



Ensuring Access to Urban Green Spaces

A LEED for Cities Case Study Featuring Royal Oak, MI; Denver, CO; and Atlanta, GA

Nature and green spaces play a vital role in the social, physical, psychological, and environmental health and well-being of cities and their residents. They serve as a [community-building space](#) for people to gather, play, exercise, celebrate, learn, relax, reflect, and enjoy city life. Various studies have shown that close proximity to urban greenery is also linked to [better mental and physical health outcomes](#). In addition to promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting mental wellness, green spaces provide [critical ecosystem services](#): buffering anthropogenic and natural hazards, preserving biodiversity, improving water and air quality, and mitigating greenhouse gases. Thus, cities must consider the location and spatial distribution of these spaces for residents to fully experience their co-benefits.

Sharing success stories from LEED-certified projects helps guide other cities toward achieving tangible progress. The following case studies from Royal Oak, MI; Denver, CO; and Atlanta, GA discuss the importance of urban nature and highlight strategies for improving access to green spaces.

charrettes, open houses, and surveys — all facilitated by a park task force — guided the development of this park. Filled with amenities such as walking and running paths, nature trails, sports and grassy fields, a playground, a splash pad, a sledding hill, and more, this park meets community needs and preserves open landscapes, enhancing both residents' quality of life and ecosystem health.

- Meant for growing native Michigan trees, the [Royal Oak Arboretum](#) will upgrade to a [Universal Design](#) park complete with ADA compliant trails, resting infrastructure, signs, and parking. Creating great public spaces is a major design challenge, but universally designed parks benefit even more communities. People of all ages, life stages, and abilities will be able to enjoy this inclusive space.
- Named the [Centennial Commons Downtown Park](#), this new green space is replacing an old parking lot and building site in the middle of downtown Royal Oak. MKSK Studios worked closely with city officials to [engage the community](#) by hosting public outreach events and facilitating stakeholder meetings with local businesses and community leaders. This new park will not only provide a link between multiple downtown destinations and increase connectivity for non-motorized transportation, but also serve as resilient ecological infrastructure.

Royal Oak, MI

"A major way to design relevancy and increase access to green space is by inviting the community to offer feedback about desired amenities in new parks and upgrades in older parks"

- Julie Lyons Bricker, Energy and Sustainability Manager for the City of Royal Oak

Royal Oak has a long history of commitment to creating abundant and accessible green space. Myron Zucker, the Royal Oak Parks Commission Board Chair, was a progressive advocate for preserving green space and pledged that no child should have to walk more than a quarter of a mile or cross a busy intersection to access a park. Since receiving [LEED for Cities certification](#) in 2020, Royal Oak has continued Zucker's legacy — the city provides 241.59 square feet of green space per person and 98.20% of residences have a green space within a half-mile walking distance.

In order to promote and increase access to green space, the city has adopted a bottom-up approach to planning and development and emphasizes community engagement. Collecting input that represents the diversity of residents ensures that parks not only remain relevant but also meet local needs. Community involvement has taken the form of charrettes, town halls, workshops, and electronic surveys. "The city needs to use an 'access for all' lens when planning upgrades and new park designs," said Julie Lyons Bricker, Energy and Sustainability Manager for the City of Royal Oak.

To promote equitable access to inclusive and resilient green spaces, Royal Oak is in the process of creating and updating several parks:

- [Normandy Oaks Park](#), previously a 50-acre, single-use fenced golf course, is a 40-acre, diverse-use park. Two years of community input,



Denver, CO

"It is really the streets that we are most focused on when we think about how we are going to expand our urban forest. As Denverites, we truly value the importance of trees as a basic amenity."

- Mark Bernstein, Downtown Area Planner for the City and County of Denver

Urban trees and forests are key to supporting sustainable and climate-friendly cities. In addition to overall improved health and well-being, the benefits of trees include mitigating air pollution, reducing the urban heat island effect, increasing property values, and calming traffic. Denver, however, is not naturally conducive for tree growth due to its semi-arid and high-plains environment. Compared to other cities in the United States, Denver's urban tree canopy goal of 20% is much lower, as its climate, limited funding and regulations, and a lack of public infrastructure to maintain tree growth present challenges to supporting a robust tree canopy.

The city, which received [LEED for Cities Platinum certification](#) in 2019, has developed several plans such as the [Downtown Denver Area Plan](#) (2007), the [Outdoor Downtown Plan](#) (2017), and the [Game Plan for a Healthy City](#) (2019) to guide and inform green space improvements, policies and regulations, and capital investments. While there have been major advancements in cultivating more green space, sustainability and planning staff acknowledge that there is more work to be done.

