

Building Community Through Inclusive and Equitable Parks

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Bridging Communities Through a New Park in New Orleans - HAYDEN PLAZA

Landscape architect Diane Jones Allen, ASLA, explained how she helped bring together multiple communities in central city New Orleans to re-imagine Hayden Plaza, a linear park found at the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard.

The neighborhood has evolved over the years. First settled by Jewish, Italian, and German immigrants, it became an African American community, and one of the few places African Americans could shop during the segregated 1930s, 40s, and 50s. As the immigrant shop owners who served African American patrons moved elsewhere, the stores were taken over by African Americans, who “didn’t get enough business,” and commercial activity declined.

In the 1960s civil rights movement, the neighborhood was a hub for protests. Artist Frank Hayden created an abstract sculpture of Martin Luther King, Jr. during the era when there “wasn’t community engagement.” The community had wanted a figurative sculpture, but Hayden delivered an abstract one instead. “The community wasn’t happy.” (Another figurative sculpture was later added).

Post-Hurricane Katrina, “new development came in, as black merchants lost property. A new merchant’s association made capital improvements,” such as a new jazz market, with a bar and theater, and an old school was revamped as a stall market. “They were bringing money in, but pushing the community out.” New development became a “sign of gentrification;” there was even a “Jane Jacobs walk.”

But every March, the Recreating the Emotional Ability to Live (REAL) protest march, led by a black empowerment group, works its way down through the neighborhood to the plaza, which demonstrates how this “space is still contested.” Working with the client — the merchant’s association — there was a “chance to educate and design for both those who go on the Jane Jacobs walk and those pushing for empowerment. A symbolic design would be inclusive and not take space away for the empowerment group.” The new landscape design “acknowledges the future, while honoring the past” (see image above).

Both communities — the African Americans and the new-comers — are now part of the future of the neighborhood, Jones Allen said. They came together in community planning and design charrettes held in the jazz market.