

BBAR 11st Street Bridge Park

Washington D.C.

Expected completion by 2023

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Rendering by OMA

Abstract and Keywords

bridge; park; community engagement; inclusive development; partnerships

The 11st Street Bridge Park replaces an old bridge that spans the Anacostia River in Washington D.C., linking Capitol Hill (an upscale, predominately white neighborhood) with Anacostia (a historically African-American, low-income neighborhood). The project is managed by Building Bridges Across the River (BBAR) and designed by OMA and OLIN, and it is expected to start construction in 2021 and be completed in 2023. Running parallel to a car bridge, the park bridge shape forms an “X,” at the ends of which are waterfalls from the top to bottom level. The park will feature art and performance art spaces, community gardens, and plazas with green spaces.

With extensive community engagement that preempted the design process through an Equitable Development Plan, the Park aspires to not become another instance of green gentrification like the NYC Highline. The project started early by going to the community – visiting their homes and joining civic association meetings – to listen. The resulting Plan responds to the community’s concerns, needs, and wants through a variety of proposals and partnerships to “ensure that the park is a driver of inclusive development,”¹ bringing together workforce development, housing, arts and culture, and small business enterprises. The timing of the project is particularly important in order to anticipate gentrification of greening; however, Building Bridges’ work with the Douglass Community Land Trust may not be sufficient to mitigate displacement.

Philosophy/Mission/Values

Building Bridges Across the River (BBAR or Building Bridges) operates as a non-profit organization in Southeast DC since 1997 that works through partnerships, managing and leading programming at THEARC, THEARC Theater, THEARC Farms, Skyland Workforce Center, and the 11th Street Bridge Park. Their vision is “a future in which the residents East of the Anacostia River experience vital, thriving communities characterized by social, cultural, economic and racial equity.”²

The 11th Street Bridge project began with community meetings in 2011; Building Bridges started raising money for the park in 2013, when they also hired their first full-time paid employee, Scott Kratz. Reactions from the Anacostia side of the river ranged from fear of gentrifying effects to skepticism of the promise of investment in their neighborhood. Anacostia activist Brenda Richardson commented that “it symbolized, ‘the white people are coming and we’re going to get displaced.’”³ Another resident expressed skepticism: “This mythical bridge park, this is never going to happen. We’ve seen so many promises made to our community that

¹ Building Bridges Across the River, “11th Street Bridge Park’s Equitable Development Plan,” 2018, 5.

² “Our Organization,” accessed April 22, 2021, <https://bbardc.org/our-organization/>.

³ Laurie Mazur, “Can a Park Prevent Gentrification?,” Next City, February 10, 2021, <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/can-a-park-prevent-gentrification>.

have been broken.”⁴ Harriet Tregoning, then the DC Director of Planning, and Scott Katz, who now serves as director of the Bridge Park, held over 200 meetings in the first two years of the project, meeting people at official events and visiting their homes, to listen to the community.

From this engagement, Building Bridges arrived at four goals for the Bridge Park to address economic, social, environmental, and health disparities,⁵ which determined the park competition design principles, values, and facilities description.⁶ Building off of these goals and further community meetings, BBAR created with residents, local and national experts, and community leaders an Equitable Development Plan that directs equitable investment: \$55 million into the community in preparation for the park (almost as much as the construction of the park itself) and \$10 million reserved for operations once the park is opened. The Equitable Development Plan has four elements of commitment to driving and serving as a model for inclusive development: housing, workforce development, small business enterprises, and arts and culture. BBAR seeks to accomplish these goals through partnerships, preparatory investment, and programming, as will be discussed in the following sections.

workforce development

The 11th Street Bridge Park will prioritize the hiring of neighborhood residents for job opportunities on the Bridge Park.

- 1 Ensure that neighboring residents in Wards 6, 7 and 8, as well as hard-to-employ District residents are prioritized in the application process and hired for construction and post-construction jobs on the Bridge Park.
- 3 Advocate for equitable distribution of grants and educational programs that support capacity building, including partnerships, internships, and technical assistance within the Bridge Park's surrounding neighborhoods.
- 4 Support and facilitate programming at the Bridge Park that builds the capacity of local artists, especially emerging artists and youth.

housing

11th Street Bridge Park is committed to working with partners and stakeholders to ensure that existing residents surrounding the Bridge Park can continue to afford to live in their neighborhood once the park is built, and that affordable homeownership and rental opportunities exist nearby.

- 1 Collect, organize and disseminate resources and information regarding housing opportunities to residents in the Bridge Park's surrounding neighborhoods.
- 2 Work with city agencies and existing non-profits on strategies to preserve existing affordable housing (rental and ownership) and leverage existing public and private resources to build new affordable housing near the Bridge Park.
- 3 Engage and participate in partnerships with those in the housing community to support and advocate for policies that preserve existing affordable housing and spur the creation of new affordable units within the Bridge Park's surrounding neighborhoods.

small business enterprises

The 11th Street Bridge Park is committed to supporting new and existing local small businesses surrounding the Bridge Park both directly and through partnerships with economic development organizations and others.

- 1 Support and nurture a thriving network of small businesses that operate on the Bridge Park following construction.
- 2 Leverage the 11th Street Bridge Park to build and sustain small businesses in the surrounding community.
- 3 Ensure the Bridge Park is deeply connected to business corridors on both sides of the Anacostia River.

arts + culture

The 11th Street Bridge Park will serve as a platform to celebrate the history and culture of communities on both sides of the Anacostia River and in particular, to amplify the stories, culture and heritage of neighboring African American residents.

- 1 Create an information hub that communicates information about events and programming, occurring both at the park and in the surrounding neighborhoods, with nearby residents and visitors.
- 2 Ensure that programming on the Bridge Park is affordable and accessible to all visitors, especially existing residents.
- 3 Ensure that design of the Bridge Park includes a variety of spaces that support a range of informal, formal and temporary uses.
- 4 Prioritize programming at the Bridge Park that fosters collaboration with residents, local organizations, artists (of all disciplines - visual, performing and literary) and humanists in the surrounding neighborhoods, especially programs that amplify narratives and voices of black residents.

a community-driven planning process

Working collaboratively with community members and stakeholders, government officials, business owners and policy experts, the Bridge Park is committed to changing the narrative of how development typically takes place. It is well known that the construction of signature public parks can significantly change land values and uses in surrounding areas. Indeed, a recent HR&A economic impact study found that property values in comparable park developments increased by 5 to 40 percent. The goal of the Bridge Park's Equitable Development Plan is to ensure that the park is a driver of inclusive development—development that provides opportunities for all residents regardless of income and demography. By following a community-driven and vetted process, it is our hope that other cities can look to the Bridge Park as a prime example of how the public and private sectors can invest in and create world-class public space in an equitable manner.

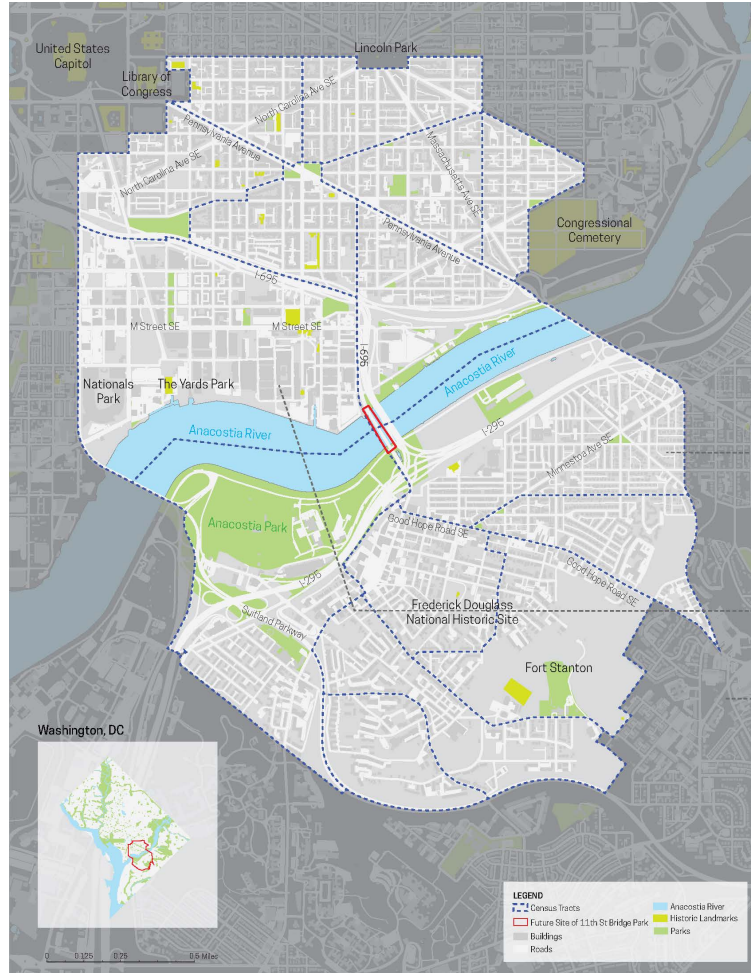
Equitable Development Plan (2018)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Bridging DC,” accessed April 22, 2021, <https://bbardc.org/bridging-dc/>.

