



Design Counts

Good design is essential to making the most of a park system, especially in urban areas. Good design creates highly functional, environmentally sensitive, and durable parks that also bring beauty and delight to their users.

DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR PARKS

RECOMMENDATIONS

- > Hire a staff landscape architect for the parks department.
- > Involve the public and park managers in the redesign of existing parks and the design of new parks.
- > Apply design guidelines when redesigning existing parks or designing new ones.

Successful parks and public spaces are where the people are. This is an apparent tautology but it emphasizes the point that parks are for people and people are drawn to places where other people seem to be enjoying themselves. A successful park is located in a place where a park is needed; it provides for activities that people are interested in doing, where they can see others and be seen; and it is linked to other parts of the public realm. The design of the space can attract people or it can repel them. Parks professionals who were interviewed in a recent publication about the best parks in their park districts mentioned the same basic ingredients over and over again: “open space, water, shady places, strolling, fun people places.”¹

As Miami renovates existing parks and creates new ones, it has the opportunity over time to create distinctive park environments. The major park redesigns and new park designs underway as part of the current capital improvements program will make a very significant difference in the design quality of those parks. However, many smaller design projects that affect the parks every year receive much less design attention. During the recent period of very tight budgets, facility improvements or equipment upgrades were made without sufficient attention to overall park design. The Department of Parks and Recreation has not had an in-house landscape architect for decades. It is imperative that the department add a staff landscape architect to work closely with park management and staff—and with the public. Nearby residents and other park users should be involved in the development of improvement programs and master plans for design and renovation of parks.

¹ Bernie Dahl and Donald J. Molnar, *Anatomy of a Park*, 3rd edition, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2003), 151.

Park Context and Edges

- Provide access to parks from the street on at least two sides, if possible.
- Orient adjacent buildings to face the park with windows to frame the park and provide “eyes on the park.”
- Where there are high-traffic streets at the park edge, buffer those edges to minimize entry of noise and pollution from the street into the park.
- Evaluate the need for fences and remove or reduce fencing if it is not needed for security or aesthetic purposes. Attractive fences that allow views into a park while controlling entry can be aesthetically pleasing by providing an edge between the green world of the park and the hard surfaces of the street. Many of Miami’s parks have high, turquoise-blue fences of closely-spaced stakes. Both the color and the structure of these fences obscure the view of the park from outside. Because crime, especially at night, remains a concern for some park users, it is important to experiment with different levels of openness before making a final decision to eliminate fences altogether.



Signs and maps at the entry to parks help orient people, as in this San Antonio park.

Sense of Place and Entry

- Strive for a sense of place and individual character in park design. Special landscape, historic, or cultural elements should be identified and preserved. Thematic unity expressed through architectural design and details, colors and materials, site furnishings and equipment, and plantings should be encouraged.
 - If possible, locate the main entry to paths near crosswalks or bus stops.
 - Clearly define points of entry with arches, decorative gates, signed entry features, and/or special landscape massing.
 - Avoid tall fences along street edges. Decorative fencing and berms, buffered by low hedges, for example, provide definition, safety and security for the park. The removal of fences around parks should be discussed with park users and evaluated in light of crime and other security concerns.
- In larger parks, provide signs and maps to orient users.

Access

- Safe, comfortable, well-lit walkways should extend from neighborhoods to parks. Sidewalks should be shaded and the pavement should be in good condition. Designated routes that avoid major arterials and intersections should be created with signage, as recommended in the discussion of the ParkWalks program in Chapter 3. Where crossing of arterials and highly-trafficked



Shady, tree-lined streets like this one provide pleasant walking routes to parks and other destinations.

intersections is necessary, crosswalks and pedestrian-activated signals should be provided at a minimum, with consideration given to installing raised intersections or similar traffic-calming devices to ensure that vehicles will slow down.

- Connect pedestrian paths to all activity areas in a park. Multiple use paths to accommodate walkers, joggers, rollerbladers, and so on should be at least 8 feet wide,

increasing to 10 or 12 feet where heavy use is expected. These paths should have gentle curves so they can also serve as access ways for park vehicles and, in larger parks, police patrol cars.

- As Miami implements its ADA program to make parks accessible, ensure that when handicap-accessible equipment is provided, access from adjacent sidewalks, other areas of the park and parking areas is also provided.

