

The background is a solid blue color. In the top left, there is a green, hand-like shape. In the top right, there is a pink circle. In the middle right, there is a large orange circle. In the bottom left, there is a yellow arch. In the bottom right, there is a pink, hand-like shape. The logo for 'reilly gardens' is centered at the top. 'reilly' is in a lowercase, rounded font. 'gardens' is in a lowercase, rounded font. To the right of 'reilly' is a small orange circle containing the letters 'SEL'.

reilly  
gardens

EST. 2020

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Design  
as Common  
Good

# Design as Common Good

Online Conference | 25-26 March 2021

## DCG “Regaining the Right to Our City: Designing Reilly Commons”

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**Abstract** | Reilly Park is the site for a public design intervention lead by a neighborhood sustainability committee in North Central Austin and a teacher at a local school, alongside faculty and student researchers from University of Texas at Austin.

The project is an example of denizens seizing a ‘right to the city’ through participatory public design and a negotiated process of decision-making between government entities, an NGO, residents, and researchers. It is a Lefebvrian appropriation of space, reclaiming use value for all inhabitants of an economically and racially diverse area undergoing rapid gentrification.

The 7.4-acre (28733.7 square meters) Park is delimited by a 5-foot high (1.5 meter) wire fence, erected by Austin Independent School District (AISD) citing school security. The fence gives the appearance of ‘private property’ and deters access to those unaffiliated with the school, despite a portion of the land being owned by the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PAR) and designated for public use.

There is a dearth of publicly accessible green space North Central Austin and Reilly Park is positioned to serve two park-deficient neighbourhoods, Highland and Skyview, fulfilling a new City of Austin mandate for accessible greenspace within a 10-minute walk of most urban dwellings.

Reilly Park is under the shared jurisdiction of AISD and PAR. It is situated with proximity to a light rail station and two major vehicular arteries; unprecedented access to mass-transit for Austin, Texas. The park is bounded by Waller Creek, a sensitive watershed being closely monitored by The Nature Conservancy Texas, according to whose data the park has fewer visitors than any other in Austin. Situated within a floodplain, half the park serves as a water catchment area for the Highland and Skyview neighbourhoods. Flood mitigation being a priority for the city in recent years, as Austin has experienced an increase in dangerous storm events; the severity of related floods being exacerbated by intermittent and prolonged periods of drought in the region.

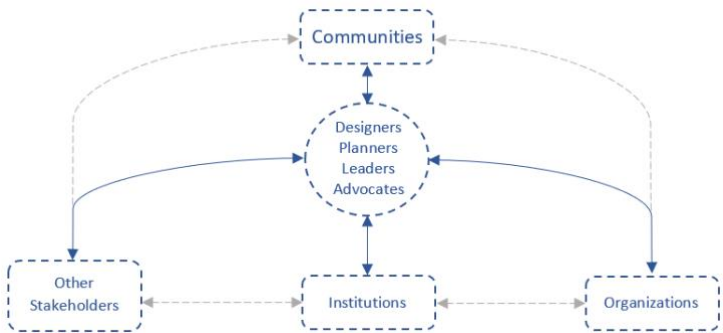
This paper presents a participatory public design process undertaken to make Reilly Park the centre of a more environmentally and socially resilient neighbourhood: Including plans for a new community garden and documentation of the design process, alongside the circuitous route of negotiated decision-making between government entities, residents and designers throughout the project. The Reilly Park project takes the form of a discrete design intervention in Austin Texas that revealed disenfranchisement and informed a strategy for strengthening and unifying the voice of a previously dispersed community: A future publication will present a roadmap for similar projects.

**Keywords: Participatory Design, Design Intervention, Critical Urbanism, Right-to-the City**

## Introduction

### Cultural Context

At this moment in American history evidence of inequities across society have come into clearer focus; and so, it is with [equitable access to open public spaces](#) in our towns and cities. Standard solutions to address and redress disparate access to green spaces for recreation, and lack of support for natural ecosystems have not yielded the desired results to date. It has become evident that existing, and typically top-down strategies, will not suffice moving forward. Social and environmental justice is the wicked problem (Buchanan, Richard. 2008. P.16) at the heart of this project, that utilizes participatory methods and design approaches to ‘tame’ this poorly defined problem through expert design guidance and the engagement of diverse stakeholders throughout.



*Figure 1. A community-driven practice works towards legitimizing the voice of communities by using it as a transformative agent. Design and allied professions act as key players to catalyze diverse interests and institutional burdens to help communities achieve their goals. Diagram: Jorge Zapata.*

