

Eye on Evanston: Thoughts on Design | Jim Gamble: A founding member of Design Evanston

by [Tom Hofmaier, Design Evanston](#) February 14th, 2023

In 1980, Design Evanston came into being when a group of designers working or living in Evanston started to meet regularly to discuss how, as professionals, they could assist in maintaining quality design in Evanston, particularly in the downtown area which was undergoing a surge of new building.



Jim Gamble. Credit: Alison C. Gamble

Among that original group of concerned professionals who became the founders of Design Evanston was Jim Gamble.

Jim came to Evanston in 1972 after graduating from the Landscape Architecture program of the University of Michigan in 1968 and working four years as a landscape architect in Ohio. His arrival in our town began his long association with our city, continuing to this day, as a resident, designer, planner and active advocate for good public area design in Evanston.

Jim's first professional position in Evanston was with the distinguished firm of Barton-Aschman Associates, where he gained experience in planning and urban streetscape design, working with Charles Mosher, another talented landscape architect, and Jim Bates, who led the firm's civil engineering practice.

Jim worked on projects throughout the country, including a major planned use development and streetscape project at Cedar Riverside in Minneapolis. Additionally, he worked on other firm projects, including streetscapes, parks and urban design assignments throughout the country, many with mass transit functions. In small to midsize communities such as Burlington, Iowa; Rock Island, Illinois; Marquette, Michigan; St. Joseph, Michigan; and Council Bluffs, Iowa, central business district revitalization was the focus of the projects. Larger projects in Evanston; Houston; Spokane, Washington;

and Seattle included significant mass transit facilities for bus service and, in some locations, light rail transit.

In 1983, Jim moved to another major planning and design firm in Evanston, Teska Associates. There he served as vice president of design before, in 1986, moving on to open Land Design Collaborative, a partnership with prominent Illinois landscape architect Robert Zolomij.

Together, the partners' commissions were concentrated in Evanston and the Midwest. Some projects, especially the firm's zoological garden designs, were implemented nationwide. The range of the firm's work included urban design, park and campus master planning, multiunit residential land planning, playground design, urban design including plazas and gateways, bikeways, and wayfinding for secondary pedestrian circulation systems.

Working together, Jim and his partner played a significant role in bringing about the Illinois Landscape Architecture Licensing Act in 1989. Jim also served on the Illinois Landscape Architecture Registration Board, and both partners served terms as president of the Illinois Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

As a founding member of Design Evanston, Jim Gamble participated in its programs of community involvement such as reviews of proposed building projects. These reviews provided developers with professional insight that went beyond code or zoning compliance to offer suggestions for enhancing the designs of proposed buildings, including the functional and visual integration into their surroundings.

In the same vein as Design Evanston's community activism, Jim participated in pro-bono design consultations with business owners to improve signage and building street appearance. Jim also played an integral part in developing the Design Evanston Awards program, which recognizes exceptional local projects and provides awards to the owners of those buildings for supporting good design in Evanston.

Following are examples of public planning and design projects Jim created for Evanston in his 50-year career.

Downtown Evanston streetscape revitalization



Downtown planting program. Credit: Jim Gamble



Downtown planting program. Credit: Jim Gamble

In 1992, Land Design Collaborative and three other Evanston design firms were engaged by Evmark and the City of Evanston as the designers for the revitalization of 92 block faces in downtown Evanston.

The project goal was to improve the appearance and function of the central business area. The resulting design work provided a comprehensive master plan addressing vehicular and pedestrian access.

Basic to the plan was a breakdown of the central business district into different “character” areas and defining them with distinct design styles for each of the areas. Public art, as a means to improve wayfinding, was incorporated through the use of custom-designed pavers by artist David Csicsko for each of the designated unique locations of the central business district.

Additionally, the downtown was further upgraded by the planting of new and more trees, the incorporation of Tallmadge streetlights, new signage, and the redesign of curbs and crosswalks. This upgrade increased parking and improved pedestrian safety.

Downtown transportation center



Evanston Transportation Center overview. Credit: Jim Gamble

In 1987, Jim led in the planning for the Evanston Transportation Center on the north side of Davis Street between the CTA and Metra train lines. The transportation center plan included a future building site on Church Street between the Metra and CTA lines as well as a new plaza entered from Davis Street with a drop-off loop for taxis and “kiss and ride” cars. The new CTA station on Benson Avenue was enhanced as a transit center by the creation of a new and larger bus stop at street level.



