which first debuted in 1977 with a design by Lawrence Halprin & Associates, necessitated a 21st century refresh following an extended period of underuse and neglect. As OJB put it, the park had long grappled with "difficult access and activation issues."

While the lagoon is now a memory, this isn't to say that the *new* Gene Leahy Mall has been stripped of all the old hits. The beloved, jumbo-sized slides live on along with other "park artifacts," joined by a long list of new public amenities and attractions including smaller, interactive water features, a dog park, a sculpture garden curated by local arts nonprofit KANEKO, a formal pond, a public plaza at 13th Street, shaded seating areas, amphitheater, pedestrian promenade linking downtown with the Old Market entertainment district, and a state-of-the-art playground described as "iconic" by OJB. Notably, the park has been regraded, elevating the once-sunken space roughly 13 feet to street level as a means of improving pedestrian access, enhancing neighborhood connectivity, and drawing people to the sprawling lawn, dubbed the Downtown Green, at its heart. Never an easy spot for large-scale gatherings (the lagoon was always an obstacle, limiting public use) the reimagined Gene Leahy Mall "brings public activity back to the forefront," said OJB in a press statement announcing the park's much-anticipated, pandemic-delayed July 1 opening.



The Kristin Chenoweth-headlined reopening of the transformed Gene Leahy Mall kicks off the phased unveiling of a larger park network that fuses Omaha's downtown core with the Missouri River. Dubbed the Riverfront Revitalization Project, the 72-acre urban open space project is one of the largest of its kind in the county and will be comprised of a trifecta of revitalized and newly interconnected parks when completed: the Gene Leahy Mall, first broke ground in June 2019 as the first phase of a master plan developed by OJB for Omaha's Metropolitan Entertainment & Convention Authority (MECA); Heartland of America Park, which opened in 1990 at the old site of

the Jobbers Canyon Historic District and is the largest of the three components at 31 acres; and Lewis and Clark Landing, a concrete-dominated, 23-acre space directly abutting the Missouri River. First opening in 2003, Lewis and Clark Landing is the newest and northernmost of the three parks and will reemerge from its redesign with a new playground, renovated marina, sand volleyball courts, and other features.

The trio of reimagined parks—Heartland of America Park and Lewis and Clark Landing are both set to reopen next year as part of subsequent project phases—have been collectively rechristened as The RiverFront.



The bioswale adjacent to the Sculpture Garden at Gene Leahy Mall is filled with native and adaptive planting. (Courtesy MECA)

The \$322 million-plus Riverfront Revitalization Project is funded by a variety of public and private sources, including \$272.6 million in philanthropy generated by the nonprofit Downtown Riverfront Trust (DRT) and \$50 million from the City of Omaha. The DRT, established expressly to fund the construction and activation of The RiverFront, will finance maintenance and operations at the new park system for its first decade in existence with MECA overseeing its management and all community-based programming.

“The history of concrete infrastructure that prioritized transportation in major metropolitan areas is now being rethought, and in its stead, we are seeing a boom in the construction and development of

green spaces that prioritize health and wellness, connectivity, and the building of sustainable cities,” said James Burnett, president and founder of National Design Award-winning OJB Landscape Architecture in a statement. “Omaha is at the forefront of American cities investing in green infrastructure as a quality of life imperative.”

Houston-founded OJB, which first revealed its transformative master plan to the public in 2018, is joined on the redesign of Gene Leahy Mall and the larger RiverFront project by Gensler along with ADBC Architecture and Safdie Rabines Architects; engineers HDR and M&R Global, Fluidity Design Consultants (water feature design), Studio Ludo (play consultant), Atelier Ten (lighting design), TSM Design (signage and wayfinding), Avine Engineering (MEP engineering), and others. Also playing a key role in the development of the Riverfront Revitalization Plan was the general public as part of what OJB called “all-inclusive communication and collaboration approach” that involved three large Community Workshops and a number of design charrettes held with key stakeholders and community groups.

OJB partner Kyle Fiddelke added: “As a firm, we’ve sought projects that improve not only the lived experience of people in these communities, but also the environmental health of the city. The Riverfront Revitalization Project is a prime example of such a venture, and we are incredibly proud to be a part of this enormous endeavor.”

This past November, the Riverfront Revitalization Project was awarded with Platinum level Envision Verification for Sustainability from the Institute of Sustainable Infrastructure; it is the first project in Nebraska to receive the honor.

More information about Gene Leahy Mall and The RiverFront can be found [here](#).