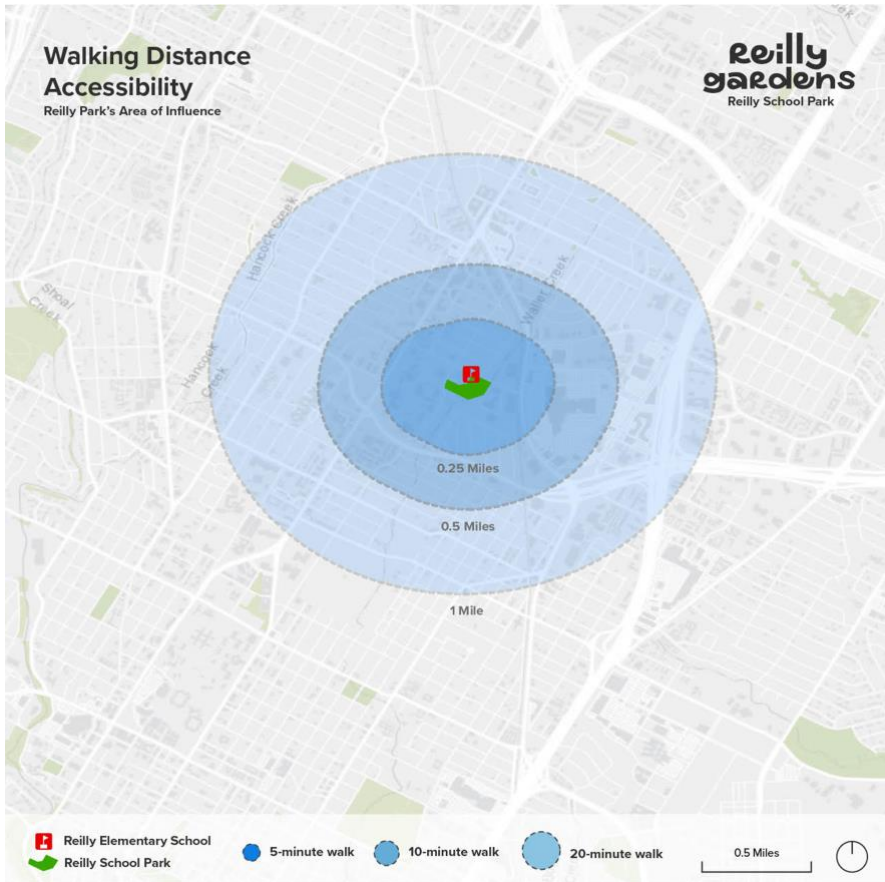


Figure 2. Reilly Park is situated in a park deficit area. It is the only park within a 10-minute walk of both Highland (North portion) and Skyview (South portion) along Waller Creek. Map: Jorge Zapata.

Design interventions have proven effective in engaging disparate groups, identifying community goals, and unpacking problems to be addressed. And the reclamation and redesign of Reilly Park has indeed revealed the loss of access to public land, systemic problems in funding and a community with no collective voice. Designing Reilly Gardens has started to galvanize the neighborhood around a shared garden, and is reshaping expectations about the role of its denizens in public life and their rights to public space.

Viewing the site through the lens of a European Design conference has caused us to see this shabby park afresh. Access to shared civic spaces is an expectation and a right in most western countries, and absence of such amenities reason to complain. In Austin

expectations for neighborhood public green spaces have historically been comparatively low and demands for more opportunities, muted. This is about to change at Reilly Park.

## The Site

Reilly Park, is situated at the south-eastern quadrant of the Highland neighborhood of N. Central Austin in a previously industrial area interspersed with working class residential housing stock and lower-income apartments. Miles from any other public green space the community lost free access to their local park, without notification or recourse, in 2015 when it was fenced and seemingly incorporated into elementary school property.

Highland, an historically black area once on the periphery of the city, is now in transition due to a lack of residential housing stock in central Austin and an influx of highly paid workers in the burgeoning 'knowledge economy': Dell, Google, Apple, Tesla, University of Texas, etc. It is a rapidly gentrifying area, with proximity to a recently repurposed mall; now home to Austin Community College. The Reilly Park project team is cognizant of this and is invested in balancing the impact of park improvements upon property values and maintaining an equitable economic and social balance in the area as outlined in the [Austin Strategic Housing Blueprint](#), 2018; concerns we are starting to negotiate in partnership with colleagues in the School of Social Work, the [American Association of Retirement Persons](#) (AARP) and [Basta!](#); Members of the [National Right to the City Alliance](#).

## The Team

Alyson Beaton grew up in 'the valley' in south Texas, then El Paso, both economically deprived areas situated along the Mexican border, and with few public resources. She later moved to study design in Chicago and was struck by the availability of high-quality public spaces and a system of community meeting and events structures. Jorge was born in Florida and grew up in Medellin, Colombia. He later moved to Buenos Aires, Argentina to study architecture, both vibrant Latin American cities with a complex history of social and urban challenges that inspired him to pursue graduate studies in community planning and urban design with a focus on public spaces. Kate was raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a city known for highly controlled and surveilled public spaces. She studied design in Glasgow, which like Belfast, was a post-industrial Victorian city with a faded, but plentiful legacy of grand public parks and botanical gardens.

Public space in Austin has been defined by the legacy of Lady Bird Johnson (Wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson), who advocated for resurrection of Texas wildflowers along State highways and was instrumental in the creation of Austin's hike and bike trail alongside the river in downtown Austin. A secondary trail connects NW Austin with the downtown hike and bike trail, following Shoal Creek for 13-miles through some of the wealthiest areas in the city. Several smaller trails serve areas to the east of Austin, including a new initiative

centered on Waller Creek at Waterloo Park. Our work at Reilly Park endeavors to draw interest and money North to the headwaters of Waller Creek at Reilly Park, making an argument for an equal level of connectivity along this creek that passes through less affluent communities.

