

GRAND STAND

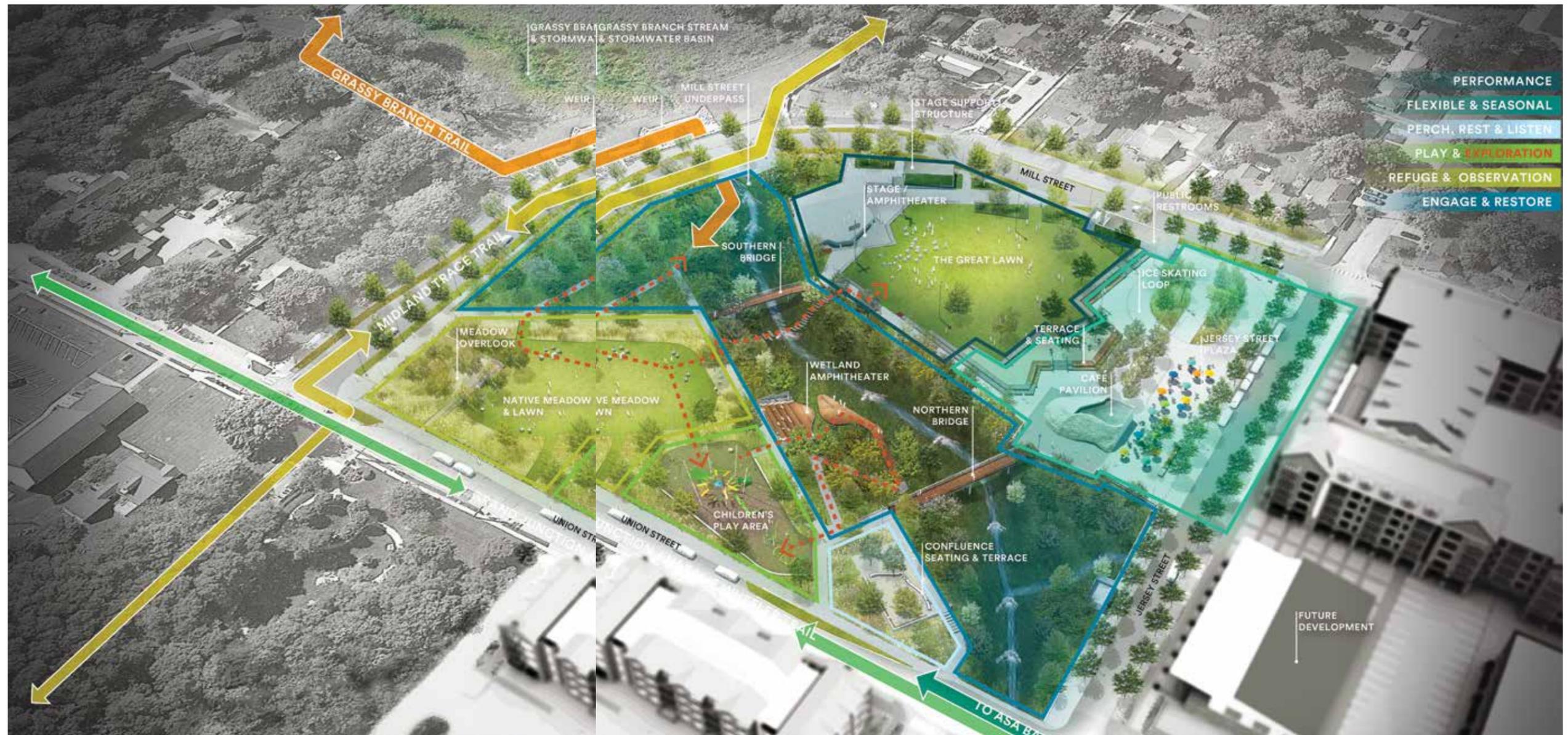
A PARK WAS CONCEIVED AS A CIVIC HEART
FOR A SPRAWLING SUBURBAN CITY.
THEN CAME THE STORM.

BY JONATHAN LERNER



ABOVE
The renaturalized creek channel both mitigates against flooding and invites exploration.

