



  
**RUDY  
BRUNER  
AWARD**  
FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE  
**2019  
SILVER  
MEDALIST**

## Parisite Skatepark

New Orleans, Louisiana

Youth-driven DIY creation of a new public skatepark on vacant land underneath a highway overpass



Michael Wong

## Overview

**Submitted by:** Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund on behalf of the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

**Completed:** July 2015

**Total Development Cost:** \$490,000

In 2009, a group of young skateboarders, seeking an alternative to skating on the city's uneven streets, used found materials to create a makeshift skatepark on vacant land near the intersection of New Orleans' Interstate 610 and Paris Avenue. When the popular park was demolished by the property owners in 2012, the skateboarders decided to move to an adjacent site beneath the interstate overpass and began to rebuild. They formed an organization called Transitional Spaces and reached out to the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design at the Tulane University School of Architecture for help designing and building a replacement park and navigating the process of working with the city.

In 2014, the Small Center's staff, faculty, and students collaborated with the skaters, public agencies, a structural engineer, and a landscape architect to help realize the new skatepark. Two 14-week design/build studios led to the development of a phased master plan and construction of one phase of the park, an urban landscape that features surfaces and elements desirable for skaters and non-skaters alike. The design includes a landscaped edge to manage stormwater runoff. After extensive negotiations, an agreement with

“Parisite Skatepark is an example of how a small, allegedly powerless group of young people can fight city hall and create a win-win for everyone.”

— 2019 Selection Committee

the City of New Orleans reactivated the site as an official city park, to be managed and maintained by the skaters.

Opened in 2015 with a ceremonial 40-foot “Reuben cutting” by Mayor Mitch Landrieu, Parisite Skatepark includes a defined entrance at Paris and Pleasure Streets, landscaping, and colorful artwork spanning the highway superstructure above it. An accessible ramp leads to a viewing platform and seating area that overlooks the park and surrounding neighborhood. Inside the park, concrete and wooden ramps offer a variety of skating experiences. Interpretive signage highlights the perimeter rain gardens, which collect and filter runoff from the highway above.

Ongoing volunteer-led programming, which includes cleanup and ramp-building days, neighborhood barbecues, and all-girl skate nights, contributes to a sense of community ownership at the park. Reflecting on the project, Tulane Adjunct Associate Professor Doug Harmon observed, “Working in concert with the city through engaged and thoughtful design, urban voids can be capitalized on to transform them from perceived public nuisance to public amenity.”



*The public park offers a variety of skating experiences and perimeter rain gardens.*