Landscape Design

The foundation of a park's design, even for a park primarily dedicated to sports activities, is the grouping of trees and palms. Shade trees provide much-needed relief from the sun in Miami's climate, and all kinds of plantings provide a green environment to contrast with buildings in urban neighborhoods. Ideally, park sites will be selected and developed to preserve existing stands of trees. However, in many areas, the site will be devoid of trees and the entire landscape will have to be created. Tree planting should be one of the first implementation activities in building or renovating a park. Parks without trees, and the shade and beauty they provide, are not fulfilling one of their prime reasons for being; it takes ten or more years for trees to grow to serve their intended function.

- Group trees to define spaces, separate incompatible uses, or visually enhance and direct views of scenic features.
- Plant trees for shade. Shade is essential adjacent to all gathering areas. Shaded areas for spectators to watch ball games and other sports activities are especially appreciated in Miami's climate. Picnicking and trees go hand in hand. Walkways and sitting areas should be shaded. Shade over play equipment is critical.
- Plant special accent plants, such as groupings of tall palms or flowering trees, to direct the eye and enhance park entrances, or subtly guide visitors along paths. Accent plants can be focused in planters to assist in maintenance, and the edges of planter boxes can be made wide enough to serve as seating areas.

[Landscape Design text continues on page 154.]



A donated tree in Kenneth Myers Park.

Why Margaret Pace Park Is Successful



Places to sit—walls, benches, picnic tables, steps



Open areas for relaxation or free play



Shade



Security



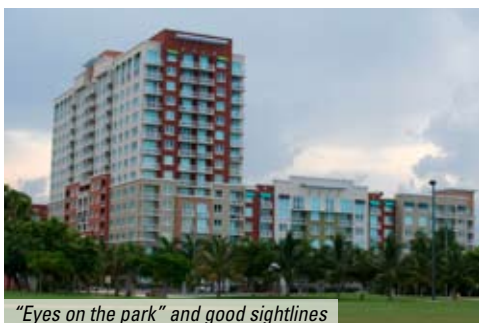
Places for dogs



Amenities for picking up after dogs



Art and culture



"Eyes on the park" and good sightlines



Basketball, volleyball, and tennis

Why Juan Pablo Duarte Park Is Successful



A building designed to fit with the neighborhood



A circulation loop for walking and biking



Art and culture



Places to sit in the shade



A baseball diamond and informal soccer field



Fun activities for kids



Places to gather—large picnic shelters



A play area and bridge over a remnant of nature

- Install artificial turf on high-use athletic fields so that the fields can be used more efficiently.

Proper Placement of Facilities and Activities

- Where possible, design multi-use active areas that can be available for different sports on the same space.
- Locate park uses to be compatible with adjacent land uses.
 - > Locate noisy activities such as basketball, ball fields, and group picnic shelters away from adjacent residences.
 - > Provide adequate space from errant balls to adjacent properties or streets, or high fences to contain fly balls.
 - > Avoid spill-over of field and court lights into adjacent residential properties by use of cut-off luminaires.
- Locate park uses to be compatible with adjacent uses within the park.
 - > Group activities that generate large concentrations of users, noise, and high-intensity lighting together, away from quiet, passive areas.
 - > Place recreation buildings near most intensely-used activity areas to facilitate the park manager's ability to observe and monitor activities. Larger buildings that can house large groups of people should provide a convenient vehicular drop-off area and nearby parking, if possible.
- Preserve natural features such as groups of trees to buffer active park uses from residential areas, at street edges to present attractive views into the park, or near special views, such as waterfronts.
- Shade is a critical component of park design in Miami. Whether by canopy trees, shelters and pergolas, shade sails (fabric canopies), or other means, shade should be available at or near all activity areas in a park. In new parks or park redesigns, shade trees should be planted to the south and west of playgrounds.



Pullman Mini-Park in Little Haiti lacks shade over the play structure and appropriately placed seating nearby.

Ideal Groupings of Facilities

- Group certain activities together to generate enough users to justify the inclusion of support facilities.
 - > Ballfields and football/soccer fields, in groups of three to five, can support a restroom/concession building, usually operated by an organized league.
 - > Tennis courts, in groups of six or more, can support a restroom/tennis pro shop that can serve as a base for a tennis court manager/instructor. This attracts more players per court. The “club” atmosphere provides a social setting, where finding a playing partner is more likely, and a game can be scheduled in advance by the manager. The typical two-court facility

traditionally installed in a small neighborhood park (to provide “equal” access to all), is usually not well used.