ALAN KARCHNER



Westfield, Indiana, 20 miles north of Indianapolis, had history, and plenty of energy. What it lacked was a center of gravity.

Westfield was founded in 1834 by anti-slavery Quakers and intended as a stop on the Underground Railroad. They platted a little grid of 48 lots for a village center, though until recently most of Westfield's 26 square miles was still farmland. But lately it has clocked in as the fastest-growing place in the state. The population has ballooned from about 3,500 in 1990 to more than 50,000 today. This growth has been accommodated mainly in single-family, cul-de-sac subdivisions. Commercial activity

takes place in big-box shopping centers out by the expressway. A couple of drowsy blocks along Main Street constitute the historic—but today somewhat notional—downtown. “We really didn’t have a city identity,” says Melody Jones, who moved there in 1984, and has served on the city council and the planning commission and as parks director. “People would name their subdivision instead of saying ‘I live in Westfield.’ They didn’t even know there *was* a downtown.”

Around the time Westfield formally became a city in 2008, people there began to envision an urban-design fix. To achieve it, about 15 properties at one edge of the downtown grid were eventually cleared of their mostly deteriorated

ABOVE With multiple program areas and pedestrian access routes, the park is well-equipped to activate Westfield’s downtown.

DAVID RUBIN LAND COLLECTIVE

structures and amalgamated for redevelopment. The centerpiece would be a new park intended as a community-oriented gathering place and a stimulant to mixed-use infill. The park was named Grand Junction Plaza: junction, because it’s the meeting point of several trails and the confluence of two branches of Cool Creek; and plaza, for its urbanizing aspirations. DAVID RUBIN Land Collective was hired to design it. “Two weeks after we received the award, they had a 500-year event that flooded all the areas that were going to be for redevelopment,” says David A. Rubin, FASLA, the firm’s founder and principal. “So what began as a central park for their citizens suddenly needed to be a climate crisis response, a

stormwater management response, and a riparian corridor response—with a social overlay.”

And without the slightest pretentious gesture, it succeeds at all of that. The roughly seven-acre park, inaugurated at the end of 2021, has won a 2023 ASLA Professional Honor Award for General Design, the 2023 Design Award of Excellence from the Indiana chapter of ASLA, and the 2022 Exceptional Commitment to Watershed Protection Award from the White River Alliance. (Westfield and Cool Creek are within the White River watershed.) The park is nearly square, a sort of superblock. Along the north boundary, facing downtown, is a true plaza, paved and adaptable to