Denver's urban forest strategy highlights several measures aimed to create more opportunities for green infrastructure and improve canopy cover:

- **Cultivating a culture of urban forest stewardship** by hosting [public art installations](#), engaging the youth with tree planting volunteer opportunities, and partnering with local organizations such as [The Park People](#), the [Downtown Denver Partnership](#), and the [Urban Forest Initiative](#). Through these initiatives, the city hopes to engage community members and raise awareness of the importance of trees and green spaces.
- **Maintaining the existing tree canopy** by participating in the Downtown Denver Partnership's [BID Tree Health Program](#), which cares for approximately 1,800 trees within Downtown Denver. This program not only relieves property owners from the burden of tree care, but also helps support a healthy tree canopy by placing all the downtown trees under a centralized care system.
- **Tapping into funding resources** such as the [Parks Legacy Fund](#) and [grants from the Urban Forest Initiative](#) that contribute to the improvement and expansion of parks and tree infrastructure.
- **Updating forestry policies, regulations, and design standards** to reflect Denver's long-standing commitment to expanding the city's urban forest.

The Role of LEED v4.1 for Existing Cities in Expanding Access to Urban Green Spaces

The rating system's Ecosystem Assessment prerequisite and Green Spaces credit promote not only the conservation and restoration of ecosystems but also their equitable access.

Natural Systems and Ecology Prerequisite: Ecosystem Assessment

This [prerequisite](#) requires cities to assess existing conditions and services provided by ecosystems, built landscapes, and other open spaces in order to inform urban development along with conservation and restoration efforts. Cities are required to complete and document an ecosystem assessment of areas that include the following topics: topography, soils, vegetation and habitat, and hydrology and aquatic ecosystems.

Natural Systems and Ecology Credit: Green Spaces

This [credit](#) seeks to provide accessible green spaces that positively impact the physical, mental, and psychological health and well-being of the community while also enhancing the environmental quality of the city. Cities can earn up to two points for providing a certain amount of green space per capita and ensuring that a minimum of 70% of dwelling units are within a half-mile walking distance of a green space.



Takeaways

- The COVID-19 pandemic and other major environmental challenges such as climate change have emphasized the important role green spaces play in making cities and communities more sustainable, greener, and healthier.
- Adequate provision and access to green spaces provide a multitude of benefits to humans and are critical for biodiversity conservation.
- An inclusive community engagement approach to planning, development, and land management results in practices and decisions that are more responsive to community priorities and ensures that those who have been historically left out of these conversations have a say.
- Cities and communities seeking to enhance resilience and improve the local quality of life can utilize the LEED for Cities rating system to find technical guidance, resources, and additional case studies of communities leading the way in providing safe and equitable access to green space.

Atlanta, GA

"Delivering new parks and green spaces, in partnership with residents, through community-centered processes ensures environmental, economic, and social justice outcomes for those that live, work, and play in some of our most vulnerable communities."

- Shelby Busó, Chief Sustainability Officer for the City of Atlanta

In 2018, Atlanta announced the establishment of its first-ever Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. The office seeks to create [One Atlanta](#) — a safe and welcoming city with world-class employees, infrastructure, and services; an ethical, transparent, and fiscally responsible government; thriving neighborhoods, communities, and businesses; and residents who are equipped for success. To achieve this vision and continue their sustainability journey since receiving [LEED for Cities Silver certification](#) in 2019, the administration has set an ambitious goal to ensure that 85% of residents are within a half-mile of fresh affordable food by 2022. "For Atlanta to be a place where all residents can thrive, we must ensure that they have access to fresh food," Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms said in a [statement](#).

To increase access to green space and address food insecurity, the city has created the nation's largest [urban food forest at Browns Mill](#), a community that has historically struggled to access fresh fruits and vegetables. Thanks to

an \$86,150 grant from the U.S. Forest Service Community Forest and Open Space Program, this green space features garden beds, a fruit and nut orchard, herb gardens, walking trails, and gathering spaces. This site serves as a new model for integrating food resources into equitable park development plans in order to provide long-term benefits for local communities.

Several elements of Atlanta's urban food forest project have contributed to the city's provision of green space, providing varied opportunities for interactions that can improve and maintain health and well-being:

- Through on- and off-site meetings, tours, charrettes, and virtual outreach opportunities, the Steering Committee, landscaping design team, and community partners collaborated to create the [Urban Food Forest at Browns Mill Community Vision Plan](#), which provides an overview of the food forest's amenities and green infrastructure. During this process, staff were attentive to community needs, holding meetings at the site itself, providing food and childcare during meetings, and going door-to-door to gather feedback from those who were unable to attend.
- The implementation of the Community Vision Plan was led by **local nonprofit organizations**, such as [Trees Atlanta](#) and the [Greening Youth Foundation](#), who held forest restoration and environmental education programs that connected under-represented youth and young adults to the outdoors and careers in conservation.
- The food forest currently **hosts events and educational workshops** to help community members of all ages understand the process of growing food, nutrition, and the importance of urban nature. Participating in activities ranging from science festivals and composting workshops to cook-offs and forest bathing fosters a greater understanding and consciousness of the natural world.



LEED for Cities • <https://www.usgbc.org/leed/rating-systems/leed-for-cities> • cities@usgbc.org
U.S. Green Building Council, 2101 L Street, NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20037

Photo courtesy of the City of Royal Oak, the City and County of Denver, and the City of Atlanta