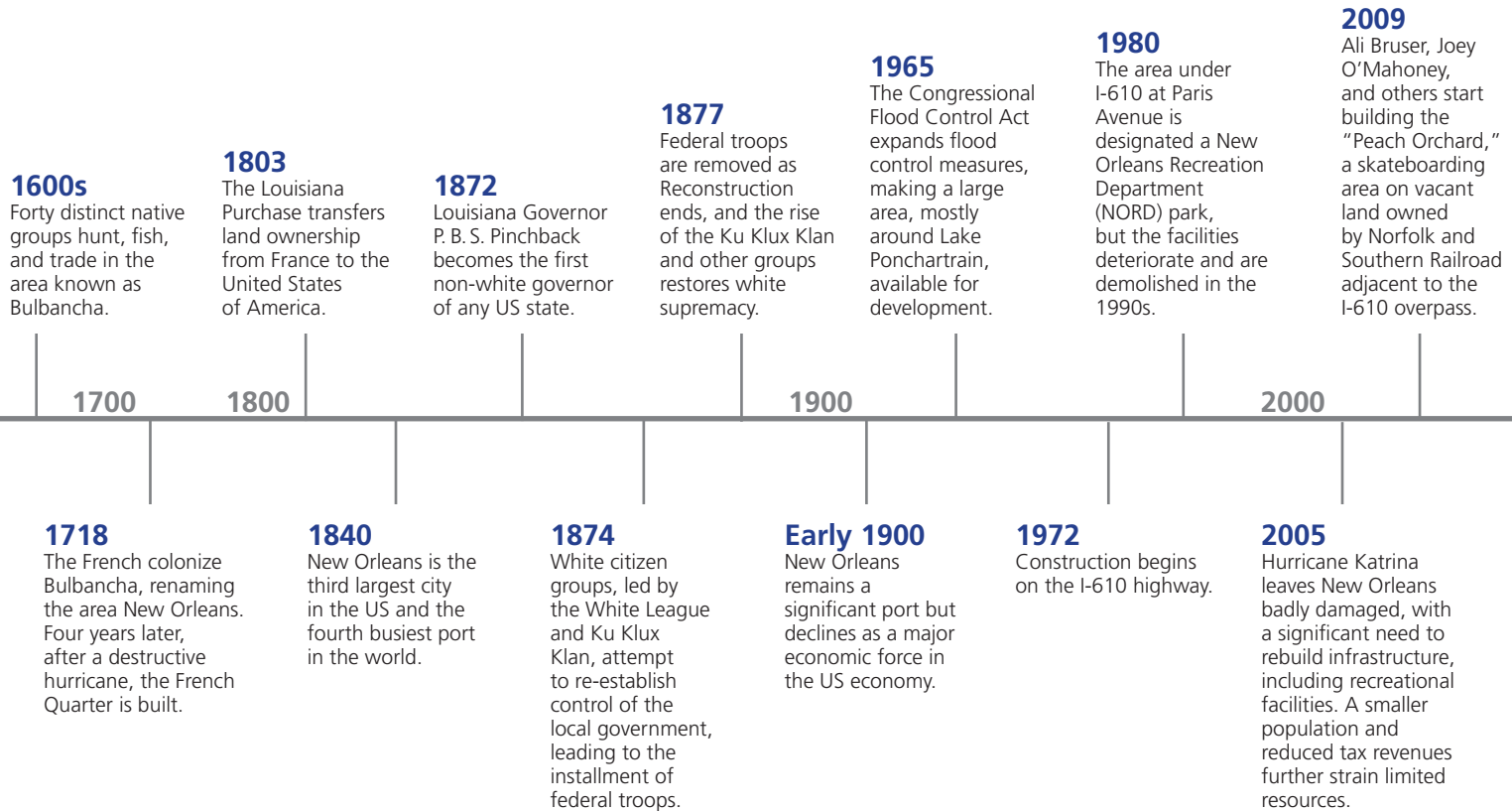
## Project at a Glance

- A loose-knit, informal group of skaters who overcame many obstacles to transform an unused piece of public land under an interstate highway into an amenity that brings together people from communities throughout the metropolitan area.
- The first public, free skatepark in New Orleans.
- A DIY project that addressed several needs in an underserved neighborhood, providing the only free public outlet for skateboarding and much-needed recreational options for at-risk youth.
- A city-owned park that was built and is programmed and maintained exclusively by the park's users at no cost to the city, entirely funded with money and in-kind support from many sources and managed through a collaborative community effort.
- A landscaped entry with a rain garden that captures and filters water runoff from the highway above and a viewing area overlooking the skating bays.
- An effort that gained legitimacy from the support of the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design at the Tulane University School of Architecture, which provided design expertise for the collaborative master planning process and design/build of the park's entryway.

## Project Goals

- Create a free and open skating and recreational space for New Orleans youth that meets the desires of local skateboarders through a DIY process.
- Turn an unused, neglected piece of public land into a welcoming, inviting place for skaters and non-skaters alike, using a variety of activities to attract nontraditional skaters and residents of nearby neighborhoods divided by the highway.
- Develop a model for water capture, filtering, and retention systems in underpasses where high levels of polluted stormwater flow are disruptive and destructive.

# Chronology



**2010**

Word of mouth spreads and the site becomes popular with skaterboarders, attracting as many as 30 to 40 a day to skate and help plan, build, and maintain the site.

**2012**

May 14: Early in the morning, the Peach Orchard is demolished by Norfolk and Southern Railroad. Soon after, the ad hoc group of skaters reassemble and move a few dozen yards to publicly owned land under the I-610 overpass to rebuild the skatepark.

When city officials learn skating elements are being constructed on a new site, they threaten to evict and demolish. In response, skaters form Transitional Spaces to negotiate with the city.

The City of New Orleans, in response to frequent resident requests for a skatepark, directs its Capital Projects Administration to identify sites in every district for possible skatepark construction.

September: Trukstop Park, a private, for-profit skatepark in the Lower Ninth Ward, has a grand opening but never fully opens for business.

**2014**

Spring: Tulane architecture studio faculty and students work with Transitional Spaces, the skateboarding community, and the neighborhood to create a master plan for Parisite.

June: The City Planning Commission approves Parisite as a city park.

Fall: Red Bull Mississippi Grind skating features are pulled from storage and installed at Parisite. NORD signs Cooperative Endeavor Agreements with Transitional Spaces. Tulane architecture studio faculty and students design and, with Transitional Spaces and skaters, build the park's entryway, seating, and stormwater retention.

**2017**

December: Skaters run a second Kickstarter campaign, raising \$40,000 for capital improvements.

**2019**

Construction of the "peanut pool" in Bay 1, Phase 4 of the park's construction, is designed, built, and paid for by park users.

**2011**

Concrete skating pieces created for Red Bull's Mississippi Grind floating skateboard competition are donated to the City of New Orleans for a future skatepark and put in storage.

**2013**

May: Transitional Spaces submits a request for design assistance to Tulane University's Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design. Their proposal is accepted and planning for the new park begins.

October: The Small Center begins a six-month-long series of public outreach meetings on the proposed design.

The City of New Orleans amends its joint use agreement with the State of Louisiana to include skateboarding as an approved activity.

**2015**

February 28: Mayor Mitch Landrieu cuts the "Reuben" to open Parisite, New Orleans' first official skatepark.

April: Transitional Spaces launches a Kickstarter campaign for Parisite, which generates \$51,866 for future construction phases.

**2016**

Fall: Skaters pay for, design, and build a concrete bowl alongside Paris Ave.

**2018**

New Orleans passes its first stormwater planning ordinance requiring stormwater issues to be addressed for permitting.

## POINTS OF INTEREST

1. Parisisite Skatepark
2. Peach Orchard Site
3. St. Bernard Recreation Center
4. Columbia Parc
5. City Park



5

4

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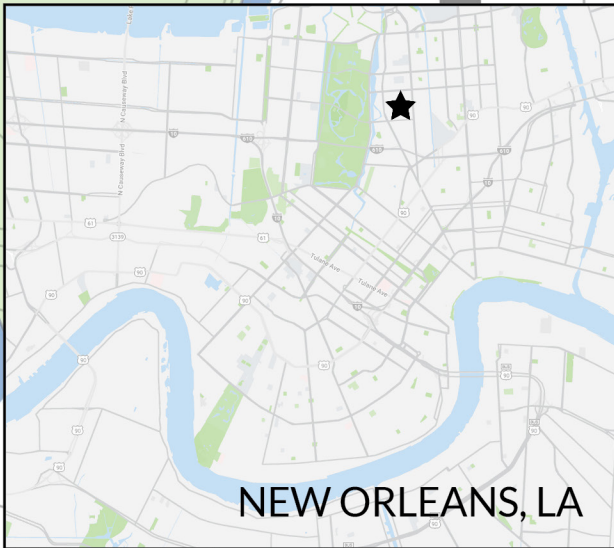
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610

NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN RAILROAD

PARIS AVE.

PLEASURE ST.



NEW ORLEANS, LA



# Project Description

## INTRODUCTION

Parisite Skatepark is the first public skatepark in New Orleans, which had previously been, according to Transitional Spaces, the largest city in the United States without a public space for skateboarders. It is a park created by skateboarders themselves, in an extended DIY effort, at virtually no expense to the city for capital improvement or maintenance—the skateboarders clean and maintain the park themselves. The skateboarders were supported by a partnership with Tulane University School of Architecture’s Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design. Two design studios helped skaters develop a master plan that created a welcoming, multipurpose space and build a defined entrance that activated and reclaimed a disused and neglected piece of public land beneath an elevated interstate highway.

## CONTEXT

### *New Orleans*

The lower sections of the Mississippi River in Louisiana, known as *Bulbancha*, were occupied by 40 distinct Native American tribes for thousands of years before Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto passed through in 1542. French explorers and European trappers and settlers arrived in the late seventeenth century, bringing infectious diseases that dramatically reduced the Native American population.

European settlement began in earnest after New Orleans was founded by the French in 1718, and in 1722, the French Quarter was built following a destructive hurricane. New Orleans was capital of the French territory when it was sold to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803

and became and remained the South’s largest city until the latter half of the twentieth century. By 1840, New Orleans—then the third largest city in the country—was also the fourth busiest port in the world. It remained a significant port through the early 1900s, though its impact on the US economy declined.

While some in the native tribes were enslaved, Africans were brought to the area in large numbers as slave labor in the early nineteenth century. New Orleans had the largest slave market in the South before the Civil War, comprising a significant portion of its economy until the city was captured by Union forces early in the war. At the same time, there was a large population of free Blacks<sup>1</sup> living in New Orleans and elsewhere in Louisiana, from the early eighteenth century through the beginning of the Civil War. They enjoyed a “golden age” of involvement in society, with contributions as artists and artisans, as well as having some property rights and economic success—at least until the period of greater restrictions in the decades preceding the war.

After the war, people of color, including freed slaves, became increasingly active in politics and served as elected officials, both locally and nationally—including Louisiana Governor P. B. S. Pinchback, who served as the first non-White governor of any US state in 1872. Two years later, in the aftermath of a disputed gubernatorial election, the paramilitary White League and Ku Klux Klan led an attempt to overthrow the government, which was working toward increased equality and opportunity for Black citizens. The resulting three-day Battle of Liberty Place led to the temporary installment of federal troops in New Orleans which lasted until the end of the Reconstruction era in 1877, when White supremacists re-established control of local government and institutionalized segregation. The 1891 monument built to honor the White League members who perished in the battle was finally removed from the city in 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, references to race, ethnicity, and nationality throughout this case study reflect the terminology used by the source. In instances where there is no direct source, we have attempted to use the most inclusive, accurate, and appropriate language possible.



Wikimedia Commons, SEWico

The area where the park is located experienced significant flooding during Hurricane Katrina.



Wikimedia Commons, Infrogmaton

Population declined after the storm and demolition of the St. Bernard housing project.

New Orleans is now and has been for many years a city of diverse cultures, including English, French, Spanish, Haitian-Creole, Native American, and African, as well as many other nationalities from periods of modern immigration. A majority of the population remained French speaking through much of the nineteenth century.

According to worldpopulationreview.com, the estimated population of New Orleans in 2019 was 392,000, down from the city's peak of 627,000 in 1960 and the pre-Katrina level of 484,000 in 2000, but up from the post-Katrina decline. The city has a poverty rate of 25.36%. Though still a majority-minority city, the percentage of the population that is non-White has fallen since Katrina, though the Hispanic population has increased. The Black or African American population makes up approximately 60% of the city (down from 67% in 2000), with 34% White.

### *Hurricane Katrina*

Surrounded by lakes and the Mississippi River with most of its land mass below sea level, New Orleans has always been threatened by flooding from storms, particularly hurricanes. While original settlers built on higher ground and made use of natural levees, the city soon spread to lower-lying areas. Responding to destruction from Hurricane Betsy, the Congressional Flood Control Act of 1965 authorized the building of an expanded floodwall system around a much broader area of the city. According to "Hurricanes: Science and Society," failure of the levees in this system was the primary cause of the flooding following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, in which 80% of the city was covered by water.

The impact of Hurricane Katrina was massive and lasting, especially for those living in the low-lying areas and the city's poor and Black population. Over one million people evacuated New Orleans and its suburbs as the storm approached and hit. Many who lost their homes and neighborhoods left New Orleans after the flood and have not returned. The city's population dropped by half down to 223,000 shortly after the hurricane but has recovered significantly, though not fully, since then to 386,000 in 2015. But, as noted by Gary Rivlin in *The Nation*, both the loss and recovery have been uneven, with the greatest impact on poor and

Black citizens, who were three times more likely to suffer flood damage than White residents.

