It's a Pale Shadow of a Real, Functioning River

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Abstract
If the River Returns Project were a new design, its greatest weakness—the artificiality of the water system—would be clear. Some critics would decry the ersatz river as a pale shadow of a real, functioning riverine system, while others would complain that the mechanized nature of the park should be revealed, rather than hidden under a thin veneer of "ecological design." As new design, the project would, critically, be dead in the water.

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Perspective
It's a Pale Shadow of a Real, Functioning River

By Heidi Hohmann, ASLA, Iowa State University

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But the River Returns project is not a new design—it's a renovation, one attempting to fix a hundred years of misinformed decision making in an urban park. By this I don't just mean the site's outrageous hydrological problems; somewhere along the line St. Louis also missed Olmsted's harangue about public institutions not belonging in landscape parks. As a result, Forest Park has over the years incorporated in its design a zoo, two museums, a planetarium, an ice rink, an opera house, a fish hatchery, and a golf course, as well as athletic fields ad nauseam.

Though most of these elements have evolved into beloved park features, considered together they make the park a physical and programmatic potpourri. As a result, the landscape has receded from the park's design, becoming merely backdrop for these other institutions. So it's a sound idea to reestablish the river—a landscape—as both an "open space spine" and a real park destination.

To a large degree the idea works. As I drove, half lost, through Forest Park's winding roads on a bleak Sunday morning in November, the new water system rapidly became my navigating device, a highly visible feature I could use to orient myself. Not having seen Forest Park's previously poohmarked condition, I can't judge the degree to which the park has been turned around, but I can say the landscape was a lively place when I visited. Walkers, joggers, bikers, and birdwatchers used the new trails along the river, despite the cold temperatures and leaden skies.

The redesigned river displays multiple personalities along its meandering route. To the east, Bowl and Jefferson Lakes are traditional water features: irregularly shaped fishing ponds situated amid shady lawns. Deer Lake, where a savanna landscape of towering swamp white oaks and expansive grasslands is being restored, is the project's requisite edenzone. Just upstream is the more highly designed Pagoda Circle, where a historic bandstand is situated in a sea of waving grasses, mounded shrubs, and colorful perennials. Though it may eventually blend well with the expansive grasslands of adjacent Deer Lake, Pagoda Circle is currently a little overblown, an almost steroidal composition by Oehme, van Sweden & Associates, an odd hybrid of Victorian carpet bedding and a contemporary prairie school aesthetic. In contrast is the more naturalistic Post-Dispatch Lake farther upstream. Nestled along its banks is the new boathouse, a seemingly burgeoning profit center, its restaurant jam-packed with Sunday brunchers.

The western end of the river—its ostensible headwaters—is dominated by the Grand Basin, a huge Beaux-Arts style pool and promenade that define an axis between the art museum and the golf course. It's a monumental space lined with walls and balustrades of cast stone, all classically proportioned, beautifully detailed, and solidly constructed. But the space feels more melancholic than exuberant, because the (re)construction of such an expansive, opulent, and optimistic landscape seems somehow false and out of step with today's skeptical, postindustrial, twenty-first-century society. In other words, I'm not really sure what the design of the Grand Basin means in contemporary culture. Is it a restoration that pays homage to the past? Or is it a reconstruction that expresses our yearning for something no longer attainable?

Such questions might equally apply to the rest of the River Returns project, because the tension between the past and the present is not just located at the Grand Basin. It is also found in the master plan's desire to "return," if in name only, the long lost River des Peres, and to "restore," if in small patches only, the pre-settlement savanna landscape. These are admirable goals, but do these restorations—ecological or historical—evolve feelings and ideas that are truly meaningful and relevant today? Or are they simply artificial voices from an imaginary past? Overall, this project makes me wonder if renovation and repair of a landscape must be synonymous with restoration. Or can we see a way to bring nineteenth-century parks into the twenty-first century—without looking backwards?