

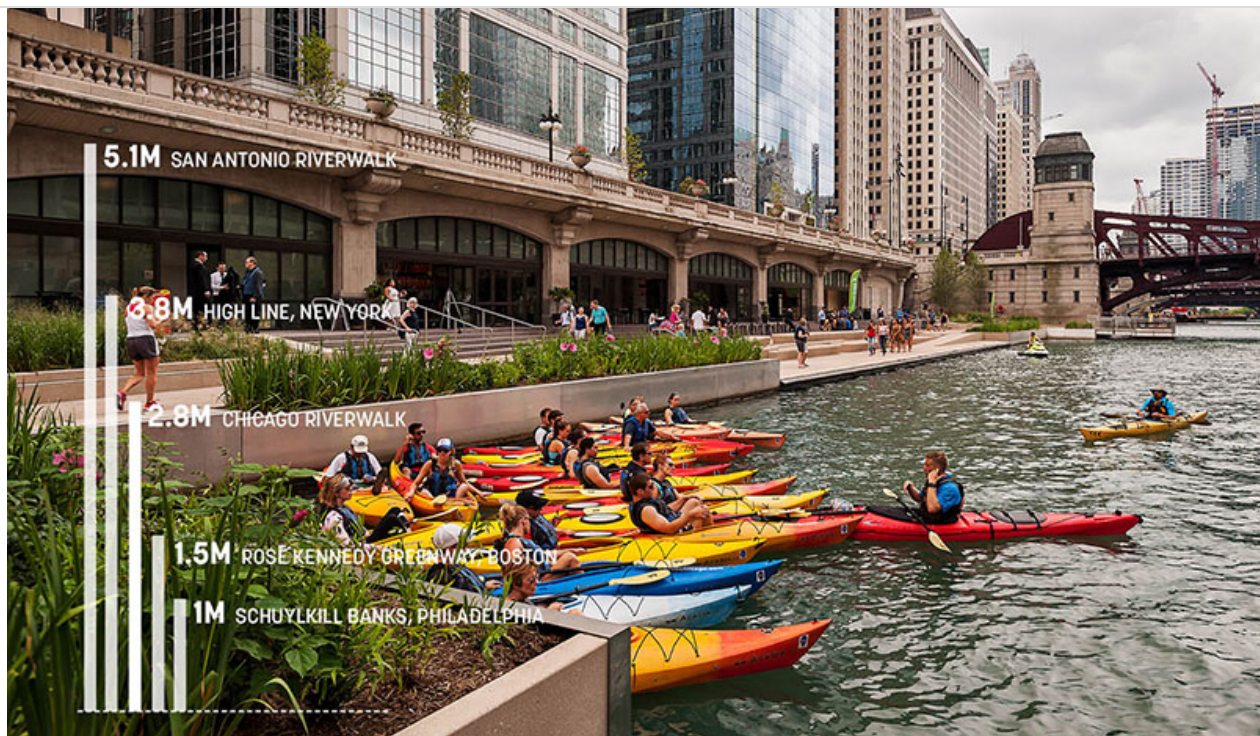
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Three U.S. Cities Reinventing the Modern Waterfront

By [Gina Ford](#)

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A kayak tour group on Chicago's Riverwalk. The chart at left shows estimated visitors per year for recent U.S. waterfront projects. (Original photo ©Christian Phillips)

Projects such as the High Line in New York City and Discovery Green in Houston have upped the ante for cities, showcasing landscape architecture as a powerful tool for urban change and raising public awareness of the multifaceted value of well-designed public spaces.

These projects—and many more like them—are a far cry from the pastoral, largely unprogrammed spaces championed in the last century by visionaries like Olmsted, Burnham, L'Enfant, Kessler, and Cleveland. Today's urban parks, instead, face intense pressure to provide “something to do” for an increasingly wide array of users—and are often, by necessity, thrust into new management and operational structures (think: conservancy or public/private partnership models). For the first time in history, the majority of the world's population lives in urban areas. Since the average city apartment's footprint is significantly smaller than that found in suburbia, urban public spaces increasingly serve as an expansion of one's apartment. The city, in essence, becomes one giant shared frontyard.