Benson Avenue and the Davis Street CTA station. Credit: Jim Gamble



Benson Avenue CTA bus drop-off. Credit: Jim Gamble

Also downtown, when a new bridge on the CTA line was planned for Clark Street, Jim Gamble consulted with the bridge engineers to set the appearance of the new bridge. This resulted in a clean, simple appearance overall, with curved abutments that function as planters on both sides of the bridge, which was built in 1995.



CTA underpass at Clark Street. Credit: Jim Gamble



Abutment planters at Clark Street underpass. Credit: Tom Hofmaier

Oldberg Park and the *Duna* Sculpture

As part of the downtown upgrade Clark Street's Oldberg Park was enhanced with new walkways, plantings and a sculpture dedicated in 1988. Jim and his wife Donna, acting as executors for the estate of Catherine Stallings, gave the City of Evanston a sculpture titled *Duna* in memory of Ms. Stallings. Created by artist Debora Butterfield, the sculpture has since enhanced the park and the walkway passing through it, connecting Northwestern and downtown Evanston.



"Duna" in Oldberg Park. Credit: Jim Gamble

Lakefront parks

During the 1980s and 1990s, Jim led the city's lakefront park design initiative for the revitalization of the Evanston lakefront parks, which were being devastated by Dutch Elm disease leading to the removal of many mature elms. Working with City Forester Fred Gulen, he created a reforestation plan that strategically installed a variety of large native species shade trees to fill in the forest canopy over the years as the elms died out. Jim's Lakefront Parks Master Plan also included improvements to the open meadow/picnic areas, pedestrian walks, cycling paths, boating ramp and beach areas that still exist today.



Events staged at the repaired and upgraded lagoon in Dawes Park, now named the Arrington Lakefront Lagoon in honor of the late W. Russell Arrington, a former state senator. Credit: Jim Gamble

At the core of his lakefront park design was the rehabilitation of the lagoon in Dawes Park (before the Arrington upgrades) which involved replacing the lagoon's wooden side boards with stone perimeter walls and paving the bottom of the lagoon.

A handicap access ramp was concealed within new walls extending from the original stone stairway and a small plaza was created at the base of the stairs for performing groups. Repair of the original waterfall and provision for ice skating was also accomplished. Relocation of the access drive to the north side of the park building allowed for a safe connection between the lagoon and the shelter concession/warming house.

Jim was significantly involved in the successful effort to retain and restore the original park building at the lagoon, thereby keeping the historic quality and character of this location.

Green Bay Road streetscape

North of downtown, along Green Bay Road in 1992 Jim designed a very significant streetscape along the embankment of the Metra rail line extending from Simpson Street north to the border with Wilmette.



Green Bay Road streetscape at Evanston gateway at Isabella Street. Credit: Jim Gamble



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The improvements included large ungrouted limestone block retaining walls. Patterns ranged from randomly placed stones replicating a quarry ledge to more regularly stacked staggered joint stone walls. Near the bottom of the embankment, trees were planted regularly along the road, and the remainder of the sloped embankment was covered with native plants chosen to reduce maintenance and give the embankment a more natural appearance.

The east embankment landscape and stair along Green Bay Road between Central and Lincoln streets was also designed by Land Design Collaborative as consultants to Metra's engineers. The curving stair down to Lincoln Street resolved the steep slope, which visually integrated them with the remainder of the streetscape design along Green Bay.



Metra platform stairway at Lincoln Street. Credit: Jim Gamble



Planted streetscape at Green Bay Road. Credit: Jim Gamble

Community design activism

Throughout Jim Gamble's time in Evanston, in addition to his Design Evanston participation he has maintained a landscape architecture practice while remaining publicly active in other areas related to design in Evanston.

Jim was a founding member and first president of an organization called Keep Evanston Beautiful that spearheaded the drive that led to establishing Evanston's recycling program.

Jim also served on the Evanston Public Art Committee, a subcommittee of the Evanston Arts Council, where he assisted in establishing the "Percent for Art" program. That program has led to the placement of many works of public art, including the Richard Hunt sculpture at the Evanston Public Library.

Design Evanston's "Eye on Evanston" articles focus on Evanston's design history and advocate for good design in our city. Visit designevanston.org to learn more about the organization.

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