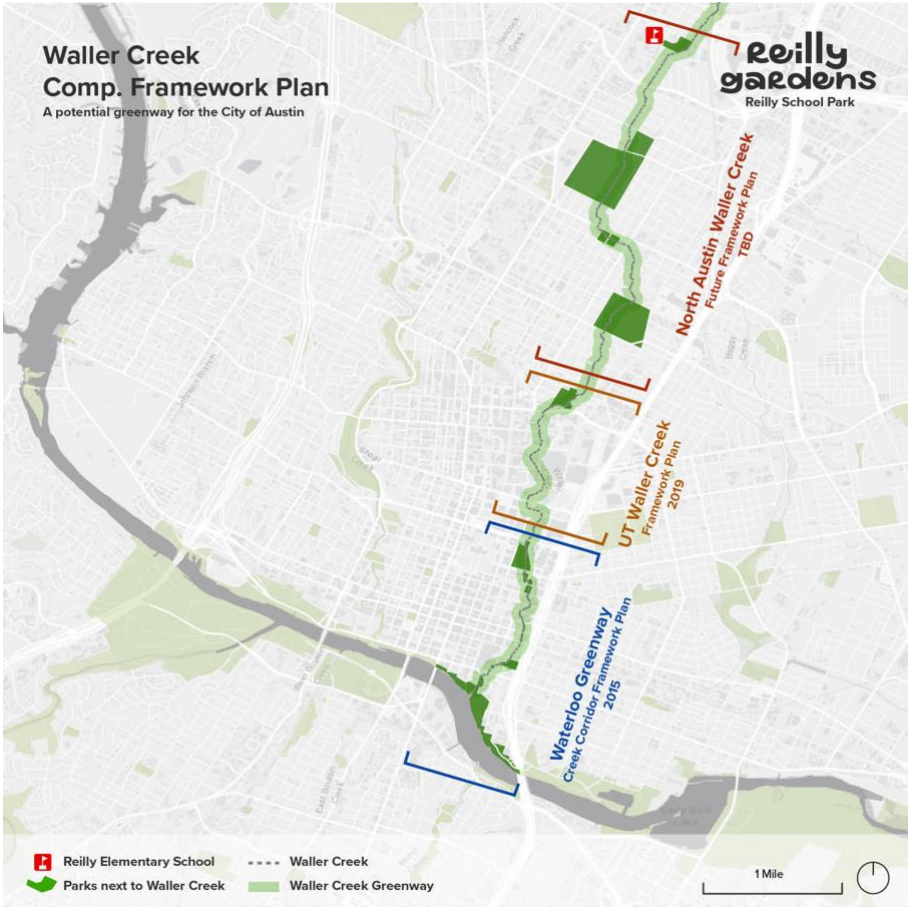


Figure 3. Team proposes Reilly Park, at the Waller Creek headwaters, as a node in a greenway/hike and bike trail connecting commuters in N. Central Austin to downtown amenities. Map: Jorge Zapata.

Working together in Austin, our team has built of personal and formative experiences of the public space, embraced Olmstead’s notion that parks are ‘bastions of the democratic ideals of community and equality, and developed Reilly Community Garden with the concept of park-as-commons in mind: The conceptual device of the commons, ‘defined as a dynamic

and collective resource that stands in tension with commodified and privatized space'. (Gilmore, 2017. p.2).

## The Design Approach

The team conceived Reilly Gardens as a potential for challenging the statu quo of park spaces in Austin. This project aims to generate awareness about the importance of community engagement as a change agent in urban environments, as well as suggesting potential linkage with city-wide strategies such as Imagine Austin in the hopes of inspiring neighboring communities and spread positive change.

Peter Marcuse's notion of radical urban practice is central to our approach; the application of theory as an intervention designed to provoke change. This 21<sup>st</sup> Century iteration of Le Febvre's ideals is aimed at a renewed right to urban life (Marcuse, 2009. P. 193-4) in Austin 2020 and the steps delineated by Marcuse were succinct: Expose, Propose, Politicize. For Reilly Park the sequence was more accurately Propose, Expose, Politicize – repeat.

Our focus on social and environmental justice involves negotiations with City and school district aimed at elevating neighborhood needs – regaining fair access to Reilly park and regaining a voice in planning decisions -- to achieve parity with private and City interests in and around the park. We engaged a myriad of actors with interests in the site; those contented with the status quo, and those arguing for change.

At Reilly, creating a more convivial, community-oriented, and sustainable environment meant designing with the entire local [social and environmental] ecosystem in mind; the embodiment of Transition Design (Irwin, Fry, Tonkinwise, Willis, Escobar, et al). A 'design process that requires a vision, the integration of knowledge, and the need to think and act at different levels of scale, and that is also highly contextual (relationships, connections, and place)' (Irwin 2015, 238).

- Enable stakeholders to arrive at a shared definition of the problem and an understanding of its complexities and interdependencies.
- Identify stakeholder concerns, relations, expectations, and beliefs and factor them into both problem frames and designed interventions in order to leverage collective stakeholder intelligence (Forrester, Swarling & Lonsdeale; GPPAC, 2015, p4).
- Frame wicked problems within a radically large spatio-temporal context.

- Provide Stakeholders and interdisciplinary teams with a palette of tools and methodologies useful to resolving wicked problems and seeding/catalysing systems level change.

*Provide a rationale for “intervening” in complex systems and “solutioning” over long periods of time (dozens of years, decades) Vs creating short-term, one-off solutions (Resnick, 2018. P. 432).*

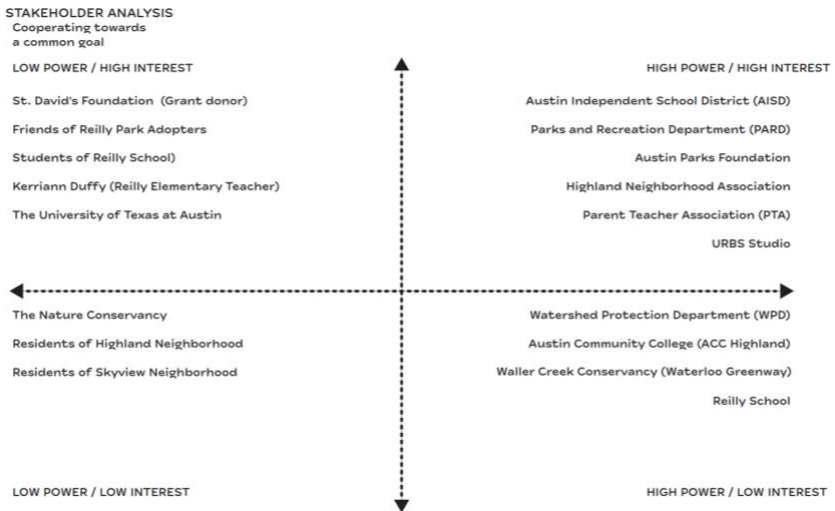


Figure 4. Stakeholder Analysis, Spring 2020. Byline: Alyson Beaton and Jorge Zapata.

## Propose; Expose; Politicize

### PROPOSE: Designing Reilly Commons

*‘Propose, in the sense of working with those affected to come up with actual proposals, programs, targets, strategies, to achieve the desired results.’ (Marcuse, 2009. p. 194).*

The Reilly design challenge: How to create a community of interest and action around a 7.4-acre dust bowl of a park, that experiences period and extreme flood events and registers the lowest use numbers on a recent Nature Conservancy survey.



