

A Stormwater Problem Becomes a Health Equity Opportunity

The initial plan was to solve a chronic flooding problem through a traditional solution: acquiring numerous local residential properties and tearing them down to build an enormous stormwater detention basin. But when a team of landscape architects became involved, a new plan emerged to go beyond addressing the flooding to also avoid resident displacement, create vibrant spaces and address health and health equity issues across a large swath of Denver.

The Platte to Park Hill stormwater system became a \$298 million project that stretched through a range of neighborhoods in the central part of the city—many of them low income and previously lacking access to healthy features like parks and active transportation. As the landscape architecture firm brought on for preliminary design and to help facilitate public involvement,

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- Meredith Wenskoski, Livable Cities Studio

Denver's Livable Cities Studio had the perspective and the experience to transform the initial thinking on the project. Instead of seeing stormwater management as a problem to deal with, the firm wanted to create an opportunity—not only to mitigate the flooding, but to enhance public health, safety and welfare.

“Although conversations with the project team could be slow, and even frustrating, at times, the paradigm began to shift as we continued to talk through ways to manage the flooding while

benefiting the entire community,” says Meredith Wenskoski, ASLA, president and owner of Livable Cities Studio. The project was guided by resident input throughout and as it began to take shape, further conversations with professionals from a range of disciplines helped drive its continuing evolution. In the end, the team created a mile-long, 12-acre greenway to collect and convey stormwater to the South Platte River.

Neighborhood health and well-being were enhanced with the creation of open spaces, like nature play areas, public plazas and open lawn areas, where there had been none. The greenway also partially abuts 39th Avenue, which became the first pedestrian-bicycle-motorist shared street in Denver, slowing traffic and encouraging walking and biking.



Explains Wenskoski, “The Platte to Park Hill project really demonstrates that pretty much anything is achievable when you start a dialogue among the community and the built environment professionals who serve them—and stretch your thinking toward endless possibilities.”



Conversation guide

Projects and initiatives related to health and health equity in the built environment often start with a conversation between individuals or among small groups. It may be a formal convening led by a foundation or city agency, a workshop at a convention or even coffee between colleagues.

The Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities is engaged in a year-long effort to spur these conversations among our members and beyond. We've compiled stories about discussions that have led to healthy solutions at the community, regional and state levels.

Here are the questions they asked in Denver →



WHO'S COME TO THE TABLE SO FAR

- City and County of Denver
- Community stakeholders: general public, property and business owners, advocacy groups (Historic Denver, Bicycle Colorado, Walk Denver), and registered neighborhood organizations
- DHM Design (landscape architecture and planning)
- Felsburg Holt & Ullevig
- GBSM (public affairs)
- Livable Cities Studio
- Matrix Design Group (engineering)
- Mile High Flood District
- SEMA Construction, Inc.

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

To manage chronic flooding in a string of neighborhoods, the city of Denver was planning to build a massive stormwater detention basin. When landscape architects from Denver's Livable Cities Studio joined the project, they broadened the thinking with questions like:

- How can we use this much-needed infrastructure project as an opportunity to enhance community vibrancy, health and well-being?
- What design solutions may be available to bring health and health equity to the forefront?
- How can we involve community members from the many neighborhoods along the project's path, meet their unique and varied needs and ensure we are not displacing current residents?

2. BUILDING OUT THE CONVERSATION

As the planning for the project progressed, an array of different perspectives came to the table, from engineers and designers to the general public and others, raising new questions and considerations:

- How can we act as a team of conveners to bring together a range of perspectives and needs?
- What can additional parties bring to the table that's not already here?
- How can we continue to prioritize community voices as other partners come on board?

3. CLOSING THE LOOP

Moving through the planning process, other questions included:

- Have we considered a range of solutions that go beyond the obvious?
- How do we integrate the revitalized areas of the project into the city as a whole?
- What co-benefits can be achieved by looking beyond the bounds of our project into the surrounding urban infrastructure?