The storm left New Orleans with significant needs for repair, rebuilding, and support in a city with much reduced tax revenues with which to address these efforts. The limited resources went largely towards critical and immediate needs for health care and living conditions. As a result, funds to restore and rebuild recreational facilities and parks were often lacking. The poorest areas, largely occupied by historically underserved Black residents, struggled the most. In the face of few resources and difficult conditions, especially for youth, it is not surprising that some people felt their only option was a DIY approach: find the space and the resources to build the needed facilities themselves.

#### *Gentilly/St. Bernard*

Parisite is located under Interstate 610 (I-610), an urban elevated interstate freeway. New Orleans, like most cities in the United States, experienced an era of highway construction through the 1970s, spurred by the passage of the Interstate Highway Defense Act of 1956, through which the federal government paid 90% of highway construction costs. A section of the interstate that was to pass through the French Quarter was stopped by preservationists, but many other neighborhoods were impacted, including Treme, the oldest Black neighborhood in the United States, which is about two miles south of Parisite. The highway through Treme split the community and resulted in the loss of many businesses, hundreds of homes, and scores of ancient oaks. It led, as noted in *The Advocate's* 2012 article "Skateboarders mourn the loss of makeshift skatepark in Gentilly," to increased crime and poverty in the area. Gentilly and St. Bernard were similarly affected by I-610, which cuts directly through residential neighborhoods and City Park.

The skatepark sits at the edge of three neighborhoods: the east edge of Gentilly, the north edge of St. Roch, and St. Bernard, the western edge of Mid-City. The area directly around Parisite consists of a mix of single-family houses, both owned and rented. According to The Data Center, the neighborhood broadly is predominantly Black, with 40-50% of the

population living below the federal poverty line. The neighborhood is centrally located in New Orleans and close to two major open spaces: City Park and the New Orleans Fairgrounds. It is also near the St. Bernard housing projects, a former 1940s public housing complex from which the area got its name.

The St. Bernard area experienced both significant flooding during Hurricane Katrina—with standing water of two to six feet—and a significant decrease in population. This population reduction began prior to Katrina with the increased use of housing vouchers and renovations to the St. Bernard Housing Project and was exacerbated by both flood damage and the demolition of the St. Bernard project following the storm. A new mixed-income housing complex called Columbia Parc was built to replace it. This and other factors have shifted the social and economic demographics of the neighborhood, including reducing the percentage of the population living below the poverty line and in female-headed households and increasing the percentage of the elderly in the neighborhood.

North of I-610 is the southern tip of Gentilly and St. Bernard, largely made up of single-family housing for lower middle-class populations. The area south of I-610 is in New Orleans' 7th Ward and is more commercial but also includes single-family housing. On the south side of I-610, between the elevated highway and the Norfolk and Southern Railroad tracks, is a barren patch of land that runs along the railroad right-of-way. It includes the paved remnants of a street that existed before the interstate was built and random pieces of trash and abandoned appliances. This was the spot first chosen for the DIY skatepark that was named the Peach Orchard.

The neighborhoods around Parisite have experienced population growth in recent years, although the population still is 30% smaller than its pre-Katrina size. As in New Orleans as a whole, the Black population has returned here at a slower rate than other groups, and the overall racial balance has shifted. According to The Data Center, though many neighborhoods are down from their pre-Katrina percentages, the areas surrounding Parisite are still primarily Black: 90.2% in St. Bernard (97.7% in 2000), 78.2% in Gentilly Terrace (69.7% in 2000), and 84.2% in St Roch (91.5% in 2000).



*The I-610 elevated interstate highway bisects the community.*



*The area includes a mix of modest, single-family homes and commercial businesses.*

While there is a bus stop near Parisite, access is not easy for many young skaters who live in other parts of New Orleans or outside the city and do not have a car. The underpass has the advantage, however, of being just several hundred yards from the St. Bernard Recreation Center, a recently built facility with an outdoor pool, full-size basketball court, meeting space, play equipment, and recreational facilities. The center is owned and operated by the New Orleans Recreation Department.

### *Skateboarding*

Skateboarding has a history of being both an organized and governed activity as well as a freewheeling individual sport often operating outside of traffic and safety codes. Because skateboarding relies less on strict rules and organized forms and more on individual style and creativity, it is sometimes seen as appealing to an anti-establishment subculture. It is reputed to have begun in the mid-twentieth century with some very early versions noted as far back as the 1940s and 1950s. Boards designed expressly for skating were first produced in the early 1960s in California and, as the sport grew in popularity, the first organized national championship was held in Anaheim, California, in 1965, an event that was broadcast by national television networks. It soon, however, also became the focus of criticism as a dangerous activity, causing it to be banned in many places in the late 1960s, during which time some police departments confiscated boards. There are still partial skateboarding bans in many cities, including Washington, DC; Charleston, South Carolina; and Northampton, Massachusetts.

Skateboarding reemerged as a national phenomenon in the 1970s, particularly with the introduction of better boards, mostly due to better traction and control provided by polyurethane wheels instead of metal. The first official skateparks opened in 1976 in Florida and Southern California.

As skateboarding has grown in popularity, a number of well-known professional skaters, design consultants, skateboard manufacturers, and related organizations have also flourished. One such organization is the Tony Hawk Foundation. According to its website, Tony Hawk, a successful professional skateboarder and manufacturer of skateboards, clothing, and accessories, created the foundation to “help ... develop quality places to practice the

sport that gives [children] much needed exercise and a sense of self-esteem.” Another is Spohn Ranch, a California design/build firm that is a leader in the field working to create skateparks in cities around the world.