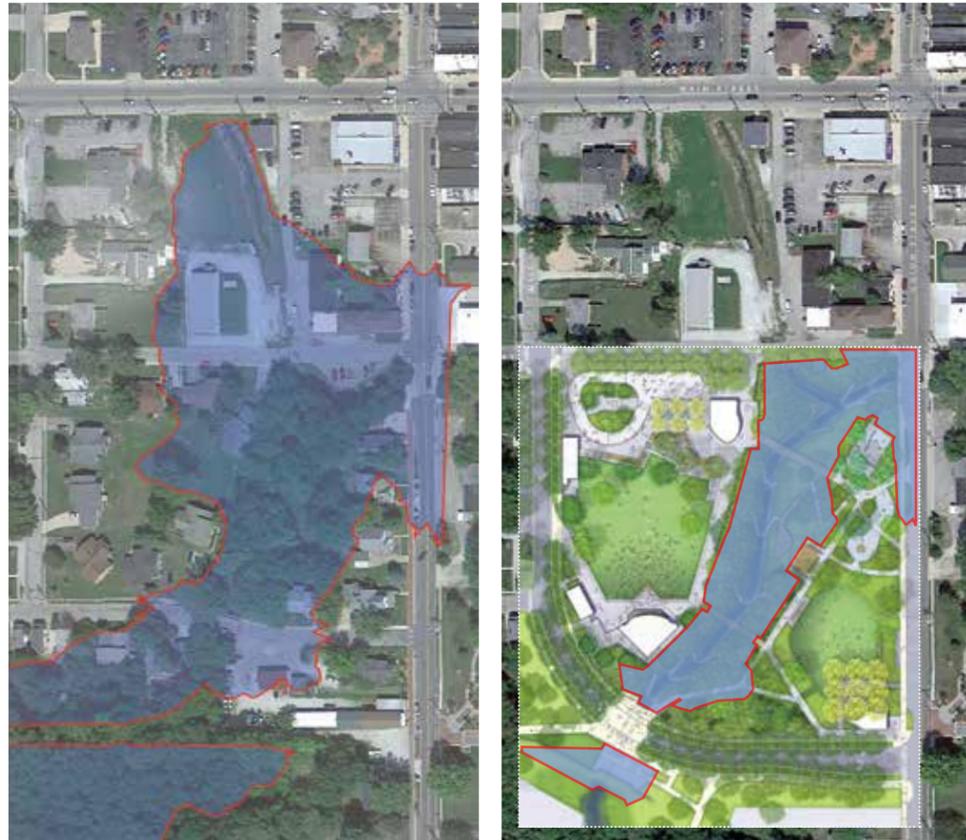


LEFT
Amid a general absence of topography, the recessed creek valley is an alluring counterpoint.

many uses. This can be a skating rink in winter or a farmers' market in summer. It accommodates large tents for special events and has a curbless transition to the bordering street, which can be closed off to extend its crowd capacity. Here there is a restroom building, and another designed to be a café. Adjacent to this, in the park's southwest quadrant, there is a trapezoidal 40,000-square-foot lawn, angled and gently sloping toward a stage. For performances, it can accommodate about 2,000 seated or half again as many standing.

Grassy Branch of Cool Creek cuts diagonally across the park, roughly from the southwest to the northeast corner, where a tributary joins it. This waterway separates the tightly designed and manicured zones of plaza and lawn from spaces to its east that are shaggier and more free-form: a meadow, an amoeba-shaped and fenceless playground, and a small amphitheater set into the waterway's bank whose sculpted wooden tiers of seating suggest waves cascading downhill. There's generally little elevation change within the park, and sight lines are open. You feel as if you can

FLOODPLAIN



Preconstruction condition—100-year floodplain

Postconstruction—100-year flood potential extents

PLAN

- 1 MULTIPURPOSE PLAZA
- 2 RESTROOMS
- 3 CAFÉ PAVILION
- 4 CONCERT LAWN
- 5 PERMANENT BANDSHELL (UNBUILT)
- 6 WEIR
- 7 INFORMAL CROSSING
- 8 RIPARIAN BOARDWALK
- 9 AMPHITHEATER
- 10 PLAY AREA
- 11 TRAILHEAD PAVILION (UNBUILT)



DAVID RUBIN LAND COLLECTIVE, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE

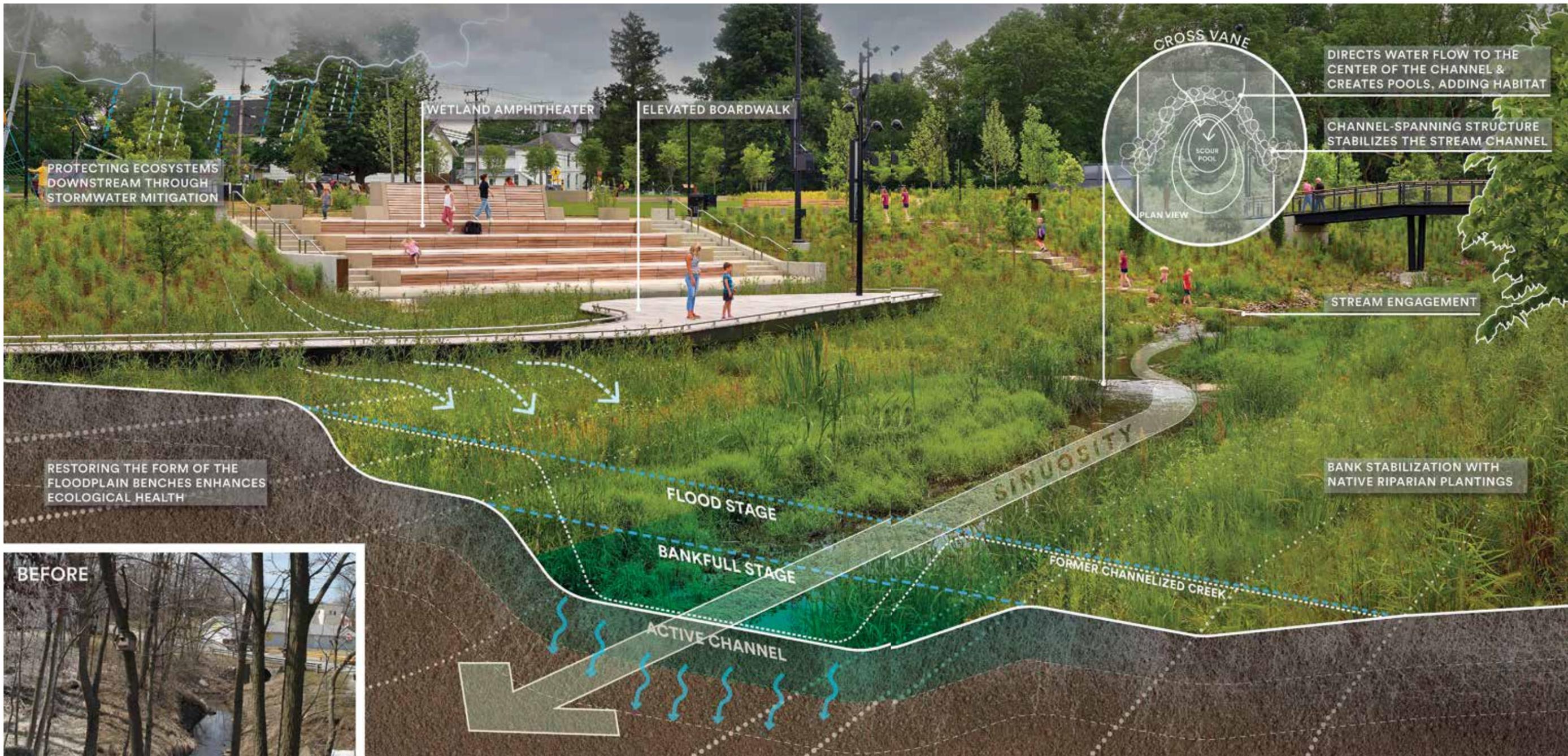
see right across it, and see it all, just standing in any one place and turning your head. The creek's meandering valley is broad and shallow, with gently sloping sides, and it is richly vegetated. It runs, of course, below grade. So when you come upon it, there is a double element of surprise: that it is there at all, and that it appears to be so wild. It looks as if it has been untouched since before the era of settlement. This, of course, is illusion.

a guitar-strumming folk singer was entertaining them. Some kids were more interested in wading in the creek. "Look at them, investigating the water's edge," Rubin said. "Are they appreciating the value of riparian corridors? They will. They will value this into their future. They will understand what needs to be present. There's now fish in this. I've seen muskrat. But it's not nature. It's managed nature. It is a rehabilitated, naturalized stream."

ABOVE
Future flooding within the park will be contained within the renaturalized creek channel.

Rubin visited the park one July morning to find a children's concert in progress. A hundred or more kids and their moms were sitting in and milling around that amphitheater. Standing on the lobe-shaped terminus of a boardwalk below that,

Few streams in Indiana are in their natural state, thanks or no thanks to the Swamp Land Act of 1850. To promote agriculture and westward settlement, it gave states permission to sell and drain wetlands. This led to the dredging and



LEFT
The creek's profile, vegetation, and hydrological functioning look natural but were all meticulously crafted.

channelizing of streams. "It used to be that the ideal scenario was to move water off the land, as fast as possible," says Jill Hoffmann, the executive director of the White River Alliance. More than 90 percent of the state's original wetlands have been lost, she adds. On his first visit to the site, Rubin noticed the creek's "V-shaped channel with eroded sides. The profile was not natural. I was like, 'Hey, this is looking very unstable. We've got to make fixing the creek part of this.'"

