



Trillium and Cully Parks: Engaging Deeper Place Histories

By Tim Beatley

Portland, Oregon, and Toronto, Ontario, offer wonderful recent examples of the positive trend in engaging the stories and deeper history of native peoples in the design of urban parks.

Cully Park in Portland is the story of the transformation of a former landfill in a neighborhood of color in Northeast Portland into a wonderful new park. Extensive neighborhood engagement was a key goal undertaken with the assistance of local nonprofit Verde. Social justice was a strong motivation behind this park. A former quarry and later a landfill, the park at once satisfies the need to clean up a contaminated brownfield site, and the need for a park in a very underserved neighborhood. According to Tony Defalco of Verde: "This is a story about transforming a site that was put into a low-income neighborhood as literally a

dumping ground."

Verde did much of the fundraising for the park, with matching funds provided by the city. The design and planning for the park was marked by an unusual degree of community involvement, including monthly meetings of a community involvement committee and extensive efforts to facilitate participation (providing childcare and transportation assistance for meetings for example, and even stipends given to participants in recognition of the value of their time). Part of the park is a community garden designed by 7th and 8th grade students who actually had to present their design to the community. The Cully Park process reflects the city's commitment to a new partnership model, not simply consulting the community but giving them real power and

involvement in its design. The hiring process for construction of the park also reflected a commitment to the community: 70% of the contractors doing the work on the park were minorities and women.

The park is also unusual in the extent to which the Native American community was consulted and involved. Its final design reflects the intent for Cully Park to be a major Native American gathering space. The most prominent feature of the park is a Tribal Gathering Garden: a place for ceremonies, for teaching, and to grow important medicinal plants. In the words of Judy Bluehorse Skelton (Nez Perce/Cherokee): "This is an opportunity for our community to come back to this place ... that healing ... to reclaim the relationship we've always had with the land."

Cully Park is a spectacular new park with playfields and walking paths that will help to fill the neighborhood's void in nature and parks. As Defalco says: "What we heard was you've got to be able to come to a place where you can look up and see the sky and see the mountains." The views from this elevated park are magical: on clear days you can see Mount Adams and Mount Hood.

What is perhaps even more remarkable is the way Portland's Parks and Recreation Department has formalized their relationship with the Native American community, specifically through the Native American Community Advisory Council (NACAC). The stated mission is "to bring about a healing between Indigenous/Native American peoples and all others who live in this region, recognizing that the people are one with the land and consider themselves stewards of it and participating in the well-being of the land."

Another important example of a new urban park that tells a deeper, more inclusive story is Trillium Park in Toronto, Ontario. Trillium Park and the William

G. Davis Trail were created on the site of a former parking lot on the shore of Lake Ontario. I spoke recently with Walter Kehm, landscape architect and senior principal with the firm LANDinc that designed the park, about some of its remarkable features and how it is being received by the residents of Toronto.

As Kehm explains, this is an unusual park for its efforts at incorporating the history of First Nations. From the beginning, local members of Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the traditional inhabitants of the land on which Toronto lies, were engaged in the design process in an effort to include this history. "Walk Gently on the Land" became the park's theme, a reference to the importance of the ancient pathways and seasonal migrations to First Nations. The shoreline site of the park was an important ceremonial destination.

Several unique features reference this walking history. Kehm asked Mississaugas members what would be the most symbolic representation. Kehm also consulted closely with a former Mississaugas chief, Carolyn

King, who had been influential in creating a provincial school-based program, called the Moccasin Identifier Project, that challenged kids to learn about the history and culture of First Nations. In the end, the park contains three large carved moccasins, the particular style worn by the Mississaugas, each fifteen feet high.

The park's moccasins are a stone version of the more ephemeral versions that have been stenciled by kids in schools throughout Toronto "to remind people that we are on the traditional territory of indigenous peoples," says King.

A second reference in the park to the walking heritage of First Nations can be seen in one of the most interesting features of the park, its three so-called "marker trees". The Mississaugas intentionally bent and trained tree limbs to create a network of directional or marker trees --trees that would guide the way. Many of these are still living, but Kehm wanted to grow and plant some new examples of these trees in the park.

An article about the new park notes that the park is both



modest and spectacular: "There are no toys here: no playground, no sports fields." But there are extensive boulders and rocks. "People of all ages like to climb these rocks," Kehm told me. There are other impressive features, including a sacred fire pit and circle, very near to Lake Ontario's edge.

He has been especially keen to see the ways in which kids create their own play stories in this interesting and richly textured environment. This is not a passive park, but one that challenges visitors to be active and to physically engage. There was a recent group of five kids he witnessed cooking imaginary pancakes on the flat surfaces inside a cave. At one point, he joined in to help them find some syrup. "How to describe all this," he pondered. "You don't need Disneyland; they've created their own Disney." That seems to be the essence of a good park; setting the physical and natural stage, and creating the conditions for play and imagination. Adults can also have fun, and there are places where rocks can be stacked into towers of infinite variety. The photos Kehm sent me later were quite telling--and quite impressive for the variety of stacks of stones.

Kehm visits the park frequently to observe and is often happy with what he sees. He often engages the visitors he sees in conversation. I get the sense that this is a personal version of a post-occupancy study, an informal but very informative way for Kehm to get a sense of what features of the park are



working. It all seems to be working. He is especially impressed with the ways in which visitors have taken over the site, he says, and made it their own.

Kehm related one especially interesting recent conversation he had with an elderly woman visiting the park. She was a retired nurse who had moved back to Toronto after a career living at Cambridge Bay in the high arctic. It had been a hard adjustment, one marked by

depression. Discovering and visiting Trillium had been a godsend for her, a kind of "magic" she told Kehm. She explained that she lived in a 600 square foot condo that looked down onto a parking lot. She spoke of the powerful smells of the hemlock, pine and spruce at Trillium: "the smell alone is healing," she said. Then she came to the water's edge and saw the birds and the water lapping and she said 'I'm now at home.'

Resources:

Hala Ghonaim (Sept. 7, 2018). "Spray paint moccasins at Huron signify First Nations land and treaty." CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/london-ontario-moccasin-identifier-project-1.4813779>.

LANDinc. "Trillium Park & William G. Davis Trail." <http://www.landinc.ca/ontario-place-op>.

Let Us Build Cully Park! <https://letusbuildcullypark.org>.

Richard Longley (July 12, 2017). "Trillium Park: the magic carpet that flies us back to the glory days of Ontario Place." NOW Toronto. <https://nowtoronto.com/news/trillium-park-the-magic-carpet-that-flies-us-back-to-ontario>.

Portland Parks & Recreation. "Cully Park." City of Portland, Oregon. <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/finder/index.cfm?action=ViewPark&PropertyID=1174&searchtext=cully>.

Portland Parks & Recreation. "Native American Community Advisory Council." City of Portland, Oregon. <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/parks/63749>.

Verde. <http://www.verdenw.org>.

Verde in association with The Let Us Build Cully Park! Project and PrettyGoodProductions. Reclaiming Relationships: The Tribal Gathering Garden at Cully Park [video file]. <https://letusbuildcullypark.org/park-feature/native-gathering-gardens>.

[View the New Biophilic Cities Film about Cully Park](#)



Boulder Outcropping
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley