2011 ASLA Design Awards

Babi Yar Park
Merit Award
Mundus Bishop Design, Inc. / Denver Parks and Recreation / Satura Nishita

Design over $500,000 Construction Budget
**Project Fact Sheet – Category 1A Design**

**Project Name:** Babi Yar Park

**Project Location:** Yale Avenue and Havana Street in southwest Denver, Colorado (within City & County of Denver)

**Project Summary:** Babi Yar Park is a place of remembrance and commemoration—a living memorial dedicated to those who have experienced mankind’s atrocities, and for those who protest such actions. The completion of Babi Yar Park transforms it into a world-class public place that is a profoundly sacred ground of remembrance, hope, and protest against acts against humanity. The park's sculptural landforms, memorial spaces, and journey along the Star of David Path allows Babi Yar Park to fulfill its decades-old mission as a place of refuge and promise, while engendering a call to action.

**Purpose of Project:** The purpose of the project was to transform a dilapidated 26-acre public park into a place of local, national, and international significance that would fulfill its original mission as a living commemorative place. This new public place needed to integrate important individual memorials already in place, and provide a comprehensive park experience to serve as a refuge for all. As a local park, Babi Yar Park needed to serve the neighborhood. As a destination park, set along busy arterials and adjacent to residential neighborhoods, Babi Yar Park needed an internal focus.

The idea of Babi Yar Park was conceived in the early 1970s as an act to create a living place that would commemorate those lost to atrocities in the Ukrainian capitol of Kiev, Russia in 1941 during WWII, and to raise awareness so that these atrocities would never occur again. A small group formed the Babi Yar Foundation in the 1970s, and worked with city officials to appropriate acreage to build a public park. In 1972, the Foundation, city, and Elie Weisel dedicated a parcel of undeveloped land in southwest Denver for future park development. Babi Yar Park was partially built in 1982 as three memorials and entry stones designed by Satura Nishita, FASLA. Aside from regular maintenance, some repair and tree replacements, the park languished in the years that followed.

The project began as a park master plan, and was completed through two construction phases occurring over a four year period. The philosophy of creating a living place of remembrance and commemoration is realized and expressed through the following design features.

- A cohesive park composition provides a contrast, and a dialogue, between the series of man-made spaces and the restored native short-grass prairie, all connected by a central path designed as the Star of David;
- An individualistic new setting for each memorial is created, and they all share a vocabulary of enclosure created through topography and walls; and a vocabulary of materials (concrete, granite, crusher fines, and native ornamental plantings);
- Each new space now reflects each memorial’s intent—an entry landscape of sculpted berms and terrace at Monument Terrace where the journey begins; new terraces at the People’s Place and Grove of Remembrance; and new terraces and sculptural forms at the Wooden Bridge;
- A new Star of David Path, set low in the prairie landscape, connects all memorials along an accessible path, and adds three new terraces at other points of the star, two of which are overlooks to the Rocky Mountains;
- Sculpting, planting, and seeding creates a native short-grass prairie as the prime park landscape;
- A new sculptural landform and low native grasses at the Ravine at the Wooden Bridge pays homage to the austerity of its namesake Ukrainian ravine. The remainder is stabilized with mature trees and wetlands;
- A sense of healing and promise is combined with sustainability. Pervious paving, minimal hardscape, water conserving irrigation system and water feature, integrated water quality and storm water facilities, and extensive use of native vegetation are characteristics of the park—not add-ons.

**Construction Budget:** $4,025,000 accomplished in two phases, preceded by the park master plan
Role of Landscape Architect / entrant and others: The landscape architect served as prime consultant for all project phases from master planning through final design, and through two phases of construction. The landscape architect served as lead designer: designing all topography, drainage, planting / prairie restoration, features such as walls, paving and curbs, and repair of memorials and water features. The landscape architect was responsible for project management, public facilitation, and collaboration with the client team. The project team included engineering for civil, structural, irrigation, and water features.

The client team was an integral part of the design process and included city staff, Babi Yar Foundation (including founding members), and a stakeholder group that guided the master planning process. Stakeholders included representatives from adjacent neighborhoods, local businesses, city council, Mizel Museum (who sponsor programs in the park), and city agencies such as Arts and Venues, Parks and Recreation, and Public Works.

Special Factors:

Creating meaning: Memorials were in place in Babi Yar Park, but a cohesive and meaningful design expression was needed to elevate these into a place of significance to tell the original story and to make Babi Yar Park relevant for today and into the future. The new park design does just this. No one will forget Babi Yar, where in a murderous Nazi rage, abetted through complicity of Ukrainian officials, between 100,000 and 200,000 men, women and children were brutally cut down "as people they knew so well, people just like themselves...like you and me...did nothing, said nothing...as they were herded through the streets." After being ordered to strip at the ravine’s edge and piling their clothes into orderly bundles, they were methodically machine-gunned and thrown, some still half alive, into the now infamous ravine. The ravine was filled with dirt. Time passed without even one marker to signify that “here lay a people.” Babi Yar Park is a reminder of this, and the new park is a place for today and into the future.

New design in an unfinished place: Sometimes our role as landscape architects is to finish another’s thought. For Babi Yar Park, the challenge was to be as powerful and thoughtful as the original. Artist Satura Nishita was a partner in Lawrence Halprin’s firm when he created the park’s three memorials and entry stones. While the power of each is lasting, the lack of a setting diminished their presence, and the lack of a park composition diminished their meaning. The new Babi Yar Park is a compelling expression that elevates the original intent. Just as importantly, the new park is a meaningful journey for those who visit for a contemplative experience as well as for those who enjoy this great place for a walk, picnic, respite or family outing.

Balance of use with collaboration: After 1982, work at Babi Yar Park was primarily routine maintenance, and the park languished in an uninviting landscape. Gravel for parking, walks or entry stones were indistinguishable; rambling dirt paths were the only choice; memorials were deteriorating; and the site was unruly and weedy. To fulfill the Babi Yar Park Foundation’s goals, the new park design is an exemplary place of remembrance. However, this new park is much more. It is a lasting experience for all, neighbors as well as international visitors.

A new sustainable prairie landscape: With grazing halted in 1982, the site’s sandy loam soils began to regenerate. The new park design expands this by reusing stockpiled topsoil for seed sources, creating new seed mixes (xeric, mesic and xeric shady) for specific conditions, and installing native ornamental plantings. Pervious paving minimizes run-off and is used throughout the park: gravel for main walks and parking, and granite sets for terraces. Storm water is directed to low points and dissipated (concrete level spreaders are used) across the landscape to clean and slow water before entering the Ravine. The Ravine’s channel is restored, and mature trees, riparian species and wetlands are retained.

Significance: Babi Yar Park is an evocative expression of place and meaning. This is what we strive for as landscape architects—to create meaningful experiences that connect people with the land. Babi Yar Park is this—a composition of topography, native prairie, and park spaces sculpted into a place that engages us so we remember these atrocities and those impacted by them; and find ways to move toward hope and promise for the future and for humanity.