Skateboarding originally developed on Southern California beaches, largely attracting surfers, and has historically not had much participation by Black youth. This has changed, however, as skateboarding has become more popular in large cities. The Sporting Goods Manufacturers and Marketers Association reported in 2001 that skateboarding was the third most popular sport in the United States, with \$5 billion in revenue and over 10 million active participants.

There are many different styles of skateboarding, with two of the most popular being street and vert skating. Street skating involves riding and performing tricks on relatively flat street surfaces, using curbs, street furniture, steps, railings, etc. for tricks. Vert or transition skating uses flat-to-vertical transitions and is reputed to have begun by people skating up the sides of empty in-ground concrete swimming pools.

The number of skateboards sold, skateparks created, and skateboarding competitions has grown tremendously in the twenty-first century, with the sport’s popularity rivaling traditional individual and team sports, though skateboarding still maintains some of its freewheeling renegade cachet. As its popularity has grown, so has the number of skateparks, which now exist in most large cities in the United States and many parts of the world. As evidence of its popularity worldwide, skateboarding was to be a competitive event at the 2020 summer Olympics.

#### *Skateboarding and Black Youth in New Orleans*

As noted, for example, in stories by Reuters and journalist Bill Moyers, poor, working, and middle-class Black neighborhoods suffered disproportionately from damage during Katrina and have had the slowest recovery in the aftermath. The loss of recreational and athletic facilities has been particularly difficult for poor Black youth who had few other options, especially in light of urgent safety concerns that left parks and other recreational facilities a lower priority for use of city funds. Excessive time on the streets and a history of tension and negative interactions with the city police, rooted in a legacy

Jose Corto



*“Street skating” involves riding and performing tricks on relatively flat surfaces.*

Jose Corto



*"Vert" or "transition skating" makes use of flat-to-vertical transitions.*

of racism, can lead to arrest and dangerous confrontations for these young people. In her Vice.com article "How Katrina Sparked a Black Skateboarding Renaissance in New Orleans," Aubrey Edwards noted that, with little else to do, Black kids took up skateboarding as an easy, inexpensive but exciting pursuit. With so many empty malls, streets, and lots, there was no shortage of places to practice street skating. Skateboarding was less likely to lead to trouble than hanging out; one teenager noted that his probation officer recommended he take up the sport. By 2015, there was a large and active Black skateboarding community in the city.

In 2010, New Orleans was, according to Parisite Skatepark supporters, the largest city in the United States without a skatepark. A collaboration between Mountain Dew and rapper/recording artist Lil Wayne resulted in Trukstop, a for-profit skatepark in the Lower Ninth Ward, a low-income Black neighborhood. In spite of a grand opening in 2012, the site never fully opened to the public and later went out of business.

The freewheeling, high energy and creative aspects of skateboarding—developing personal tricks and moves—can be attractive to poor urban youth as an alternative to zero tolerance policing, schools with harsh discipline, and crime on the streets. Unfortunately, not only was skateboarding unsupported by the City of New Orleans, but some suggest that when taken up by Black youth, it was often seen as an aggressive act that vandalized street furniture and park benches and was "actively criminalized" with fines for skateboarding in public places.

### **PROJECT HISTORY**

Ally Bruser and Joey O'Mahoney were part of a wave of young people who came to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to help recovery efforts. Bruser was a surfer from San Diego, O'Mahoney a skateboarder from Houston. After they met, they skated together "from central New Orleans all the way out to Lake Pontchartrain," through many of the New Orleans neighborhoods depopulated by flooding. In the process, they became familiar with the challenges of street skating in New Orleans—the frequent holes, ruts, and breaks that make it difficult and risky. On one of those trips around the city, Bruser and O'Mahoney agreed that a real skatepark was badly

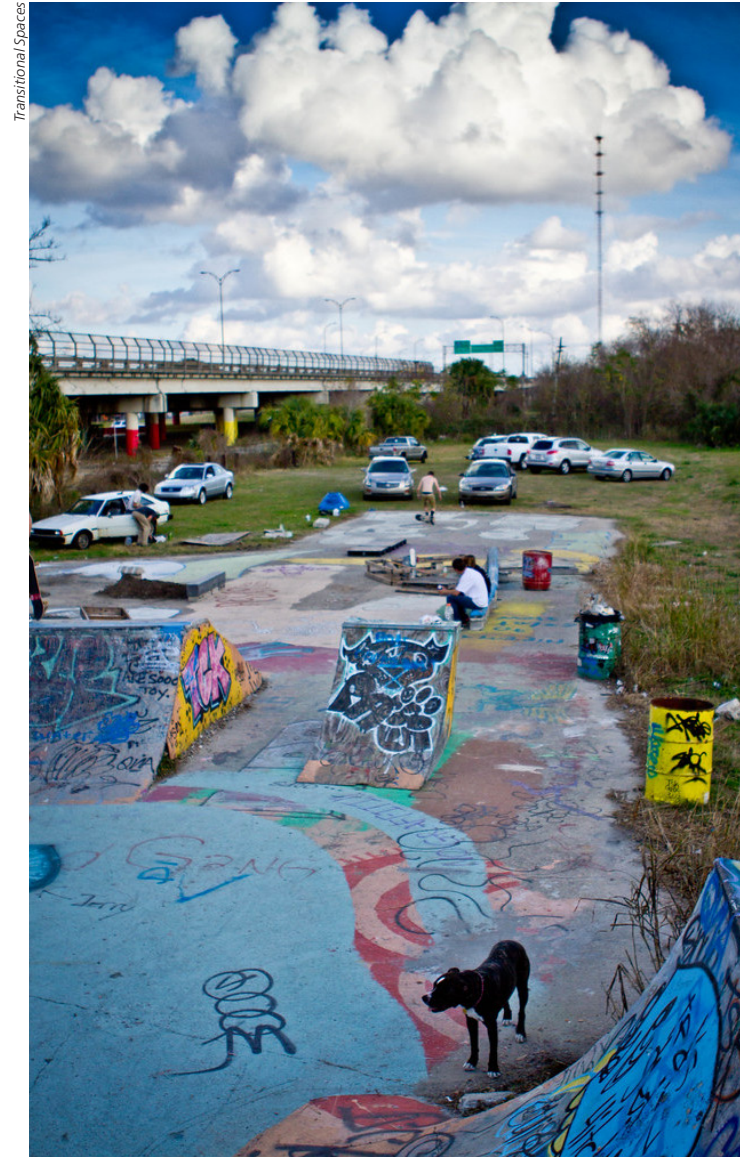
needed but would not come into being in New Orleans unless they built it themselves. From that point, they used their journeys through the city to look for a good site.