The creek flows northward into the site from a six-acre wooded wetland that functions as a detention basin for the downtown area. Formerly the two were separated by a disused elevated rail corridor, now the route of one of the trails. "That acted as a levee," allowing the stream to pass through it via a 48-inch pipe, recalls Jones, whose house faces the park. "When we had heavy rains, it would completely fill up on the south side of that." But in the 500-year storm, the pipe

ALAN KARCHNER (PHOTOGRAPHY),
DAVID RUBIN LAND COLLECTIVE (DIAGRAM)

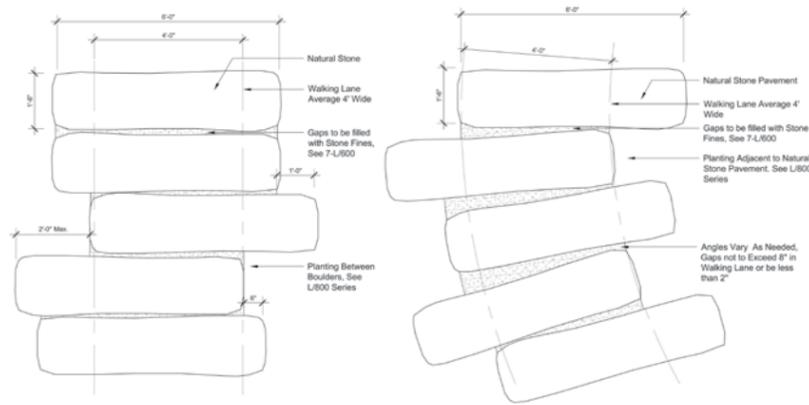
clogged, water in the wetland rose, and the berm was breached. "It washed out the railroad bed. I saw a 20-yard dumpster floating in the yard across the street from me."

In place of a de facto levee in the form of the rail berm, that function is performed now by a subtly elevated, newly constructed street marking the park's southern boundary. A 48-inch pipe still brings the creek flow north from the wetland,

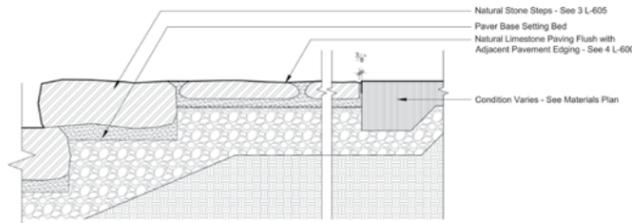
but it is set into a broad weir. The weir has a shallowly sloping front wall faced with rectangular limestone blocks in a seemingly random pattern of recess and protrusion, like a staircase pieced together by some screwball mason. If floodwater should overtop the weir, these jutting blocks will interrupt its flow and slow it down. The rest of the time, when it's dry, Rubin says, "kids actually run up and down this thing. It's really joyful and fun."

NATURAL STONE DETAILING

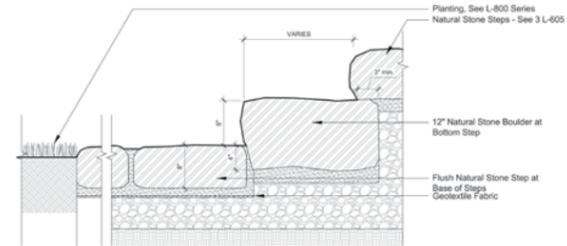
NATURAL STONE STEP AND PAVEMENT LAYOUT PARAMETERS



NATURAL STONE STEPS AND NATURAL STONE PAVEMENT INTERFACE—TOP OF STEPS



NATURAL STONE STEPS AND NATURAL STONE PAVEMENT INTERFACE—BOTTOM OF STEPS



DAVID RUBIN LAND COLLECTIVE (PHOTOGRAPHY), DAVID RUBIN LAND COLLECTIVE (DIAGRAM), BOTTOM: ALAN KARCHMER, OPPOSITE



From here a broad, high-arched culvert tunnels under the street and into the park proper. The water runs through it in a straight channel defined by low terraces of rough-cut stone, which is flanked by a wide bike- and footpath. Most of the park's perimeter allows barrier-free entry and unimpeded views in, except when screened by vegetation. It also provides unobstructed transition, appropriate for a public space meant to be seamlessly integrated with its surroundings. On the south side, however, you first descend from the street to the creek level, at the base of the weir, and then pass through

the shadowy culvert. As you go, the structure's precise arch frames an expanding view of stream, verdant bank, and sky in a pleasurable sequence of compression and release.