- Locate picnic facilities near large passive areas and adjacent to special natural features such as waterfronts. Be sure they are well shaded. A nearby open play area for pick-up ball games is an excellent adjunct to picnic grounds.
 - > Small neighborhood parks, if well-shaded and aesthetically pleasing, can also serve as picnic areas, especially in densely-developed urban areas where apartment dwelling prohibits at-home barbecues.
 - > Provision of picnic tables next to tot lots or other active recreation facilities is useful for parents to provide snacks or lunch to their children, but do not qualify as a quality picnicking experience.
 - > If possible, group picnic shelter areas should be separated from individual picnic table areas. Group picnics are generally noisy and not compatible with family picnickers who are seeking more communion with nature.
- Provide seating in different ways, so that some seating is in high-traffic areas and is arranged to promote more social contact and other seating is scattered to allow for more solitary enjoyment of the park.
- Where possible, provide separate spaces where young children, teenagers and seniors can congregate for social interaction.



Colorful painted basketball courts and a tree-shaded, paved slope for sitting and watching games combine to make a simple, attractive, and functional space at Belafonte-Talcolcy Park.



Buildings, Site Furniture, and Materials

- Incorporate art into the design of every major park.
- Minimize building footprints by using two-story structures where feasible.
- Incorporate green building practices, natural ventilation and light, and energy efficiency by promoting adherence to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) standards developed by the U.S. Green Building Council.

- Make site furniture consistent within parks, including trash barrels, which should match site furniture.
- Locate benches to maximize shade in summer and provide sun in winter; to avoid conflicts with pedestrians on paths; and with backs to walls or plantings, to enhance a sense of security.
- Choose building, wall, and fence materials for durability, weather resistance, and energy efficiency.
- Use of paint and mosaic tiles, as in Virrick Park and Bela-fonte-Talcolcy Park, can add interest to otherwise very simple materials.
- As appropriate, incorporate community cultural traditions and South Florida traditional design in the design of park and recreation buildings, particularly as tropical building types were developed to provide light and ventilation.
- Incorporate recycled and recyclable materials as much as possible.



Bench at Virrick Park.

Dog Parks

- Place dog parks away from high-value and sensitive areas, such as waterfronts, and from high-intensity uses, such as sports facilities.
- The ideal location is a grassy area with adequate drainage.
- A four- to six-foot fence should surround the park, preferably with a double-gated entry.
- Shade and water should be provided for both owners and dogs, and seating should be provided.
- Supplies for cleaning, covered garbage cans, waste bags and pooper-scooper stations should be provided.
- Signs with rules and regulations should be posted.



The Kennedy Park dog park is inappropriately located at the waterfront.



Evening play at Shenandoah Park.

Lighting

- Miami's successful parks are full of people at night. Lighting at parks and on access routes to parks is a very important aspect of park design in the city. It should be appropriate to the activity in terms of quantity and also be judged for its energy efficiency, minimum glare and spillover, and attractiveness. As noted earlier in this report, the park system should move to solar energy sources as lighting is upgraded.
- Isolated areas that are not intended for use at night should not be lit, in order to discourage entry.

Parking

- When designing a specific park, survey potential users to determine how they expect to access the park.
- Provide parking adequate to serve the activities provided in the park, but keep it to a minimum so precious park land is not taken up by paved parking spaces. Where there is a choice, vehicular access to a park should be from the street that will create the least impact on neighboring residences. Small walk-to parks can be adequately served by on-street parking.
- Encourage park users to walk, bicycle or take public transportation to parks, if possible. Provide bike racks near park and building entrances so that bicyclists can park and lock bikes.
- Share parking areas, such as adjacent school parking lots that may be empty during peak park activity times, to accommodate activities that generate large groups of users.
- Where possible, provide vehicular drop-off areas adjacent to large buildings and areas for activities such as group picnicking, baseball, and so on that require bringing equipment.
- Use grass-pave or other types of planted pavers that allow for parking in areas that may be needed at peak times for parking but could be used for other purposes most of the time.

Crime Prevention Through Design

Design the park to promote crime prevention. Provide views into, through and out of the park along paths or in other ways, in order to promote the ability of park users and people in the surroundings to see what is happening in the park and limit opportunities for concealment.