⁶ Competition brief available at: https://bbardc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Bridge-Park-Principles_.pdf

Size of Community, Scale and Geographic Focus



Equitable Development Plan (2018)

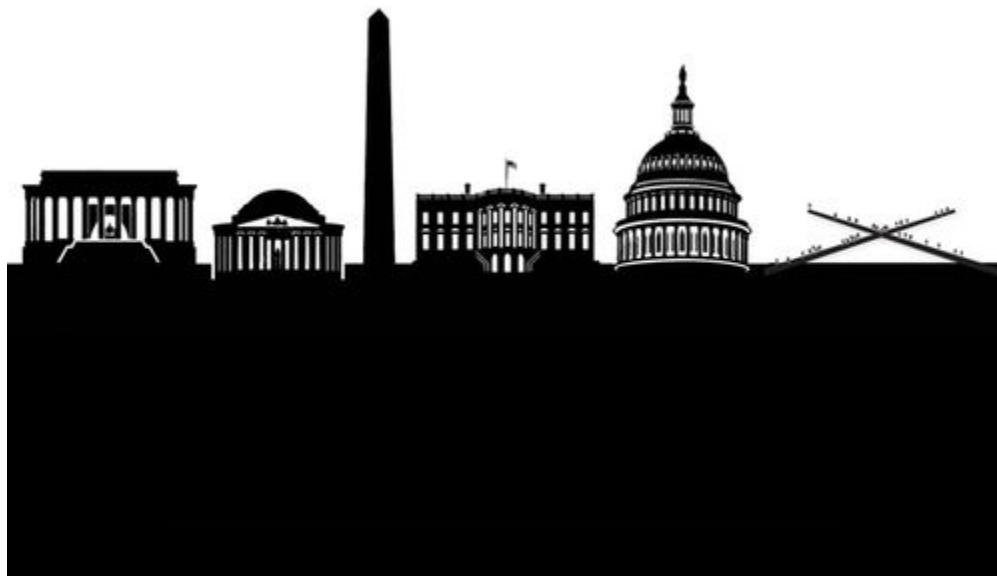
The Bridge Park itself spans the Anacostia River, reusing the piers of the old 11th St Bridge, between the Capitol Hill neighborhood (Ward 8) west of the river and the Anacostia neighborhood (Wards 7 and 8) east of the river. Both neighborhoods host populations of approximately 23,000 people; however, the demographics reveal systematic disinvestment on the Anacostia side of the river. 92.4% of the residents of Anacostia are Black, non-Hispanic compared to 23.4% of Capitol Hill. Unemployment reaches almost 16% east of the river, compared to only 5% to the west, where the median value of owner-occupied housing is also more than double that of Anacostia. East of the river, 75% of residents are renters, which means that they are particularly in danger of displacement due to gentrification.

Planning the Bridge Park primarily engaged residents of the two bordering neighborhoods, and particularly residents of Anacostia, where Building Bridges operates and where the gentrifying effects of the park are expected to impact. Visitors to the park will be able to access it from the Anacostia River Trail on both sides of the river, from Anacostia Park and

the US Navy Yard. The Park will also connect to the pedestrian walkway across the new 11th Street Bridge and be serviced by major bus routes.⁷

The scope of the project does not stop of the end of the bridge, but also the business districts that flank each end. Part of the goal of the project is to literally bridge the two neighborhoods of Anacostia and Capitol Hill; by investing in small businesses at the nodes of the bridge, BBAR hopes to entices residents to cross the bridge (a significant feat at a length equivalent to three football fields) and explore and invest in each other's neighborhoods.

While the planning process has mostly engaged the neighboring residents, both planners and designers have grander aspirations. Building Bridges hopes for the park to serve as a model and symbol for a community-driven planning and greening project at an urban scale. OMA, the architect, hopes the project will become a global icon and must-see tourist destination in DC, as is idealized in their drawing below where the 11st Street Bridge Park is positioned as part of the DC skyline as the latest in a string of grand outlines including the Capitol, White House, and Washington Monument.