The stream's channel through the park was given a broad, gently terraced profile to accept flooding and keep inundation off the majority of the park surface. Laid into the stream's bed is a series of vanes, curved lines of rocks. These riffle and slow the flow and direct it toward the center of the channel to mitigate against bank erosion. They also enhance habitat by oxygenating the water and establishing scour pools. Two footbridges cross the creek. There's also a loosely defined rock staircase down either bank, with stepping-stones in the creek bed connecting them—not that kids don't go

ABOVE The culvert conveying the creek into the park is also an entry point and a place for active engagement.

PLANTING PLAN—NORTHEAST QUADRANT



held all four chunks in mind at once, you could imagine them fitting back together again in a perfect square. If this was perhaps too theoretical for the typical parkgoer, we will never know—although the café building, alone, is so intriguingly strange that it may become a beloved icon for the park.

Another thing we can't know with precision is just how much Grand Junction Plaza has inspired other communities and leaders. But in the Indianapolis

region now “there is a significant shift in thinking about shunting water off, instead of trying to find better ways to manage it in smaller quantities where it falls,” says Jill Hoffmann. “Not only to deal with floods, but to intentionally promote infiltration and assure supply in the future.” A challenge, she says, is to “get the public to understand that that is a different-looking landscape, a little bit wild, a more naturalized landscape. And to understand what maintaining it means.”

DAVID RUBIN LAND COLLECTIVE

PLANT LIST

SHRUBS

- Ha** *Hydrangea arborescens* (Wild hydrangea)
- Hv** *Hamamelis virginiana* (American witch hazel)
- Hx** *Hamamelis x intermedia* ‘Diane’ (Diane witch hazel)
- Iv** *Ilex verticillata* (Common winterberry)
- Ivc** *Ilex verticillata* ‘Red Sprite’ & ‘Jim Dandy’ (Winterberry)
- Lb** *Lindera benzoin* (Northern spicebush)
- Mp** *Morella pensylvanica* (Northern bayberry)
- Ra** *Rhus aromatica* ‘Gro-Low’ (Gro-Low fragrant sumac)
- Rt** *Rhus typhina* ‘Laciniata’ (Cutleaf staghorn sumac)
- Sa** *Sassafras albidum* (Sassafras)
- Sal** *Spiraea alba* (White meadowsweet)
- Sc** *Sambucus nigra ssp. canadensis* (American black elderberry)
- Va** *Viburnum acerifolium* (Mapleleaf viburnum)

PERENNIALS

- Ah** *Anemone x hybrida* ‘Honorine Jobert’ (Honorine Jobert Japanese anemone)
- Ba** *Baptisia alba* (White wild indigo)
- Bc** *Bouteloua curtipendula* (Sideoats grama)
- Bg** *Bouteloua gracilis* ‘Blonde Ambition’ (Blonde Ambition blue grama)

GRASS

- Ca** *Carex annectens* (Yellowfruit sedge)
- Cg** *Carex grayi* (Gray’s sedge)
- Cp** *Carex pensylvanica* (Pennsylvania sedge)
- Cv** *Carex vulpinoidea* (Fox sedge)
- Da** *Dryopteris x australis* (Woodfern)
- Dp** *Dennstaedtia punctilobula* (Eastern hayscented fern)
- Ev** *Elymus virginicus* (Virginia wild rye)
- Hc** *Hemerocallis* ‘Citrina’ (Citron daylily)
- Hh** *Hemerocallis* ‘Hyperion’ (Hyperion daylily)
- Hj** *Hemerocallis* ‘The Jury’s Out’ (The Jury’s Out daylily)
- Hp** *Elymus hystrix var. hystrix* (Eastern bottlebrush grass)
- Hs** *Helleborus* ‘Snow White’ (Snow White hellebore)
- Jt** *Juncus tenuis* (Poverty rush)
- Ms** *Matteuccia struthiopteris* (Ostrich fern)
- Sa** *Scirpus atrovirens* (Green bulrush)
- Vb** *Verbena bonariensis* (Purpletop vervain)

