Rodney Cook Sr. Peace Park (Cook Park) is a 16-acre park that was designed to alleviate flooding and address the storm damage that occurred in the neighborhood in 2002. Recognizing the neighborhood’s important history from the civil rights era, the park is a vibrant open space that represents a shared vision between residents and local leaders to renew an unused and vacant space.

Owner: The City of Atlanta Department of Parks & Recreation

Designers: HDR; Freese & Nichols

Additional team members: Trust for Public Land; the City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management; Astra Group Inc.

Size: 16 acres (6.5 ha)

Cover: Cook Park transforms the historic neighborhood of Vine City and is centrally located minutes from downtown Atlanta. (Trust for Public Land)
Park Overview

Cook Park is a 16-acre green space located in Atlanta, Georgia. A defining feature of the park is its innovative green infrastructure, which efficiently protects the neighborhood from flooding and creates a welcoming urban oasis for the residents of Vine City, a historic neighborhood located just west of downtown Atlanta.

In its heyday, Vine City was a center for activism and leadership during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, but the neighborhood declined after decades of disinvestment, poverty, crime, and racist land use policies. Topography is also a major challenge for Vine City, which lies on low ground along Proctor Creek and is therefore prone to flooding during heavy rains.

In September 2002, storm surges overwhelmed the neighborhood’s sewer system, flooding dozens of homes and displacing hundreds of residents. With most houses damaged beyond repair, city leaders decided that the cost to rebuild and the risk of future flooding were too great. The city of Atlanta razed 60 properties within the neighborhood and relocated residents through a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) buyout program, but the land sat undeveloped for more than a decade.

In the years following the flood, a coordinated partnership among Vine City residents, the city of Atlanta, and the Trust for Public Land created a vision for the site that would address flood risk while providing much-needed green space and community amenities. The centerpiece pond and surrounding water features can capture and store up to 10 million gallons of stormwater, protecting the surrounding neighborhood from flooding. Today the park is a hub of activity, with curved walking paths sweeping over and around the water features, a playground, a splash pad, a basketball court, and an expansive lawn for a variety of activities.
Social Equity and Community Engagement

Dozens of meetings, events, and in-depth conversations with residents helped identify community needs and priorities over the multiyear planning process. In 2018, a dedicated effort to engage neighborhood youth in the park’s redevelopment resulted in two custom climbing boulder installations, made possible by a partnership with The North Face outdoor apparel and gear company. The Trust for Public Land and city government worked hard to center residents’ voices in the planning process to ensure that the park met community needs.

Given the sizable public investment, the city and neighborhood groups acknowledged that displacement and gentrification could occur in Vine City. By preparing for this possibility from the start of the planning process, organizations like Westside Future Fund had an opportunity to launch programs that would make it possible for longtime residents to stay in the neighborhood. One such program is the Mortgage Assistance Program, which helps residents pay the increase in property taxes that may start occurring when property values increase. Westside Future Fund and other organizations have also been purchasing properties for housing to retain affordability and mitigate displacement.

The splash pad provides welcome relief during hot Atlanta summers. (Trust for Public Land)
Sustainability and Resilience

While flooding has been an issue for decades in Vine City, rain events have increased in frequency and intensity due to climate change. Without swift action to protect the neighborhood, residents would have likely continued to experience property damage at the same level or worse than the 2002 disaster.

Repeated flooding not only damages properties but also can lead to respiratory issues for residents due to increased mold and mildew. These compounding challenges have contributed to disparities in health outcomes and limited economic growth for the community. This is one of the reasons the park’s engineering team created a strategy for the 150-acre watershed surrounding the park, representing thousands of westside residents who can benefit from a better stormwater management system.

Now, the bioretention ponds, wetlands, and planters absorb and filter water from the broader drainage area to reduce peak loads that would normally strain the sewer system. In addition to mitigating the negative impacts of stormwater, the park provides relief from the urban heat island effect with green space, native plants, and shade trees. Combined, these benefits create much-needed social infrastructure for a healthier and more resilient community.

Funding

A combination of public and philanthropic funds supported the development of Cook Park, which cost nearly $40 million. Atlanta’s Department of Watershed Management provided funding for Cook Park’s innovative network of green infrastructure designed to reduce flooding in the historic neighborhood. The Trust for Public Land provided philanthropic support from the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation and other donors to fund the project’s community engagement, design, and construction of multiuse sports courts, splash pad, playground, walking trails, and other park amenities.

The combined effort resulted in a unique destination that delivers a host of environmental and community benefits to the neighborhood. By making this important investment in the community, the city will achieve long-term cost savings by lowering park maintenance costs, improving downstream water quality, and preventing future stormwater damage for the residents of Vine City.