As public space is embraced as a source of civic pride, the expectations placed upon the stewards of these spaces rise. Parks departments are increasingly expected to provide not just the vision and capital to improve or create public spaces, but also active programming. At the same time, many city agencies are already making do with decreased or stagnant budgets. In an ideal world, our collective priorities would align and we would fund our park systems consistent with the value they bring to our lives and robustly enough to enable vibrant programming and sustainable maintenance—but that is not the reality we have today.

Cities are evolving with these developments. We explore here how three American cities—[Chicago](#), Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati—have made significant investments in one particular facet of public realm improvement: their riverfronts. In many Midwest and Rust Belt cities of the United States, the pressure to attract and retain workers and create a better quality of life coupled with the declining use of waterways for industrial purposes has made riverfront revitalization a somewhat common strategy. Each of the following case studies, however, offers a unique and innovative approach to both the funding of capital improvements and the long-term value-capture associated with such riverfront investments, providing an array of models for other cities.

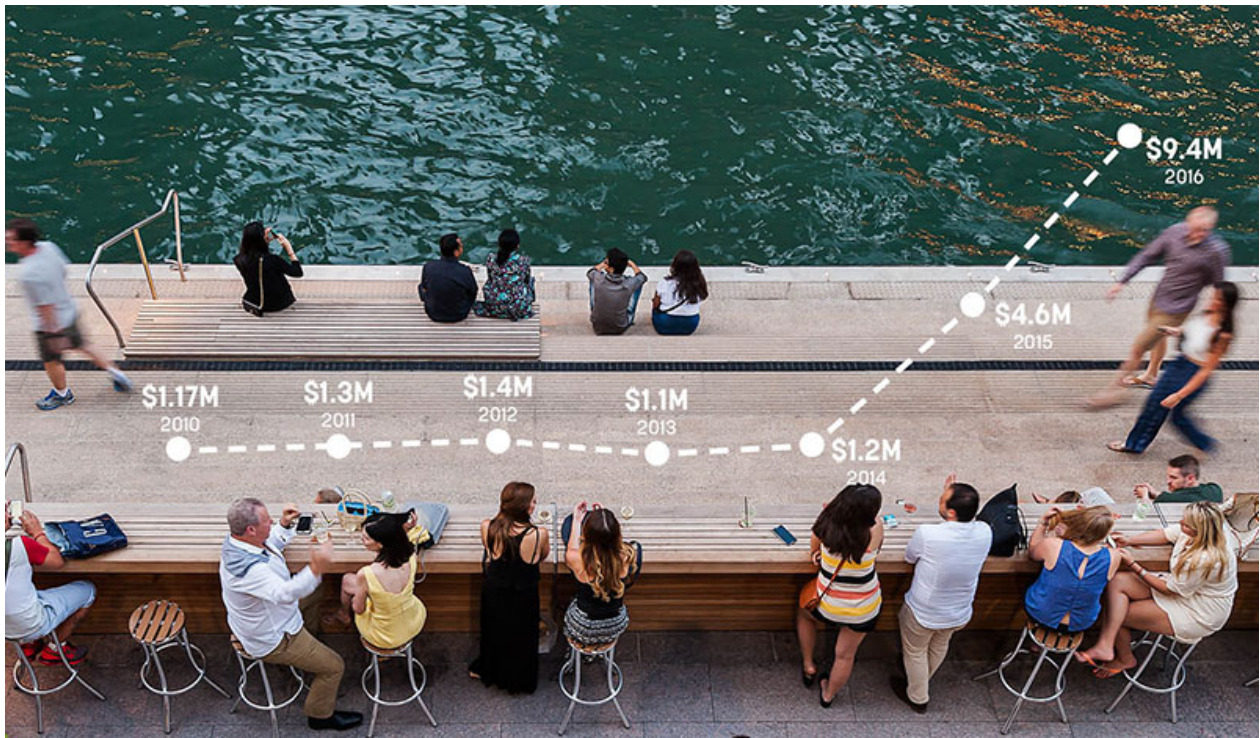
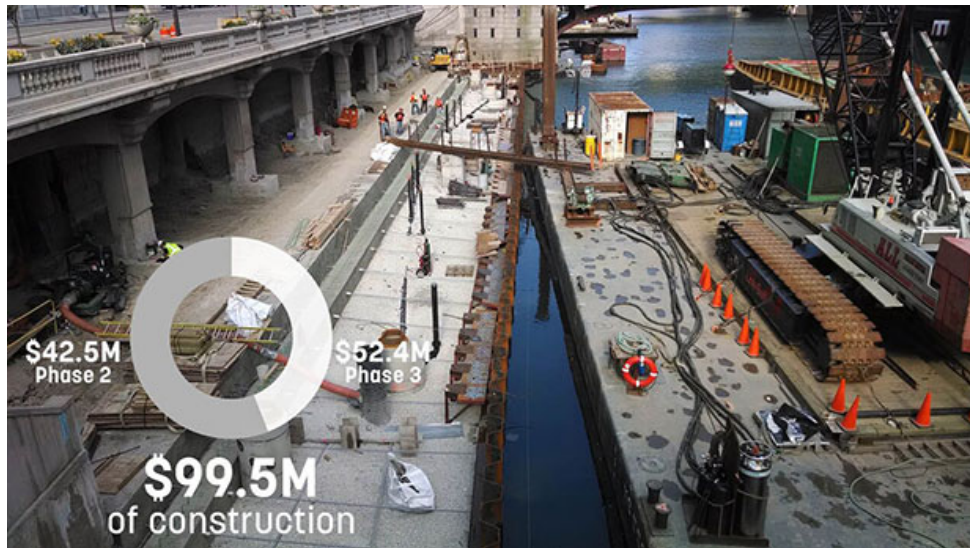


