

Case Study:
LRSLA Studio, Inc.



LRSLAstudio

SHAPES PUBLIC SPACES WITH NEW IDENTITIES





Left: Summer plantings are one component of the ever-changing palette at The Porch at 30th Street Station.

Below: The conceptual plan for The Porch at 30th Street Station improved the civic open space surrounding the famed train station.



When looking at a parking lot, most people simply see a place to park their cars. But to the creative minds at LRSLAstudio, a small, energetic landscape architecture firm in Philadelphia, parking lots represent new possibilities. The firm brought some of these possibilities to life in The Porch at 30th Street Station, an animated public space outside one of the nation's busiest train stations, and The Oval, a temporary pop-up installation representing all things fun.

Founded by Anita Lager and the late Peta Raabe in 1991, the firm did business under the name of Lager Raabe Skafta Landscape Architects before assuming its current moniker. Today, with principals Karen Skafta and Julie Bush, the firm's 10 design professionals have propelled LRSLAstudio's reputation in Philadelphia and beyond through its well planned, beautiful, and sustainable landscape designs at The University of Pennsylvania, The Free Library of Philadelphia, Hawthorne Park, and along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

The firm received a 2013 Merit Award from the Pennsylvania-Delaware Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects for its work on The Porch at 30th Street Station, an area of 34 parallel parking spaces

that LRSLAstudio transformed into an outdoor gathering area that features seasonal plantings, trees, music, and movable café seating outside Philadelphia's Amtrak train station. The space is now home to a concert series and a farmers' market, and it represents one example of the pavement-to-park movement made famous in cities like New York and San Francisco.

Pop-up Parks

Reclaiming unused spaces for public use is not new, but a fresh twist, now referred to as "Pop-up Parks," has been growing in popularity over the last five years and provides a way to be playful with the street, much like LRSLAstudio did with its recent installation of The Oval.

"Cities are adopting pop-up installations as a means to test interest in a place before they invest a lot of money turning around a great public space," said Lindsay High, a landscape designer at LRSLAstudio. "They're a way to put out a little money to see whether the investment is worthy or not."



Adirondack chairs provided relaxing resting spots for visitors while colorful lanterns lit up the sky.

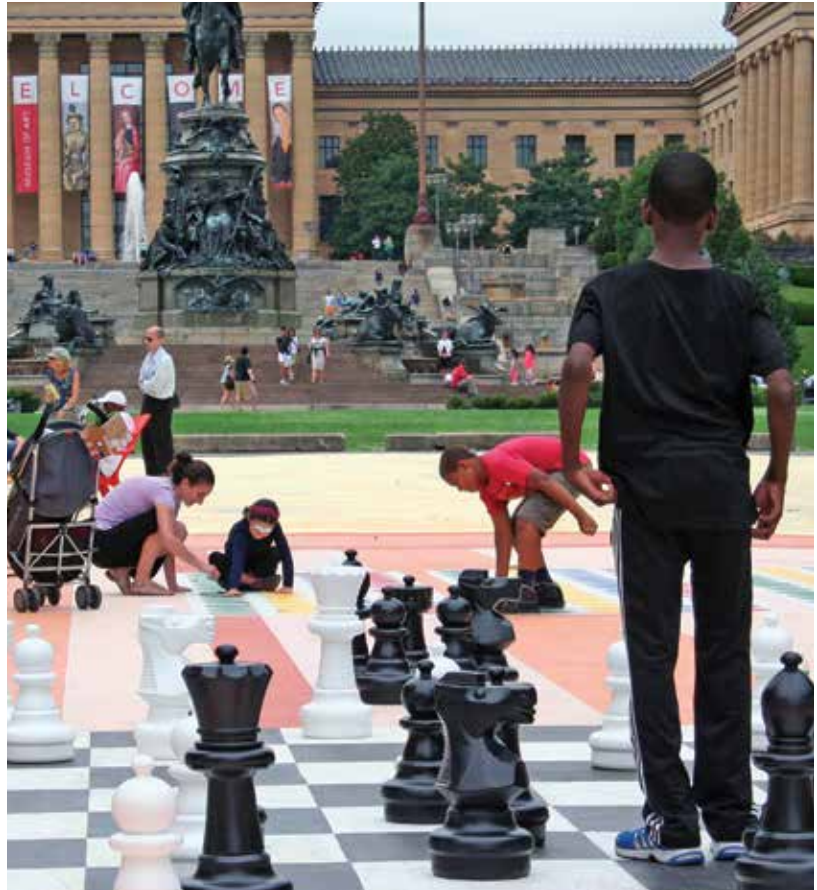
The Oval: The New Shape of Fun

LRSLAstudio's positive relationship with the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation Department has enabled the completion of many cooperative projects over the past 20 years. So reaching out to the firm was the logical choice when the city launched an initiative in partnership with the Fairmount Park Conservancy to reinvigorate Eakins Oval, an eight-acre space encompassing a traffic circle, fountains, a statue of George Washington, and a parking lot located at the west end of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. The tree-lined Parkway connects City Hall to the Philadelphia Museum of Art along a diagonal, mile-long route modeled after Paris' Champs Élysées.

"The Porch at 30th Street Station generated a lot of interest, and we've done a lot of work on the Parkway already, starting at the other end 10 years ago, redesigning Aviator Park on Logan Square," said Frank Garnier, media coordinator at LRSLAstudio. "Having the opportunity to add a new, temporary feature to the prominent space was exciting for the firm."