Drawing by OMA

⁷ “Bridge Park FAQs,” accessed April 22, 2021, <https://bbardc.org/bridge-park-faqs/>.

Timeline

Building Bridges Across the River (BBAR) incorporated as 501-c-3 nonprofit organization

1997

Building Bridges opens the Town Hall Education Arts & Recreation Campus (**THEARC**) - a 203,000 square foot community center in Anacostia

2005

Design competition announced; **OMA and OLIN** selected for their design "Anacostia Crossing"

Over 200 design charrettes and community meetings with residents, church leaders, business owners, and city government officials

11th Street Bridge Park's **Equitable Development Plan** created

2014

2011

Douglass Community Land Trust Advisory Committee formed, with seed funding from BBAR and City First Homes (CFH)

2017

Building Bridges launches **Skyland Workforce Center** to support industry training programs and job search assistance

2018

Projected start of construction

Projected project completion

2019

2021

2023

Current status:
construction not yet started, funding on hold from DC government

Organization and Operation

Once the park opens, it will be owned by the DC city government, managed by Building Bridges, and operated by local non-profits, specific to each programming space. The planning process began with meetings with residents, artists, and business owners. BBAR engaged with the community by meeting people where they were, even going to their homes, and showed that they were listening by implementing their “low-hanging fruit” suggestions. Some community meetings were organized as design charettes with members of neighborhoods at each end of the bridge, where residents talked and drew together, and even involved digital renderings quickly enacted by architects at the meeting to mock up design ideas as they talked.⁸ The meetings were also coordinated with other activities held by BBAR, such as murals and community garden planting.

As a result of the planning process and the Equitable Development Plan, Building Bridges formed a number of partnerships and programs, two major ones being the Skyland Workforce Center and the Douglass Community Land Trust. The Skyland Workforce Center was started in 2019 to support employment opportunities for Anacostia residents in conjunction with the bridge project, working to ensure that local workers will be highly qualified and first in line for construction jobs related to the park, as well as offering workshops and job search resources in general. The Douglass Community Land Trust formed in 2017 in response to fears of displacement caused by green gentrification due to the park. The Trust already maintains over 200 units of affordable housing⁹ with goals to reach 750 units in ten years,¹⁰ and it maintains two thirds of its Board as community members.

Programs

Primary park features were identified by local residents through a years-long engagement process – over 1000 meetings to discuss larger goals as well as specifics like opening hours.¹¹ The main programming includes:

- Environmental education center
- Amphitheater
- Kayak/canoe launch
- Urban agriculture
- Café
- Play space



⁸ “Design Process,” accessed April 22, 2021, <https://bbardc.org/design-process/>.

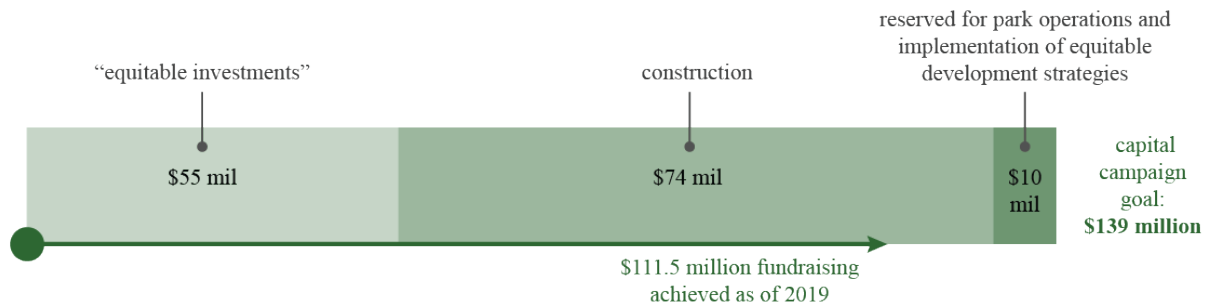
⁹ Laurie Mazur, “Can a Park Prevent Gentrification?,” Next City, February 10, 2021, <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/can-a-park-prevent-gentrification>.

¹⁰ Jake Maher, “11th Street Bridge Park Closes in on Capital Fundraising Goal,” TheDCLine.Org (blog), August 2, 2019, <https://thedcline.org/2019/08/02/11th-street-bridge-park-closes-in-on-capital-fundraising-goal/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

The park will also include a hammock grove, rain gardens, picnic garden, and overlooks.

