SHARPENING THE POINT

PITTSBURGH’S PREMIER URBAN PARK, BEARING THE BRUNT OF TOO MANY FEET FOR TOO MANY YEARS, WAS IN DIRE NEED OF A GRASS-ROOTS-TO-FOUNTAIN-TOP RENOVATION. HERE’S HOW, IN AN ERA OF GOVERNMENT AND CORPORATE RETRENCHMENT, A FOUNDATION AGENDA ON CIVIC DESIGN HAS LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR A SPECTACULAR COMEBACK.

by Douglas Root

Point State Park Maintenance Foreman John Samosky stops to greet young park enthusiasts from Beltzhoover. Samosky worries for the fate of one of the city’s signature landmarks if a foundations-funded master restoration plan isn’t enacted.
As the sun was setting on a cold and blustery March 22, 1946, the boys from the City of Pittsburgh Fire Bureau’s No. 1 station, downtown, were having a rough time of it. The fire was raging in the middle of the warehouse and rail yard district at the Point, the name for the triangular chunk of land in the lower business district that marks where two rivers snaking around the city merge to form the Ohio. ❖ One firefighter told a reporter that the heat from the inferno being fed by the Wabash Terminal buildings, a rambling network of ancient, wood-framed warehouses and oil-soaked tracks, had melted train signal gates bordering the area. By 6 p.m., the flames had grown beyond the control of the small army of city firefighters. Fire Chief William Davis ordered his men back and put an emergency call in to Mayor David Lawrence, who happened to be in an evening meeting in his office with several aides and a state senator.

The men grabbed their overcoats and rushed to the scene, but found that the best vantage point was from the roof of the Pittsburgh Press Building. For the next few hours, the mayor and his entourage watched as the buildings crumpled into heaps of charred timber, glass and metal. But instead of furrowed brows and shaking heads over the inferno, Lawrence, Sen. Joe Barr, a key ally in Harrisburg for the mayor’s agenda, and other city officials, all had broad smiles. There was hand-shaking and back-slapping congratulations all around. Then the group settled back to enjoy the rest of the fire and marvel at how spectacular the view to the rivers was with the buildings gone.

Once the officials knew that there were no deaths or injuries, “we couldn’t help but enjoy our good fortune,” said Lawrence’s chief of staff and lead strategist Jack Robin. “What the hell? We knew the fire was helping us build that park,” he told writer Michael P. Weber for his biography of Lawrence. City leaders who supported a state plan for a park at the Point realized that the property-acquisition-and-demolition process expected to take years had been, thanks to the flames, collapsed into a few months.

From the ashes of the Wabash Terminal and several other buildings rose the phoenix: an urban park that would provide one of the most picturesque city-waterway views in the world. The park at the Point would stand as an icon for Renaissance I, Lawrence’s plan for a comprehensive cleanup of “Smoky City”—Pittsburgh’s street name derived from decades of air and water pollution caused by belching steel mills and tens of thousands of coal-heated homes and businesses.

As Lawrence partnered with Pittsburgh business leaders to clean up the water and air, a park at the Point would give city dwellers an immediate sense of how much the quality of urban life could improve. The master plan created by architect Charles Stotz and landscape designer Ralph Griswold would serve the quieting, contemplative purposes of historic memorial—recognizing the site’s prominence in the French and Indian War—and of restful retreat, a green patch of solitude in the city’s hectic downtown triangle.

In the 55 years since its groundbreaking, the park has gone wildly beyond its original missions. With a spectacular 150-foot-high fountain added for the park’s dedication in 1974, it has evolved into a visual signature of the city, the mandatory photo op for “Monday Night Football” cameras trying to fill in game downtime. It is ground zero for the official Fourth of July fireworks extravaganza; the end-point for the Great Race, an annual crush of about 10,000 runners into the park since 1977; the staging ground for dozens of charity walk-a-thons, a two-week summer arts festival and a weekend boating regatta. City and state caretakers come up with the stunning estimate of 2 million event-goers and individual strollers treading over a scant 36 acres every year.

Worn and weary, more often restless than restful, Point State Park has for years been in dire need of much more than
a cosmetic makeover. The erratic patterns of human contact are threatening its health and calling its purpose into question. Planners say that in stepping forward to develop a new master plan, they have settled the issue of core identity and are making it relevant for another 50 years.

In an era when cash-strapped government officials are struggling just to supply basic services, and where corporate leaders have cut back in leading complex civic projects, it is Pittsburgh’s foundation community that has been looked to as the force for effecting this significant change in the park—every bit as dramatic as the flames that helped create it. “In this instance, the park is so special, so connected with a first impression of Pittsburgh to the world, that it demands getting support beyond just a few key constituencies. The foundations have to be the leaders,” says Lisa Schroeder, executive director of the Pittsburgh Riverlife Task Force, the convening group of 54 civic leaders focused on best uses of the city’s riverfronts. From that authority and through support from the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, a 65-member committee was formed and worked for three years to create a new master plan for the park. “It seems like a lot of groups and a lot of process—40 public meetings—went into this plan,” says Planning Committee Chairman James Broadhurst, CEO of Eat’n Park Hospitality Group. “But one of the guiding points we kept holding over committee members is that what we do in our planning will affect Pittsburgh for decades to come. It seems everyone now is referring to this park as the city’s front lawn.”