VINE PLANTING MIX

- Cg** *Campsis grandiflora* ‘Morning Calm’ (Chinese trumpet creeper)
- Pt** *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* (Boston ivy)

WOODLAND TYPE A & B PLUG MIX

- At** *Arisaema triphyllum* (Jack in the pulpit)
- Oc** *Osmorhiza claytonii* (Clayton’s sweetroot)
- Pp** *Podophyllum peltatum* (Mayapple)
- Tr** *Trillium recurvatum* (Bloody butcher)

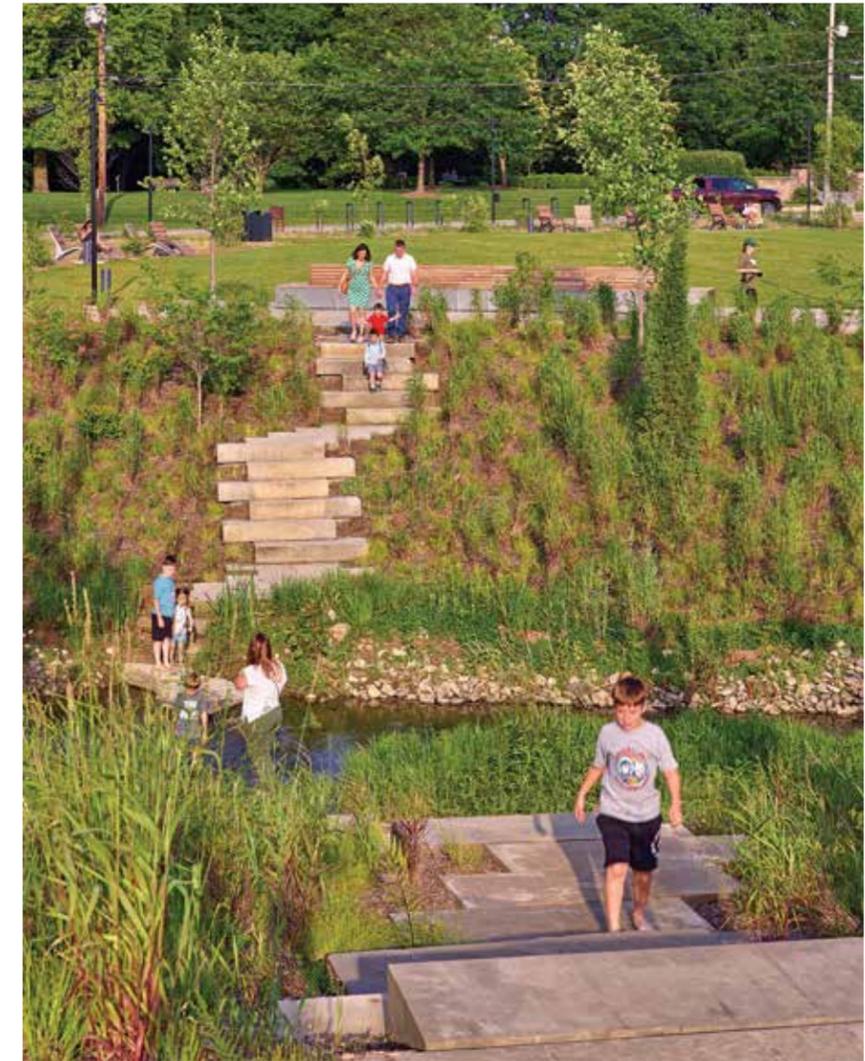
WETLAND PLANTING PLUG MIX

- Iv** *Iris virginica* (Virginia iris)

MEADOW PLANTING MIX

- Am** *Achillea millefolium* (Common yarrow)
- Bc** *Bouteloua curtipendula* (Sideoats grama)
- Cc** *Centaurea cyanus* (Garden cornflower)
- Pv** *Panicum virgatum* ‘Northwind’ (Northwind switchgrass)
- Rs** *Rudbeckia subtomentosa* ‘Henry Eilers’ (Henry Eilers sweet coneflower)
- So** *Sanguisorba officinalis* (Great burnet)
- Ss** *Schizachyrium scaparium* (Little bluestem)