Until the park was adopted residents were unaware that Reilly Park was a public amenity. The chain link fence and gates effectively prohibit public use. And conform to an ontological shift in American society begun early in the 21st Century as gun violence and fear of terrorist threats, post 9/11, crafted a culture of fear and division. Hedges and walls began interrupting the flow of velvety green lawns in residential areas long before more recent calls to 'build the wall'. Likewise, schools like Reilly Elementary, that once opened up to their neighborhoods, became more enclaves, with a chain-link fence exhibiting stark warning signs – 'no tobacco', 'no drugs', 'no guns'.

In 2018 an invitation to 'Adopt-a-park' appeared on the fence of Reilly Park in North Central Austin. The program, run by Austin Parks Foundation (APF), the non-profit wing of Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARC), was searching for park stewards who would champion their local park and commit to organizing park bi-annual clean-up days. Park adopters were also 'eligible for certain resources provided by APF, such as [gardening] tools, educational opportunities and grant opportunities. Designers Alyson and Matthew Beaton, residents of the area, became the park adopters for Reilly Park and started advocating for the neighborhood park. As the point person, Beaton immediately partnered with her design colleague Kate Catterall, and together they created a coalition (Colleagues and students from University of Texas, and a teacher from Reilly Elementary school) to improve the park and access to it. Beaton and Catterall began, as most designers do, by dreaming up possibilities for the site.

Catterall, with over a decade of experience developing partnerships with city government, community arts organizations and granting agencies, led an initiative to start the project by building such local connections. The pair organized meetings with the principal of the Reilly Elementary who led them to schedule a site visit with a lead stakeholder of the site, Staryn Wagner from the City of Austin Watershed department. Wagner's in-depth tour of the site gave the team critical information they needed to start their research. From there they hosted a series of meetings with to engage a broad cross-section of people with personal or professional connections to the site. Schemes and visualizations were developed to illustrate what the neglected park might become, initiate conversations and prompt more ideas, criticisms, and comments from the community to shape next steps.



Figure 5. Spring 2019: Park Activation. Alyson Beaton talking with neighbors (left). Detail of feedback board (right). Byline: Matt Beaton.

The community feedback event yielded initial suggestions such as, ‘we need money for our parks’, ‘a splash pad and running trail’ and discrete dog area to contain poop’ and was a necessary step in potentially gaining access to APF grant funding to develop and implement improvements. After meeting with APF to start the application we discovered that the process allowed for little, or no, neighborhood input after that initial activation; no co-design workshops or more engaged activations to uncover potential. The one-size-fits-all process moved from the ‘It’s your park day’ event to establishing an APF ‘bank’ account to receive the APF and the result of community fund-raising efforts. Then a [Community Activated Park Project](#) (CAPP) form could be submitted to the City of Austin and a development masterplan completed by a city-appointed landscape firm.

The plan developed by the city-appointed landscape designer typically consumes much of the initial grant, but a masterplan is a crucial next step towards entering the bidding process and moving towards construction; construction costs for a park like Reilly are typically in the \$350,000.00 range. We discovered that similar park plans in Austin have languish for years as neighborhoods wrestle without securing the necessary funding.

After 6-months in discussion with APF we decided to pursue independent funding and utilizing our own expertise to reduce costs; developing a concept plan community garden that could be phased in funded by a series of smaller grants and activations as a mechanism to build community.

Summer 2019, the St. David’s Foundation invited interested groups to apply for their ‘[Parks with a Purpose](#)’ Grant opportunity. We discussed the opportunity with our own university, PARD and AISD’s non-profit wing, Ed Fund, who had an obvious stake in the park through the joint (or shared) use agreement. We chose to work with Ed Fund and developed a working relationship with Kerriann Duffy, a Reilly Elementary teacher and incorporated

'chicken tenders' her a school chicken coop project in the proposal, in hopes of extending the scope of her initial work. We looked to the school further, integrating Kerri Ann's native plant/pollinator interests and a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum into the garden concept. And so, the project became [Reilly Gardens: Social Emotional Learning for All](#) a transgenerational community space that extend the notion of lifelong learning and emotional intelligence to the entire community.

The coalition led by Beaton and Catterall won the \$130,000 award and the influx of money started to leverage a strong neighborhood voice in design process, despite constraints being placed on how we could access and distribute the funds, which were tempered by a group meeting between our team, AISD, PARD and St. David's Foundation in which it was agreed that in order to accommodate equitable school/community access AISD and PARD would grant use of a space within the site that straddled both AISD/PARD land. An AISD-approved landscape architect was engaged to work in alongside our team to retain the integrity of the project and we would collaboratively develop an AISD approved and insured plan.

Securing a strong coalition between Reilly Elementary staff, PARD, APF, Ed Fund and the Highland Neighborhood Association (HNA), and having St. David's Foundation available to assist in negotiations, ensured our team's participation through the design and development process, but not without continual, pressure, negotiation and prompting.

The grant and our role as both designers and primary grantees, seemed to destabilized a pre-existing power dynamic between AISD and PARD revealing fault lines in their relationship as they worked to development of new rules and make space for HNA to contribute to the future of Reilly Park once again.

Winning the grant to design and implement a simple park improvement project, became a provocation that unearthed a series of systemic problems; unwieldy bureaucracies, unnecessary red tape, competing economic and political interests and turf-wars that had historically disenfranchised the neighborhood. The irregular route we chose to pursue our goal presented seemingly insurmountable problems at moments, but in navigating the system we began to understand how securing additional grants, and using those funds to leverage community goals from a position of relative economic strength, and with backing from entities outside the existent system, might work for in future.

## DEVELOPMENT of a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) GARDEN for ALL

AISD implemented a district-wide an SEL framework in K-12 education a decade ago. The framework is based on the *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)*, a Chicago-based initiative, and reinforces "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show

empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (Casel, 2020).