### *The Peach Orchard*

In 2010, while touring the city by bicycle still looking for possible skatepark sites, Bruser and O’Mahoney found a likely candidate in an illegal dumping site with an “old forgotten slab of pavement near some railroad tracks and a freeway,” which they assumed was city owned. The concrete pad was a leftover part of the street that had been there before the I-610 was built and provided a good base for skating. With others who joined them there, Bruser and O’Mahoney took the found conditions and worked to configure them for skating.

The skaters wanted a variety of skateable surfaces and areas. These included opportunities for transition skating, including skating onto ramps and broad, raised curves, as well as street-style skateboarding, which involves moving on, over, or around simple objects (chairs, boxes, etc.). They set about moving abandoned junk that was on or near the site into place—washing machines, playground equipment and the like—and covered them with dirt-filled poured concrete to create skateable ramps and other elements. It was a process, they said, of learning to build and work with concrete by trial and error.

They were soon joined by neighborhood kids and, as word of mouth spread, skaters came from other parts of the city, all relishing the chance to create their own skateboarding site. Although the core group was made up of less than 10 people, on some days as many as 30 to 40 people came out to skate and help with construction. The park was named the Peach Orchard, in a typically light-hearted fashion, because one of the founders had originally planned to spend that time picking peaches in Washington. Among those who came to skate and help with the design and construction were people with significant and valuable expertise. They included professional artists, such as Skylar Fein, who became a leader of Transitional Spaces; Heidi Tullman, a graffiti artist who painted signs for the park; architect Jackson Blalock; and others with construction and engineering backgrounds, including some with badly needed concrete expertise.



*The Peach Orchard was created by young skaters on vacant land alongside I-610.*

Transitional Spaces



*The skaters designed and built the park using concrete and found materials.*

Transitional Spaces



*The park drew neighborhood kids and skaters from across the city.*

Design and construction were iterative processes: build, test, skate, and then decide on the next move as a group. Some skateboarders routinely drove from as far as Mandeville and Slidell (30 miles from Parisite on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain) and occasionally from even farther away. Skaters would perform stunts as the trains went by (“tricks for trains”) and engineers would blow their whistles in response. One of the skater/builders said, “It was our utopia.” It was, that is, until May 2012, when the Norfolk and Southern Railroad, the owner of this property abutting the rail line, learned of the skatepark. On the morning of May 14, the skaters arrived to find that the site had been demolished.

Within two weeks, skaters reassembled and decided to try again. This time they chose an area under the I-610 overpass—a few yards away from the Peach Orchard—on what they (again incorrectly) assumed was a city-owned site. It was actually state land that had been leased to the city for recreational use and had been designated a New Orleans Recreational Development Commission park. Now empty and abandoned, it once had, according to local recollection, basketball courts, grills, tables, and lighting. The joint use agreement between the city and state that had made it available as a city park did not include skateboarding as an allowed activity on that site, apparently because of concerns that the city could be held liable for injuries incurred there. This earlier park deteriorated from disuse and facilities were demolished in the 1990s, leaving an unlit, neglected piece of public land that gathered garbage and was occasionally used for parking.

At the start, there was no formal organizational structure in which the skateboarders could work, although they regularly got together at the site to plan, design, build, and test skating features. As new pieces were completed, locals and others from around the region came to try them out. City officials also learned about this new park and issued an order to stop building, with an implicit threat of demolition. In response, in 2012, the skaters formed a nonprofit organization which they called Transitional Spaces to represent themselves and begin negotiations with the city to save the new park.

In addition, as they began to engage the city, the skaters recognized their need for additional support and capabilities and decided to approach the





*After the Peach Orchard was demolished, skaters found a new, city-owned site under I-610.*

Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design, the community design center of the Tulane University School of Architecture. The Small Center collaborates with community partners, bringing design expertise and focusing on “giving voice to residents.” Besides the expertise on staff, the center has the ability to make use of Tulane graduate and undergraduate design/build studios, which focus on planning, design, and construction.