A $35 million first phase of the new park plan, released in January, calls for intensive rejuvenation of the site—restoration of the great lawn and landscaping—but also significant additions such as a new, 4,200-square-foot visitors center and café, a redesigned fountain with a pooling basin for children and a doubling of green space for large public events and for more individual recreational uses. While foundations have provided $700,000 for a high-quality master plan and historic interpretation materials, implementation depends on whether the $35 million in public improvement funding included in the governor’s budget proposal survives the deliberation process now under way in the state Legislature.

Whether there is a groundbreaking this year or not, the development of a plan embraced by the stakeholders is considered a significant step forward by funders. “What we face now in the park is a small group of regular users and then these huge crowd surges for public events,” says Mary Navarro, senior program officer in the Endowments’ Arts & Culture section. She also coordinates the foundation’s civic design initiative, which takes on projects that enhance the quality of life in public spaces in built and natural environments. “The overarching question in guiding the planning has been ‘What kind of a park is this going to be?’” says Navarro. “Do we want a park of ‘can’ts,’ where you can’t ride your bike and you can’t skateboard and the people who live in my downtown condo can’t take their small dogs for walks?”

Now, with the new master plan approved, she says, the “use” question that has been simmering for years is settled. “We want a park that is more animated in those long stretches of time when people aren’t swarming in for events. We want to preserve the contemplative aspects but also create a direct connection with downtown residents, who treat the space as their neighborhood park,” says Navarro. Many of the programs she directs in civic design are aimed at increasing the numbers of downtown residents.

While the first phase is scheduled to be completed by 2008, in time for the 250th anniversary celebration of Pittsburgh’s founding, the foundations’ influence on the plan ensures that future phases will continue and will be centered on best uses.
“Pittsburgh is fortunate to have foundations involved to this degree in a public amenity like a park,” says Tim Marshall, landscape architect and public space management consultant who, as president of ETM Associates, LLC, worked with fellow landscape architect Marion Pressley of Cambridge, Mass., to design the plan. Funding from the Endowments and from the Richard King Mellon, Pittsburgh and Alcoa foundations, combined with money from the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, was essential to ensure a quality master plan, says Marshall, who worked for 14 years as deputy administrator for New York’s Central Park and served as vice president of the Central Park Conservancy.

Foundations are one of the few institutions, says Schroeder, who recognize the need for a dependable public funding stream in long-range planning for the park. “They’re asking, ‘How can this park be shaped to meet what the city will be 20 years from now?’”

Part of that longer-range thinking comes out of the Endowments’ civic design grantmaking. While it’s only several years old and one of the few initiatives of its kind in the country, its influence in southwestern Pennsylvania already is being recognized. The foundation’s civic design team, which consists of a mix of dedicated staff and key grantees like the Riverlife Task Force, has shepherded such recent high-profile public projects as the design competition for the David L. Lawrence Convention Center; the plan to turn a surface parking lot into a green-lawn-and-public-square entrance to Schenley Park; and the redesign of a view-killing safety railing on one of the city’s most important bridges.

One hallmark of civic design influence on the Point Park project has been the re-animation effort in phase one, shaping the space into two venues: a “city side” for large, public events like concerts and road races, and a “water side” for more individualized activity. The two sections even have a man-made demarcation line already in place in bridge ramps that bisect the park. This core structure of the master plan ends a long-standing turf battle between those in favor of the park as welcoming users for all sorts of recreational activities and those who want to maintain limits, in keeping with the founders’ original vision of a contemplative oasis from urban chaos. Some of the limitations have even made their way into park regulations like bicycle-riding restrictions.

“In any project like this, you want to stay as true as possible to the original design intent, but you also want to recognize that cities are constantly changing according to the needs of the people who live and work in them,” says Laura Fisher, a senior vice president of the Allegheny Conference.

It’s that kind of adaptive planning philosophy in re-shaping an important public space for the long term that also has attracted a foundation like Richard King Mellon, which is a national leader in land conservation.

While more often involved with acquiring large tracts of private land in order to preserve them for future generations, the foundation recognizes the historic value of Point State Park. “Restoring the beauty of the park and reminding people of its geographic significance from the time of the French and Indian War to present day is of great interest to our trustees;” says Seward Prosser Mellon, president of the foundation.

But at the heart of this green ground, far away from the computer-generated schematic drawings, the highbrow conversations with architects and urban planners around “crowd flow” and “viewsheds,” City of Pittsburgh maintenance crew foreman John Samosky knows only what he has seen in 15 years of tending to the park, trying to nurture it as best he can, even as he and his team are often preoccupied with putting band-aids on bumps and bruises inflicted by overuse.

“The shame of it is, this is one of the youngest parks in the city—and it looks like the oldest,” Samosky says during a recent tour.

And taking guidance from environmental protectionists and landscaping consultants, Samosky has been the willing good soldier for any scheme that will put more preservation into his tired park. He remembers back to the spring of 1999 when he and his crew were out in the high-traffic areas laying down new sod as they normally would do—but then adding a topping of crumbled rubber, the remains of some 3,700 tires recycled by the Western Pennsylvania Nature Conservancy into a tool for environmental protection. The crumb rubber has been proven to absorb the shock and weight from running shoes and vehicle tires, protecting the grass crowns.

The Riverlife Task Force’s Schroeder, who is working with state and federal officials to secure funding for implementation, believes environmental protection efforts are important, but a sound master plan is “the most effective, long-term protector,” she says.

The plan also will serve to put a fresh sheen on original landscape designer Griswold’s inspirational touchstone—“the calm eye in the center of the city.” Now, a new generation is looking to re-connect a calming park to the life of the city.