Chart shows revenue growth from Chicago's Riverwalk over the last two years. (Original photo ©Christian Phillips)

Capitalizing on Revenue—Generation Potential: The Chicago Riverwalk

The desire to have a continuous Riverwalk along the Main Branch of the Chicago River has been a decades-long planning and design effort. In the 1990s, Chicago's Department of Transportation created plans for a new continuous walkway—one that would require a 25-foot (7.6 m) extension of new land into the river and a series of "under-bridge" connections. In the early 2000s, the city implemented initial segments—first from the lakefront to just east of Michigan Avenue, then continuing to State Street. The final and most recent phases—Phases II and III—realize the vision of a continuous pedestrian connection along the Main Branches system, now 1.25 miles (2 km) long, ending at Lake Street.

Envisioned as a mix of recreational, entertainment, food and beverage, and retail facilities, the Riverwalk is a vibrant area enjoyed by residents, tourists, and visitors alike. Each new block provides a different kind of programmatic experience. The Marina Plaza, for instance, combines a dining terrace, custom seating, and boating infrastructure. The Cove creates a place for human-powered craft to launch or dock, and for its users to grab an ice cream cone or take a leisurely break. The Jetty creates places for fish, while the Water Plaza is a space of interactive water fun. These new blocks—six in total—opened to much warmth from both the public and critics. Of the new spaces, the *Chicago Tribune's* famed architectural critic Blair Kamin said, "The latest stretch of the Riverwalk marks a significant step forward in achieving a showcase public space that creates the equivalent of a second lakefront. Here, in bold strokes worthy of Daniel Burnham, Chicago is confirming and renewing its identity as a civilized metropolis."



Construction costs for the three phases of the Chicago Riverwalk rehab project. (Courtesy of Sasaki)

Beyond design, Phases II and III also offer a unique new funding model for the construction of such complex public spaces. These portions were funded through the Transportation Infrastructure Financing Initiative Act (TIFIA). A \$100 million loan was awarded for the project after the city, along with Sasaki, successfully demonstrated the financial sustainability of the investment. Revenues generated from all Riverwalk concessions are pledged toward the repayment of the TIFIA loan over the next 35 years. Ultimately, it is the goal of the city that the Chicago Riverwalk generate sufficient revenues to cover the TIFIA debt-service schedule and cover all maintenance and operating expenses.

With two full seasons under its belt, the Riverwalk's performance as a revenue-generating public space has exceeded expectations. The first year, annual project-generated revenues quadrupled—from an average of \$1.2 million in the prior years (2011–2014) to \$4.6 million in 2015. In the second year, revenues more than doubled, with \$9.4 million in gross revenues. Nearly \$950,000 in taxes was generated on previously dormant public space that now bustles with new businesses that employ dozens of people.