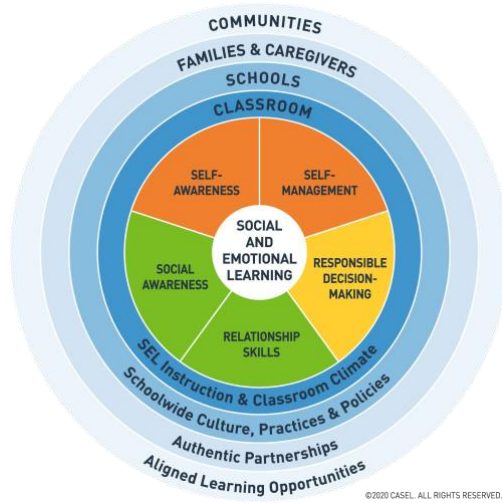


Figure 6. Social and Emotional Learning Wheel. CASEL (2020).

The gardens integrate the CASEL program through a series of spaces that engage the five senses and foster independent and collective ownership (gardening, raising chickens and donating/selling eggs and veggies), reflection, healthy relationships and communication that allow the school-age students to engage with the broader community, and environment, in meaningful ways. The gardens also afford opportunities for outdoor education through community science initiatives and that move beyond the K-5 curriculum; from monitoring rainfall and water quality and propagating native species, to performances and art plein air.



Figure 7. SEL for All: Graphics for the garden developed by Emma Overholt, BFA Design Student UT Austin, under the guidance of Alyson Beaton.

The team was joined by Jorge Zapata, a University of Texas graduate Urban Design and Community & Regional Planning student. Jorge has experience working with communities in different Latin American countries. His work has primarily focused on public projects such as community centers, kindergartens, health centers and public spaces in economically deprived areas. In 2019, he was part of a group of graduate students led by Dr. Patricia Wilson, in the award-winning Participatory Action Research project: [Engaging Informality in Metropolitan Monterrey](#). The team believes in community involvement and participation as key tools for positive change in the built environment, during months they focused on developing self-awareness tools, among other mindful strategies to engage with the community in Cerro La Campana, one of the most prominent informal settlements in Monterrey.

Awareness-based systems when embedded in the design process can empower communities to take ownership over public space in cities. This approach allows designers, institutions, and key stakeholders not to impose but to co-create and shape their environment. This method was illustrated in La Campana by the materialization of 'El Parque de los Niño's – 'The Children's Park,' a space recovered, built, and named by the community, emerged from a process of transforming an abandoned trash-filled lot into a treasured pocket park and now active public space used daily.

Reilly's team also engaged a group of undergraduate design students from University of Texas and a landscape design student from Texas A&M to develop curriculum, signage, furniture and an indigenous planting plan for the site; an opportunity for community-engaged design within the university curriculum. Beaton, Zapata and Catterall worked closely with the AISD-appointed landscape designer to retain the intent of the concept within budget.

The first draft of the Masterplan was triple the budget of \$120,000. How could the landscape designer have missed the mark by so much, when the concept design and native planting scheme had been provided pro bono? Bids from city-approved construction firms came in much higher than expected, so the design was stripped to the bare bones plan leaving a framework of plant beds for the community to fill in, surrounded by pathways of mulch and decomposed granite.

It is frustrating to know that if undertaken in a residential context, this project would have cost a fraction of the price. However, using a City bidding processes the budget ultimately did not cover necessary soil or plantings, and while the construction company was reimbursed handsomely, they were unable to even grade the landscape prior to positioning stones that would one day become planters.

REILLY SEL GARDENS MATERIALS OVERVIEW



Figure 8. Reilly SEL Gardens: Illustrations Alyson Beaton.



Figure 9. Reilly SEL Gardens: Illustrations Alyson Beaton

Initial frustrations diminished, we now see this circumstance as an opportunity to utilize the \$35,000 of the grant monies that remain to engage for the school students and community more fully in the process of place-making. Prototypes of signage, fences and furniture being developed, all of which are more inventive, contextual and environmentally sound than those proffered by City vendors at greater cost. For example: BFA Design student Brandon Burek is developing a simple hempcrete casting system for biodegradable stools that are designed decay into the ground over a period of years; new items being manufactured as needed over time in community workshop sessions.



Figure 10. (left) Hempcrete prototype. (center) Plan for constructing seating in outdoor classroom/amphitheatre. (right) Hempcrete casting process, central to an upcoming build-a-thon community activation. Prototypes: Brandon Buerk, BFA Design student, guided by Kate Catterall and Alyson Beaton.

This seedling garden, designed as a shared, transgenerational, recreational and social space will become a neighborhood common that welcomes renters and owners, natives, immigrants, migrant workers and refugees (the site is a refugee safe-space) in an area where such space existed preciously. It will be introduced with a year-long program of events 2021-22, furniture building, open-air movies, community picnics, tree plantings, facilitated history and nature walks, education/ discussions about home owner opportunities for flood mitigation (the creek and ½ of Reilly Park is in a flash floodplain), lessons on native plantings (with [plant give-aways](#)), community gardening and tree planting days (supported by non-profit an [urban forestry initiative](#)) and fostering communities who will to water new saplings and feed chickens over the summer (when school is out).

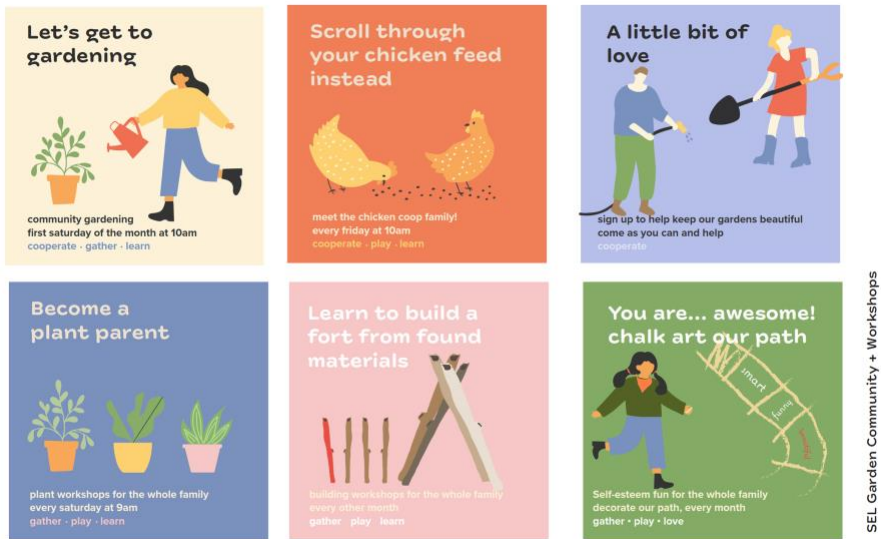


Figure 11. SEL for All: Graphics for the garden developed by Emma Overholt, BFA Design Student UT Austin, under the guidance of Alyson Beaton.