Tulane University has a history in New Orleans that goes back more than 150 years and has a nationally respected and ranked school of architecture. Working as the service arm of that school, the Small Center uses its design expertise to help neighborhood groups “through collaboration, design education and scrappy problem-solving.” The center provides the skills of designers and students, often working through design/build studios to facilitate change. Moreover, those who work as part of the center also bring an understanding based on years of experience with the bureaucratic and political processes that underlie development and change in New

Orleans. For a small, new, ad hoc organization like Transitional Spaces, working with the Small Center not only gave the skaters access to a thoughtful and organized design process, but also lent a measure of credibility to the project.

In May 2013, Transitional Spaces submitted a response to the Small Center’s annual request for proposals. In their submission, Transitional Spaces asked for help planning and building an ambitious skatepark that incorporated “public space, rainwater gardens, DIY skate studios, children’s sculpture gardens, outdoor classrooms ... a space that is comprehensive and consistent with the needs of youth in New Orleans.” Their proposal was selected.

A “long dance” then began in the conversations between the city and Transitional Spaces, with the Small Center involved and seeking common ground. Those representing Transitional Spaces sometimes felt trapped in the middle between city officials concerned with regulations, codes, and liability and the skateboarders, whose views on organization sometimes bordered on anarchy. For some of the skateboarders, it was a difficult change. The ad lib, organic design process first used at the Peach Orchard and then at the new site—where ideas for new features were quickly implemented—made it hard for some to settle for a more traditional, slow, city-driven approach. It was more difficult, one leader said, to get people excited about issues such as permitting than in building for the future.

On the other side, city officials, even eight years out, remained overwhelmed with the massive but underfunded process of rebuilding from the damage of Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, free-wheeling skateboarders were often seen as scofflaws and vandalizers of public spaces rather than a legitimate group of park users deserving attention and response. Officials admitted having negative views of the skateboarders at the start of the process, although some became, in the end, enthralled with what had been achieved at Parisite and supporters of the project.

While some in city government were upset at the idea of a skatepark being built without proper permission or oversight, others saw the potential for important benefit to the city. Mayor Mitch Landrieu noted that he and his

staff had for years been approached by people asking for city-built skateboard facilities, so much so that in early 2012, around the time the Peach Orchard was being built and then demolished, he asked the Department of Capital Project Administration to identify sites in every city district where skateparks might be built. For officials who were seeking such sites and who had been promoting innovative public-private partnerships, the Transitional Spaces group was handing them an opportunity for a quick “win”—placing a skatepark on an unused space that could be ready quickly and at little or no cost to the city.

Moreover, the city had a large set of concrete skateboarding elements ready for a park. In 2011, Red Bull, working with the California-based skatepark design/build organization Spohn Ranch, had developed a promotional event called the Mississippi Grind. For the Grind, a floating skatepark barge made its way down the Mississippi River, stopping at St. Paul, Minnesota; Davenport, Indiana; St. Louis, Missouri; and, finally, New Orleans. At each stop, a skateboarding competition was held, with the winner getting a “Ticket to Ride” to the next stop. After the finals in New Orleans, the barge’s concrete skating pieces were donated to the City of New Orleans for placement in a skatepark. With no such park to put them in at that point, the city placed the pieces in long-term storage. Parise presented an opportunity to make use of these pieces and stop paying for their storage.

It took 18 months to get an agreement, including a memorandum of understanding (MOU), that all parties were satisfied with, for several reasons. First, city officials were overwhelmed with the number of projects underway and badly understaffed. Second, a great deal of time was spent by New Orleans officials and Tulane representatives working through responsibility for risk and liability. Third, the city had to amend its joint use agreement with the state to include skateboarding as an allowed recreational activity, which was achieved in 2013.

The agreement and approval came in the form of a new MOU between three governmental bodies—the City of New Orleans, the State of Louisiana, and the US Department of Transportation—and Transitional Spaces. The MOU reaffirmed the status of the space as a part of the New Orleans



Albert and Tina Small/Center for Collaborative Design

*Red Bull donated skating elements from its “Mississippi Grind” floating skatepark to the city.*

Recreation Development Commission on land leased from the State of Louisiana. It also changed language in the original joint use agreement between the city and state to specifically allow skateboarding on the site. As a city park, liability would be covered by the city’s umbrella insurance policy. For its part, the federal government agreed to allow this use of the space under an interstate highway and permitted signage and decorative painting on highway columns and fences. The city took on no responsibility for costs or management of construction, operation, or maintenance—that was all to be taken care of by users, under the aegis of Transitional Spaces.

The process of getting to the MOU not only provided a legal basis for the park; it also showed a change in perception of the young people who designed it, built it, and skated there, who were now seen as responsible and capable of maintaining a safe and desired site. It was also an acceptance of the DIY model as a way to get a useful project built outside of city bureaucracy and budgeting.

## LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The leadership that was primarily responsible for creating this park came first from the skaters who found and claimed the site and provided the energy and skills to turn it into a DIY skatepark. They were able to succeed because of significant support from the Small Center at Tulane, primarily in terms of the expertise the center was able to bring to bear in design, community participation, and negotiating city processes.

**Transitional Spaces** was made up of what was originally an ad hoc group of people from many parts of the city who came together informally to support skateboarding, responding to what was perceived as a distinct lack of city support for the sport as well as young skateboarders unserved by the city's parks and completely unacknowledged by city government, except when they were seen as a nuisance. It was a loosely formed association of people with similar interests, and people remained a part of the organization only as long as they felt an affinity for it and saw the park as exciting and meeting their needs for fun, creativity, and community. There was, however, a core group who took on leadership roles over time, which was especially needed once the nonprofit organization was formed and negotiations with the city began. These included Ally Bruser, Ali Rex, Jackson Blalock, and Skylar Fein, a New Orleans artist who took on significant responsibility when negotiations were underway with the city to formalize the park.