Indeed, the Parkway was designed to be a cultural hub of the city, but its usage evolved into being a main connector to get people between the city and outlying districts. Thus, a dialog ensued to make the area more significant for pedestrians and transform it back into being the city's cultural spine where institutions like the Barnes Foundation, Rodin Museum, Franklin Institute, and Free Library of Philadelphia reside.

The plan for this temporary, contemporary project was to transform Eakins Oval into Philadelphia's new "Park on the Parkway." As lead designer for this transformation, LRSLAstudio collaborated with Philadelphia Parks & Recreation to create a fun-filled, summertime venue that would feature free games, educational programs, entertainment, and movies for all to enjoy. The project grew out of the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation's report "More Park, Less Way," which outlined a three-year plan to transform the Parkway into a livelier space; The Oval is the first project to emerge from the report.



The zone closest to the Philadelphia Museum of Art featured a painted beach blanket full of games including a Twister board and oversized checkers and chess pieces.

The Beach, the Blanket, and the Boardwalk

The promise of Eakins Oval's transformation was attractive, so with a budget of \$180,000 supported by the William Penn Foundation and the City of Philadelphia, LRSLAstudio had two months to develop a plan for a five-week, themed, pop-up installation. They came up with three concepts.

"We produced plans based on three different themes in Vectorworks® Landmark software, which served as the armature we needed to accentuate and enhance each theme we wanted to present," explained LRSLAstudio Principal Julie Bush, ASLA.

The first scheme focused on the shady areas outside the parking lot by placing sculptural elements in the lawn and designing activities that would live in the grassy exterior rather than on the asphalt. The second option presented a beach theme, proposing to fill the parking lot with sand and transform it into a beach. The last theme centered on the idea of play and was full of games. When Bush presented these three options to Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, the response was so positive that the firm was tasked with merging all three schemes into one.

Designers immediately got to work to conceive, model, and render the plan in Vectorworks Landmark software. The plan was perfectly executed with quick decisioning, and installation took only 10 days.

For example, one of the decisions revolved around paint selection. "We learned a lot about paint," said High, recalling the need to identify an exterior product that could work on asphalt and be used to create Twister® boards and checkerboard patterns on the road surface. "After our own research and collaboration with others, we sourced a product that was sturdy enough to survive pedestrian traffic yet could be removed or painted over after the pop-up park was disassembled five weeks later."

When realized, three zones made up The Oval: a beach with large sandboxes and misting fans, a painted beach blanket full of games including oversized checkers and chess pieces, and a boardwalk complete with patio chairs and tables and where rotating food trucks could sate visitors' appetites. Adirondack chairs and painted buoys resembling large beach balls activated the scene, colorful lanterns lit up the sky, and wind chimes strung in the trees along with a temporary concert stage filled the air with music.



Tables and chairs, as well as game pieces, were installed with the idea that they would be repurposed for other events and locations after The Oval project ended.

To complete the look, 48 towering, orange flags planted in two rows along the former parking lot could be seen from different vantage points in the city and served as a beacon, drawing people in to the site. The flags actually had a secondary benefit of slowing down vehicular traffic because they alerted people to something new they should stop and see.

Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose

LRSLAstudio was intentional about the elements it chose to fill the site, knowing several pieces would be reused. For example, the tables and chairs and game pieces are elements Philadelphia Parks & Recreation could repurpose for other events and locations, and the string lights could either stay or come back in new ways. The buoys used to emulate beach balls came from the department's salvage yard. When the project ended, some components would be disbursed and used elsewhere.

“The intent was to reuse, recycle, and repurpose as much as we could and get more than one lifecycle out of as many components as possible,” said Bush. She added that while the painted game boards would eventually be resurfaced with new paint, some original color may show through, and that’s not a bad thing. “Having the flavor and a ghost image of what was once here will inform people that we plan to do this again and remind them of all the fun and memories this installation provided.”

The Oval was packed with visitors from the time it opened, proving the concept works. “It really fills a need for the surrounding neighborhoods and tourists alike,” added Bush. “Hopefully, there is some learning that comes from this experience – learning about user patterns in the park and who wants to be there and when. This data will guide and inform the city about what a permanent design should look like.”



Left: The Oval's finished appearance almost identically mirrored renderings from the design stage, an achievement the firm has been complimented on frequently.

Right: Vectorworks Landmark software enabled LRSLAstudio to create an active, temporal exterior environment at The Oval that will be a framework for future installations.

Software Saved Time

Another positive result of the project was that The Oval's finished appearance almost identically mirrored renderings from the design stage, an achievement the firm has been complimented on frequently. "This reliable comparability is partly due to being able to bring up the site in Vectorworks Landmark and add what we wanted to be there," said High. "Getting all the line work correct from the beginning was crucial to our success in the end."

She notes that the firm completed the entire design in Vectorworks Landmark software and imported a skyline rendered in a complementary product to complete the realistic look of their project. "Modeling and working through the plan in one design software program saved us so much time," High said. "Sometimes, using fewer programs can be really helpful."

Indeed, the software solution enabled LRSLAstudio to create an active, temporal exterior environment at The Oval that will be a framework for future installations. The firm completely transitioned the space through their inspired design process, quick thinking, and unified collaboration. No matter what the design or the location is, we're sure this talented firm will continue to impress, inspire, and provide spaces for people to enjoy the outdoors in exciting, new ways.

Acknowledgements

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Images:

Courtesy of LRSLAstudio

Original text and publication by:

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