## EXPOSE

*“Expose in the sense of analysing the roots of the problem and making clear and communicating that analysis to those that need it and can use it” (Marcuse, 2009. p. 194).*

In securing the St. David’s Foundation grant, this design team and community created a proposal that inadvertently exposed conditions in Austin that otherwise might have remained invisible: decades long reductions in stable funding for PARD in Austin and elsewhere (and National Parks), leading to a shared use agreement at Reilly that disenfranchised a neighborhood and gave birth to systems vulnerable to ‘creaming off’ monies from special projects, perhaps in an attempt to sustain basic operations.

Reilly Park is designated as a ‘shared use’ site by the City of Austin. Whilst a number of schools in Austin have proximity to neighborhood parks, only a handful have been awarded ‘shared use’ status. Shared, or joint use, agreements became more common in the 20-teens and appear to have been precipitated by a CDC initiative, that led to a round of “Community Transformation Grant” awards in 2011. Some as some sixty-one grantees explored the potential of joint/shared use agreements as a route for communities gaining access to school parks and fitness facilities, including gyms in some instances, to encourage healthier and



more active lifestyles; an idea later propagated by the [Green Schoolyards Movement](#) (2016) and proposals for [multi-generational schoolyard](#) (2013) access.

In Austin, as opposed to rural or suburban contexts, it is debatable whether a shared use agreement provides communities with any additional access to facilities and in the case of Reilly Park it appears to have had quite the opposite effect, substantially limiting community access to the park over time.



*Figure 12. Reilly Park became gated even as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) encouraged schoolyard shared/joint use agreements to address burgeoning health problems and a lack of equitable access to green space in America. (left) Reilly Park December 2020. (right) Reilly Park May 2015.*

Community access, a motivation behind our design intervention, now took on a distinctly political characteristic. When comparing Reilly to comparable school parks (with/without agreements) within a 10-mile radius we discovered that, all present signage that clearly state hours when the general public can access and use the park, playground or track, and none of the other parks have lockable gates like Reilly's.



*Figure 13. The other nearby shared use parks (left) TA Brown Elementary and park and (right) Pillow Elementary School and park have permeable and ungated fences that snuggly*

*surrounding school buildings, and provide community access to those area after school hours, while offering a large swath of land on the periphery that remains open and accessible all day. Photo credits: Google Street-view, digital images 2019.*

The Reilly Park shared use agreement has yielded benefits for both Reilly Elementary/AISD, the latter gaining sole use and control of the space from PARD in exchange for undertaking maintenance (mowing the grass) in 2011. Our design team began to ask: why did this community lose out? Why was the community not consulted as the shared use agreement was negotiated, and how come the elementary school replaced the community at planning meetings in 2015? We also began to ask questions regarding why PARD needs so much support, even with basic maintenance?



*Figure 14. Reilly Elementary School Park (left) fenced condition and a comparable shared use park at Pillow Elementary in North Austin (right), that remains unfenced today. Photo credits: Google Maps, Satellite images 2015.*

The Highland community surrounding Reilly Park is working class and dispersed; there is no record of the HNA being engaged in planning conversations in 2011 and by 2015 the school was permitted to step in in leu, and as sole representative for community interests. Austin PARD is not alone in facing budget shortfalls, this appears to be a national crisis that began in the 1970's. The vast proportion of PARD budgets across the country rely on 'general funds', reinforcing 'the perception that sometimes exists that parks and recreation services are less essential than some other local government services [this] often means that parks get hit hard in times of recession and budgetary shortfalls' and leads to reductions in the number of employees, projects undertaken and the use of 'deferred maintenance' mechanisms limiting progress well beyond the duration of an economic downturn.

Since 2008, and increasingly, PARD's across the country have been encouraged to compete for scarce federal level grants, secure private donations and develop public/private partnerships. As PARD's have negotiated the inherent inequities of fee vs free access to facilities, they have developed NGO divisions, such as the Austin Parks Foundation (APF) to manage pro bono community stewardship, private donations and corporate donations. Park stewardship efforts have grown exponentially and have become both increasingly formalized and autonomous in more affluent areas in Austin; even leading to the

establishment of discreet and increasingly well-funded non-profit conservancies focused on parks with creeks and aimed at creating a network of routes to the Colorado River/Lady Bird Lake in downtown Austin.

Neighborhoods solely reliant on the APF park adoption program, apply for APF grants that cover the cost of developing a master plan and little more, but rarely have the matching funds necessary to break ground and complete the project. The [Pease Park](#) and [The Shoal Creek](#) Conservancies in Central West Austin, can however utilize APF monies, but by becoming independent non-profit organizations have developed considerable power and income that allow them to complete increasingly ambitious neighborhood projects. In working class areas with a greater proportion of renters, and residents in lower income brackets, PARD/APF's over-reliance on community initiative means parks often remain derelict even after neighborhoods organize and a masterplan is complete, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in access to high quality public parks. Projects that land in funding purgatory and fail to yield tangible results are a lesson in futility for economically strapped areas and such experiences can prevent future community-based organizing around local parks.