While some projects must generate money to cover the cost of their upkeep and programming, Chicago's Riverwalk is showing that public spaces—with some civic ingenuity and federal support—can even pay for their own creation. The Chicago Riverwalk found a creative way forward when traditional funding was not available.

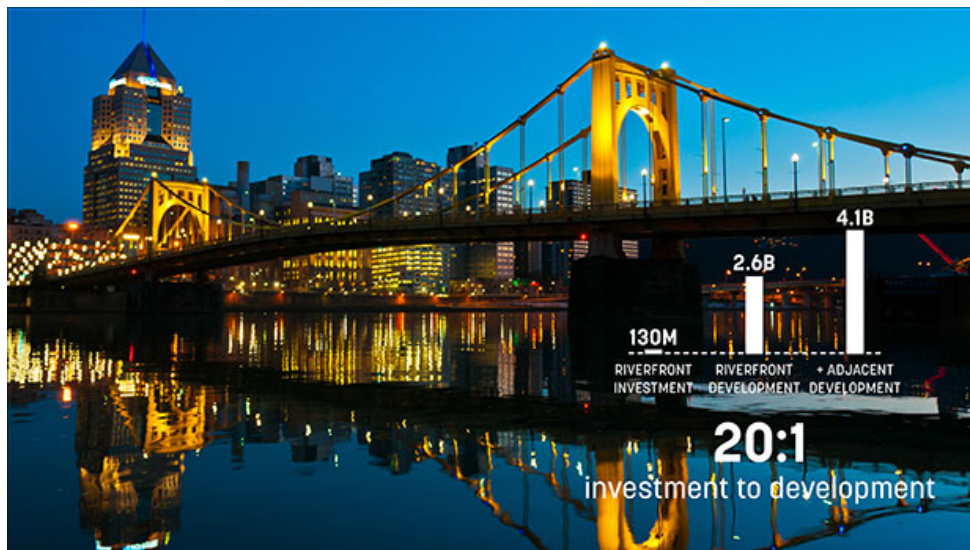


A rendering of Pittsburgh's riverfront park space. The chart at left shows construction costs and estimates of property tax revenue and financing. (Courtesy of Sasaki)

Making the Value of Investment Visible: Pittsburgh Waterfront

The Pittsburgh waterfront—a convergence of three rivers—has undergone an incredible transformation in recent years. This includes several major development projects from the past ten years, including the Rivers Casino, the Convention Center, and Point State Park Renovations. Working closely with nonprofit advocacy organization Riverlife and its public and private partners, Sasaki developed a master plan for riverfront improvements along a 20-block stretch, starting at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center at 11th Street out to the 31st Bridge, dubbed “the Strip District.” In tandem with the design work, we also created an economic impact analysis study that focused on previous improvements, both to underscore Pittsburgh's many waterfront successes, but also to provide an empirical basis for projecting benefits of future investment.

The team found that approximately \$130 million invested in Three Rivers Park over 15 years catalyzed nearly \$2.6 billion in riverfront development activity, and nearly \$4.1 billion in total riverfront and adjacent development. Just analyzing the \$2.6 billion riverfront yield, the ratio between park investment and riverfront development is 20:1. That means that \$20 of private riverfront investment followed every public dollar spent on riverfront open-space improvements. This is the high end of what has been achieved in comparable cities, and speaks to the strong success of Pittsburgh's riverfront revitalization.



The chart at right shows development investment in U.S. dollars surrounding Pittsburgh's riverfront investment. (Original photo ©AllenRan Photography)

The pattern in Pittsburgh and in other cities across the country is clear: properties close to high-quality park infrastructure increase in value more than properties that are not. Studying actual historical changes in property value since 2001, the data show a 60 percent property value increase in the vicinity of riverfront investment projects compared with a 32 percent property value increase citywide outside the riverfront zone of influence (ZOI). The pattern of increased property value near reinvested waterfronts holds true when looking at individual sites as well; they perform at least twice as well as the city average in terms of long-term increases. For example, the analysis shows that property values have increased by 117 percent since 2001 in the South Side, a historically underdeveloped area proximate to the waterfront. This rate of growth far outpaces the average across the city.