Financing and Resources



Building Bridges started out in 2013 requesting \$30 million in investment for this project, but has since launched a capital campaign for \$139 million. They estimate \$74 million for construction costs¹² and have allocated \$55 million for “equitable investments” (a vague term presumably referring to the community work done by BBAR in the planning process) and \$10 million reserved for park operations and implementation of equitable development strategies once the park opens.¹³ BBAR has raised money through corporations and foundations, such as a recent \$5 million gift from Exelon for the Environmental Education Center which will be named after the company, managed by the Anacostia Watershed Society, and powered by solar panels from Constellation, a solar energy firm under its ownership.¹⁴ An additional \$38.25 million comes from the DC Department of Transportation for construction costs, as well as funding through private donations from individuals and New Market Tax Credits. City government funding for the project, expected to total \$47.4 million, is currently on hold due to pandemic budgeting.¹⁵

Assessment

¹² Matt Hickman, “Washington, D.C.’s 11th Street Bridge Park Gets Blessing from National Capital Planning Commission,” *The Architect’s Newspaper*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.archpaper.com/2020/04/washington-dc-11th-street-bridge-park-blessing-national-capital-planning-commission/>.

¹³ Jake Maher, “11th Street Bridge Park Closes in on Capital Fundraising Goal,” *TheDCLine.Org* (blog), August 2, 2019, <https://thedcline.org/2019/08/02/11th-street-bridge-park-closes-in-on-capital-fundraising-goal/>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Alex Koma, “Bowser Budget Delays 11th Street Bridge Park Funding amid Coronavirus Woes,” *Washington Business Journal*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2020/05/19/dc-mayor-delays-11th-street-bridge-park-funds.html>.

The 11th Street Bridge Park has received praise primarily from its community-driven approach and efforts to get ahead of speculators and gentrifying impacts through partnerships and land trusts; however, it's likely still not enough. Isabelle Anguelovski critiques the project, citing limits of intentionality and unfinished redistribution of wealth; their approach to equity is well-founded but does not go far enough. The Douglass CLT cannot fully address the intergenerational inter-racial wealth-gap in order to avoid displacement, and there are already speculative redevelopment projects starting in the vicinity of the bridge, for example the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) for Reunion Square development.¹⁶ While it's great to have such global support and a flashy design by an international architecture firm, this also activates a kind of "green branding," capitalizing on projected increased diversity but also foreshadowing displacement. Even though the project is equity-driven, it will facilitate a new displacement frontier. Anguelovski suggests additional efforts such as cooperative housing models, the potential of a lawsuit arguing the right to place and return, and promoting "greening" as a form of storytelling in order to de-discipline and de-commodify landscapes.¹⁷

Outcomes should be measured starting even before the project begins, to get a sense of community inflow and outflow. A successful project would result in the redistribution of wealth to current residents of Anacostia.

Lessons for West Philadelphia

The 11th Street Bridge Park is a big gesture and a high-profile case, but it's ultimately about creating connection. Despite concerns that the bridge park is not doing enough, BBAR does show remarkable effort in community engagement techniques that will have a positive impact in slowing down gentrification and supporting the Anacostia community. The most important lesson we can apply to Philadelphia is with regard to timing - understanding the positive and negative implications of greening and getting ahead of speculators and developers. We can learn a lot from BBAR's efforts to cultivate and support a workforce and create jobs for Anacostia residents. Thinking broadly, it won't be just one thing that helps, but rather these anti-gentrifying actions act in a pipeline – more people with jobs enables residents to afford housing or spend their money at local small businesses, feeding money back into the community. Another aspect of the timeline is achieved through cultivating trust through long-term engagement.

¹⁶ Executive Office of the Mayor, "Mayor Bowser and Councilmember White Move Forward First-Ever TIF in Ward 8," March 2, 2020, <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-and-councilmember-white-move-forward-first-ever-tif-ward-8>.

¹⁷ Isabelle Anguelovski, *From Green Privilege to Green Supremacy: Environmental Justice vs White Supremacy in the 21st Century American and European City*, Cities@Tufts, 2021, https://tufts.zoom.us/rec/play/NbkgLTHnsW9uag6EQPFT2nshJfRWZa8mwyad_2oFqyQtaOt2eTo13PhfwUx_IDpj9w8I-zltipTZx_uG.VuQ8K0nOtULzXHl6?startTime=1612370710000.

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