*Figure 15. Pease Park and Shoal Creek, supported by the City, APF and two well-funded conservancies in wealthy West Austin. Photo credits: Kate Catterall.*

Ensuring public safety and meeting code is essential, and PARD/AISD need to ensure standards are met. However, even as our team interfaced with this bureaucratic system and used our professional experience, alongside an amount of white privilege, we found it difficult to negotiate more equitable access to the process and began to understand pressure points that prevented co-design and knowledge sharing/building. PARD is primarily concerned with maintenance and upkeep of parks existing parks and their access to dependable budget is impaired by its source in general vs dedicated funds. In order to better support smaller scale community-initiated projects, a stated goal, PARD most obviously needs a dedicated and adequate budget. Failing that, budgets for community-initiated project need to be developed with great transparency and creativity and a palate of inexpensive, sustainable and elegant options developed so that all plans lead to a worthwhile socio-spatial experience.

This means permitting less expensive, more idiosyncratic, and localized solutions, simplifying design concepts vs gutting them, and moving away from the prescriptive aesthetics used for more formal city parks and towards creative reuse of materials already on site (felled trees, concrete, fencing); as became the first step at Reilly. We also found that our team working on site with prototypes generated interest in the project and created ad hoc opportunities to discuss and evolve forms and ideas with the community. Working to develop compostable furniture solutions on site, initiated conversations about sustainability and self-reliance; furniture making then became a new activation workshop; teaching neighbors and students how to cast hempcrete seating as needed. Flexibility to utilize the last dollars in our grant have yielded cheaper, less formal gardens and paths at Reilly and opened up numerous opportunities for activations to co-create the space and get more bang for the buck.

*‘Critical urban theory should help deepen the expose; help formulate responses that address the root causes thus exposed and demonstrate the need for a politicized response.’ (Marcuse, 2009. p. 194)*

Going through this process lead us to understand more fully the opportunities and challenges inherent in developing community-driven park projects. Reilly Community Gardens are under construction and we are in the process of writing other grants to extend the reach of the project and establish Reilly Commons as the heart of this automobile-centric working-class neighborhood, initiating park activations and demographic research, leading to denizen awareness projects and work to initiate activism / enhance engagement in the local political process.

Next steps incorporate undertaking a design process in partnership with PARD and AISD, to find more playful ways to engage and work with the broadest swathe of the Highland community, digging deeper into the history of the site and neighborhood, researching how the Park’s shared use agreement has impacted community access, and identifying ways to effectively reclaim the communities right to this public space.

## POLITICIZE

*‘Politicize, in the sense of clarifying the political action implications of what was exposed and proposed and supporting organizing around the proposals by informing action. Politicizing includes attention to issues of organization strategy and day-today politics’. (Marcuse, 2009. p. 194).*

A community member became a park adopter in order to explore ways to build community through placemaking in a fragmented neighborhood. She built a research and design team to engage area residents in the process with hopes of implementing collective ideas and strengthening bonds. The team developed a network of relationships within the Highland neighborhood and beyond with groups interested in water and other environmental issues in the area. AISD and PARD, who had long represented the community in planning meetings became working partners on the same footing with the community for a moment, because

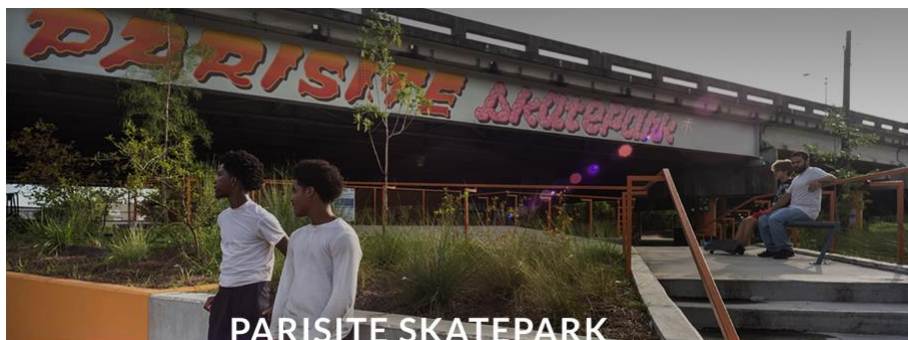
the grant secured by the team shifted the power dynamic and ensured local constituents and their interests were represented.

In the process of designing a community garden to reconnect the school and neighborhood, residents recognized just how little representation the denizens of Highland had in previous planning initiatives for the area; they were not even consulted about potential impacts of the PARD/AISD shared use agreement. In reviewing the most recent planning documents from 2015, the community saw they been replaced by two dominant institutions AISD and PARD, and had over a period of years lost access to their local public space.

A seemingly simple proposal for a community garden led our research team to dig into the history of the site, understand how the U.S. Parks Service (and later local parks) came to rely so heavily upon volunteerism, and investigate how a 2011 Center for Disease Control grant initiative aimed at diminishing obesity in the U.S. seeded the concept of shared schoolyards that went viral in the subsequent decade, and while working in Chicago and San Francisco, failed under looser regulation in Austin.

We were initially hesitant to apply for the grant, then ask for forgiveness, but understood that if the award came through the AISD Ed Fund would find it difficult to turn down \$130,000.00 and an opportunity to enhance a park deficient neighborhood.

We now recognize the potential of leveraging independent grant funding and funder oversight to give working-class communities a stronger voice in local decision-making and placemaking. The design process undertaken also served as useful provocation to galvanize a fragmented community into action and illustrate increasing inequities in community access to public land in such areas. Ally-ship also played a positive role, as the team of professionals and educators secured financing for improvements, offered pro bono services and advocacy. In the case of our own team, we continued to apply pressure in the face of push-backs from AISD/PARD for two years in order to achieve a seemingly simple goal; the right to install a fully-funded community garden.