Using these data, the team was able to study three different scenarios related to the potential tax revenue value created by a proposed \$50 million investment in waterfront-oriented public realm improvements in the Strip District neighborhood. The estimated tax revenue projections range from \$6.8 million to \$15.6 million annually. At these levels, the estimated revenue generated more than offsets the estimated annual debt payment of \$3.3 million to the city. This kind of assessment proves the wisdom of riverfront investment, which helps pave the way for future investment and helps cities leverage other tools to capture that value.



Construction costs for Cincinnati's Smale Riverfront Park. (Courtesy of Sasaki)

Leveraging the Private Dollar for Public Good: Cincinnati's Smale Riverfront Park

Cincinnati's riverfront makeover is no less dramatic than Chicago's or Pittsburgh's, and its planning and design have equally been a decades-long pursuit. The downtown reach of the Ohio River was once little more than a sea of asphalt—expansive parking lots dotted with remnant infrastructure and subjected to frequent floods. A highway separated a revitalizing downtown core from the city's former lifeblood, the Ohio River.

Opportunity was unlocked by a few key (and not insignificant) investments—first, the \$455 million Cincinnati Bengals stadium followed by the reconstruction of Fort Washington Way. These moves provided an anchor and cleared the way for further development of the riverfront—ushering in the new Great American Ballpark and a mixed-use development called the Banks. Cradled by these new edges, Cincinnati Smale Riverfront Park serves as the vibrant, connective public realm. It at once knits the new riverfront district together and reconnects it with both the city's downtown core and the river.



The chart at right shows not-for-profit support for the Smale Riverfront Park project. (Courtesy of Sasaki)

In design terms, the park offers an extraordinary array of pleasures and programming in its relatively small 20 acres (8 ha), which will extend to 32 acres (13 ha) when the final phase of the park plan is complete. Typical park events range from small picnic-like activities to larger pre- and postgame activities for the Bengals

and Reds, concerts, and events like **Paddlefest**—the largest paddle celebration in the Midwest, which draws 2,200 paddlers to the riverfront. The park includes interactive water features, a performance stage, a sculpture play area, a pavilion, bench swings, water gardens, and a riverfront promenade 2,100 feet (640 m) in length. Public landings and seasonal docking, upon implementation, will support the river's boat traffic. Park amenities are enhanced by a series of sustainable strategies, including an integrated bicycle center, support, and locker-room facility and a restaurant pavilion supported by a geothermal heating and cooling system.

A look at the project's funding sources reveals it to be every bit as diverse as its programming and visitorship. Significant contributions were made by every level of government—federal, state, county, and city. But perhaps most innovative is the park's ability to inspire private and philanthropic funding. Cincinnati's Park Board, a public entity, was able to cultivate private interest and earmark funds via a nonprofit Park Foundation. Donors to specific elements of the park were numerous, drawing \$44 million in total private dollars in addition to the \$56.6 million in public funds. From the Heekin Family and Procter & Gamble's joint support of a new playscape to the Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation's carousel gift, among many others, private donor contributions made construction possible while also elevating and diversifying its offerings. Most notably, John G. Smale's gift of **\$20.7 million** catapulted the final phases toward completion and gave the park its name—the John G. and Phyllis W. Smale Riverfront Park.

While the park's economic impact is just beginning to be understood, the park's vision enabled a groundswell of support. Its success in private fundraising speaks to the growing awareness that investment in parks—and particularly riverfront parks—is a wise investment. The sheer quantity of private donations is proof that private companies and nonprofit organizations alike, when given an inspired design vision, can be an essential partner in city-building.

These success stories—the Chicago Riverwalk, the Pittsburgh Waterfront, and the Smale Riverfront Park—offer powerful testimony to the value of well-designed public park spaces. Further, they each demonstrate new and creative models for the ever-daunting task of fundraising. While none is exactly replicable in other cities, riverfront revitalization has emerged as one of the 21st century's most significant city-building tools. These examples provide concrete strategies for cities and designers looking to take advantage of the wide array of value that such revitalization can capture.

Gina Ford, ASLA, is a landscape architect and principal with global design firm Sasaki, and leads riverfront revitalization design projects nationwide, including recent work on the Chicago Riverwalk.

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