ALAN KARCHNER



Most initiatives to create density, walkability, and activation in places that lack those qualities rely on built form. They introduce laudable elements such as interconnected complete streets and sidewalk-hugging buildings with ground-floor retail and hidden parking. These efforts can yield whole new neighborhoods. Often their architecture is repetitive, and forgettable or worse. And despite the typical inclusion of green space and pedestrian amenities—whether required by code or as a marketing hook—the resulting developments can have as little soul or sense of place as the standard-issue sprawling suburbs they are meant to ameliorate. Perhaps that is exacerbated when, as is often the case, their designs are lax in expressing or responding to surrounding natural conditions. The New Urbanists June Williamson and Ellen Dunham-Jones, who have written extensively on the subject, keep a database of what they termed suburban retrofits. Of 2,000-plus entries, they say,

ABOVE Stepping-stones down to and across the creek beckon irresistibly.



LEFT
Stairs and seating
mimic the flow of water
over the rocks.

Project Credits
CLIENT CITY OF WESTFIELD, INDIANA. **LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT** DAVID RUBIN LAND COLLECTIVE, INDIANAPOLIS. **DESIGN ARCHITECT** HWKN ARCHITECTURE, NEW YORK CITY. **ARCHITECT OF RECORD** RATIO, INDIANAPOLIS. **STRUCTURAL ENGINEER** FINK ROBERTS & PETRIE, INC., INDIANAPOLIS. **FACADE ENGINEER** LAUFS ENGINEERING DESIGN, LONG ISLAND CITY, NEW YORK. **FACADE FABRICATION CONSULTANT** UAP, NEW YORK CITY. **MEP ENGINEER** IMEG CORPORATION, INDIANAPOLIS. **CIVIL ENGINEER** VS ENGINEERING INC., EVANSVILLE, INDIANA. **STREAM RESTORATION** FLATLAND RESOURCES, LLC, MUNCIE, INDIANA. **FOUNTAIN AND ICE RINK** STANTEC, MINNEAPOLIS. **IRRIGATION** LYNCH & ASSOCIATES LTD., ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND. **STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE SYSTEMS** THEATRE PROJECTS, DENVER. **LIGHTING CONSULTANT** TILLET LIGHTING DESIGN ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK CITY. **SIGNAGE AND BRANDING** BRUCE MAU DESIGN, TORONTO. **PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT** ETM ASSOCIATES, LLC, HIGHLAND PARK, NEW JERSEY. **CODE CONSULTANT** RTM CONSULTANTS, INC., INDIANAPOLIS. **SPEC WRITER** WILSON CONSULTING INC., ARDMORE, PENNSYLVANIA.

only 2 percent are regreenings designed to restore ecological function.

It is well documented that new parks can stimulate adjacent growth. Grand Junction Plaza has made a good start at giving Westfield a center. Now under construction, facing the park's north, downtown, side is a mixed-use project, the first such development in Westfield. It will have 30,000 square feet of commercial spaces, more than 200 residential units, and parking at its core that will serve parkgoers as well as tenants. Melody Jones, who is now in real

estate, reports that 1,200 apartments are currently in construction in Westfield. "Everybody wants to live here. One reason is the schools. Another is quality of life, and that goes back to trails and parks." On Grand Junction Plaza's west side, half a dozen existing bungalows have been repurposed as restaurants—some in anticipation, before the park was even built. But besides being an engine of urbanization, this park is also what Rubin calls "a machine, a piece of infrastructure that human beings can occupy." Landscape Urbanism, a theory that presented itself as a nature-centered alternative to New

Urbanism's emphasis on built form, "was on too large a scale, and too esoteric," he says. "And form-based architecture is losing its strength to humanist constructs like this, where form has a place but the objectification of that is not the saving grace. It's no longer appropriate to push infrastructure to our edges. We must live in and with it, and then ensure that it is loved by the citizens so that it will last." ●

JONATHAN LERNER IS THE AUTHOR OF *LILY NARCISSUS* (UNSO-LICITED PRESS) AND IS CURRENTLY AT WORK ON THE MEMOIR *PERFORMANCE ANXIETY, A MID-CENTURY BOYHOOD*.

ALAN KARCHNER