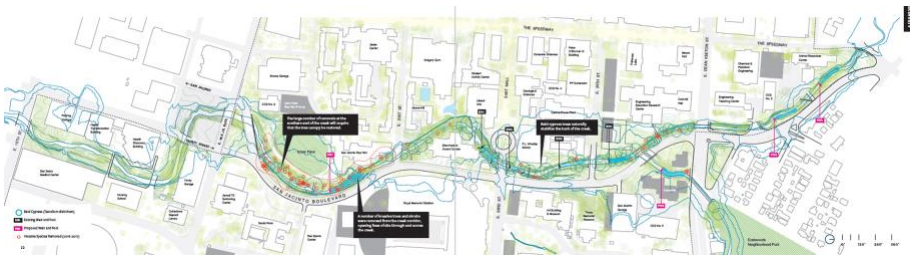
*Figure 15. Initially, a DIY skatepark begun in 2010, [Parisite](#) became a collaboration between its skaters, Tulane School of Architecture’s Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design, and the non-profit Transitional Spaces. Working together, the team grew the park and earned it official city recognition’ (Rudy Bruner Award Silver medallist, 2019).*

Recognizing the visibility and power that large grants can give projects and neighborhood groups, and understanding how that leverage can facilitate change on a local scale, has informed our strategy for next steps in the project. Like the Tulane ‘Parasite Skatepark’ project we are relying on the idea that community action can force the hand of a city, and school district, leading to great outcomes for all.

Progress has been slower than anticipated and during the pandemic the neighborhood had no park access because the shared use agreement allowed AISD jurisdiction to limit public access to this park more aggressively. The garden is under construction as of December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 and lack of access to Reilly Park SEL Garden has already begun to effect a change. Renewed community interest in the park, and access to it, has initiated a new relationship between City, school and neighborhood where claims to space, resources, and equitable access to information are actively being renegotiated.

Armed with the experience of designing Reilly Community Gardens the team is designing a year-long park activation and completion plan and preparing to write a series of larger grants. We are deepening partnerships with Basta around arts, activism and housing equity, AARP to develop stronger transgenerational aspects to the development of Reilly Commons, engaging University of Texas students in community-engaged design and continuing to develop our relationship with AISD and PARD.

The next grants will augment the SEL gardens, with a gateway and plaza with a small structure to provide space for community events and a place for a mobile library to visit weekly. The building would house a [Freededge](#) to combat and initiate neighborhood conversations around food insecurity, and serve as home base for community science initiatives focused on the water quality and the creek.



*Figure 16. [A Framework for Waller Creek](#). The University of Texas at Austin. 2019.*

Beyond Reilly, grants will provide capacity to develop plans integrating our work in N. Central Austin into greater connectivity plans in the City of Austin. At present Reilly and Highland are well-served by mass-transit routes but there are no plans for a network of greenways along which residents might commute, or exercise, in ways equitable to Austinites living in wealthier neighborhoods to the West.

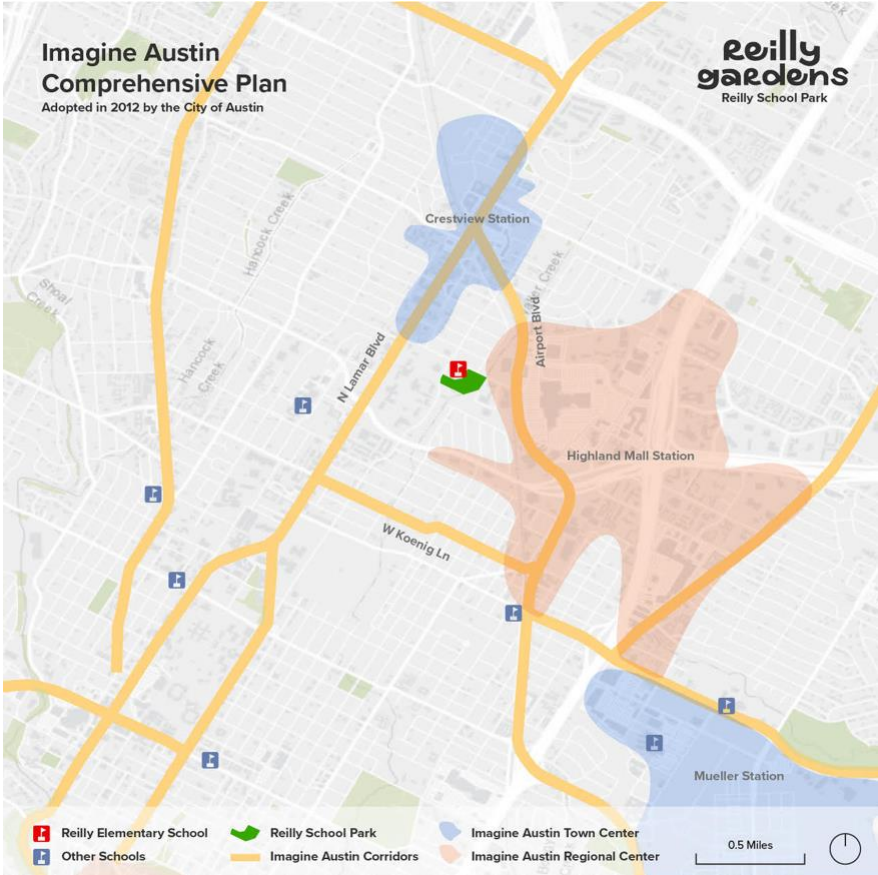


Figure 17. Reilly park's location in relation to the city's future-focused connectivity plan: [Imagine Austin](#). Maps: Jorge Zapata.

We will also take aim at the downside of institutionalized volunteerism that, over the past 50-decades, has become both a symptom of a "culture of organizational poverty" (Galvin and Pitcaithley 2008) and essential to the functioning of the National Parks and regional Parks and Recreation Departments: A system that has reduced paying jobs in the sector and

exacerbated inequities between the quality of parks in lower and higher income areas in Austin.

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Improve drainage along neighborhood creeks and streets and prevent erosion by using natural materials.”

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The Environmental Science curriculum at University of Texas will support a scientist-in-residence at Reilly Elementary in 2021-22. The graduate teaching assistant will work with the 5th grade science teacher to develop site-specific curriculum and engage the students

with environmental research, such as water quality monitoring, at the site.

<https://www.esi.utexas.edu/outreach/scires/>

The Lady Bird Wildflower Center houses a native plant and landscape research group affiliated with the University of Texas. They have agreed to consult on site plantings and contribute a community workshop, and plant give-away.

<https://www.wildflower.org/plants-main>

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