The group of skaters and builders grew organically as the initial efforts developed and included a racially diverse group of men and women. Many were lifelong New Orleans residents; others had come to New Orleans to help in the recovery from Hurricane Katrina; some were local artists and professionals. They took an abandoned and overlooked space, cleaned it up, and built the initial elements of a skateable area that became heavily used by skaters. The use of this site, however, also made this unapproved park visible to city officials and, therefore, at risk of being demolished by the city. The group leaders realized that they needed to form a legal entity in order to be able to work with city and Small Center to legitimize the space.

The mission of Transitional Spaces goes beyond Parisite to “design and implement public skateparks in Louisiana that focus on safe recreational



Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

*The skaters formed Transitional Spaces to access resources and negotiate with the city.*

Jose Corto



*A core group of skaters including Skylar Fein (right) took on significant responsibilities.*



*The Albert and Tina Small Center and Emily Taylor Welty (right) provided critical design assistance.*

and educational opportunities for youth.” In reality, however, their resources are stretched thin just by seeing through the development of Parisite. No other sites are currently being addressed.

The organization’s name has meaning on several levels. The area chosen is a transitional space in between three neighborhoods. The park itself underwent a transition from a city park, to an illegal dump, then a squatter DIY skatepark, and most recently a public park of the City of New Orleans. And, finally, “transition” is the term used to describe a skateboarding move between horizontal and vertical surfaces involving ramps or large curved concrete planes.

**The Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design** is the community design center of the Tulane University School of Architecture. It began in 2005 as a way for the university to take part in and support the recovery of the city from Hurricane Katrina, using applied projects to help train design students and support efforts of local nonprofit and community groups. The Small Center is intended to serve people often underserved by the design professions. Operating “at intersection of design and civic engagement,” the center believes that everyone should be empowered to help shape the built environments in which they live, work, and play. As such, their role extends beyond architecture to include diplomacy, design education, and project facilitation to support community engagement and design excellence. The Small Center uses an annual request for proposals process to identify projects within New Orleans that need design expertise. Projects are chosen based on the submitting organization’s capacity, student learning and design opportunities, scale of project, and promise of project to address community needs. Once selected, projects become the focus of the center’s support and expertise and one becomes the site for a graduate and undergraduate architecture design/build studio. Transitional Spaces’ proposal for Parisite Skatepark was selected in 2013.

Key staff involved in Parisite included Maurice Cox, director of the Small Center at the time of Transitional Spaces’ application; Ann Yoachim, director of the Small Center at the time of the Rudy Bruner Award submission; Emily Taylor Welty, an architect and professor of practice at the Tulane School of

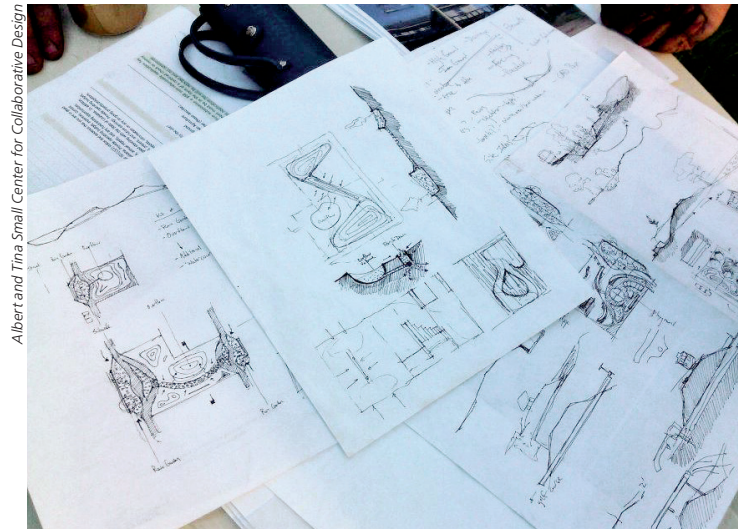
Architecture and assistant director of design/build for the Small Center; Mark Decotis and Doug Harmon, who taught the design/build studios for Parisite as faculty of the Tulane School of Architecture; and Dana Brown & Associates, a New Orleans-based landscape architecture and planning firm with expertise in stormwater management.

**The New Orleans Recreation Development (NORD) Commission** and the **NORD Foundation** were created by city ordinance in 2011 and supported by public referendum. The NORD Commission has 13 community leaders appointed by the mayor with a mission to “advance the physical, mental, and social well-being of New Orleanians by providing safe and welcoming environments for recreational, athletic, and cultural experiences.” The NORD Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that raises funds to support the activities of the NORD Commission. Affairs of parks and recreation centers are dealt with by several different organizations in New Orleans. Both organizations are independent of the New Orleans Parks and Parkways division, which “manages, maintains, develops, beautifies and preserves over 2,000 acres of New Orleans’ public green space.” The NORD Foundation helped organize and host meetings with members of local communities and representatives of Transitional Spaces and Small Center design teams.

**New Orleans Capital Projects Administration (CPA)** supported Parisite by connecting it to its mandate to find and create skateparks. The CPA transferred the Red Bull skating features that had been held in storage to the site, coordinated relationships with other city agencies, and ensured compliance with codes and other city requirements.

## DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

The Parisite Master Plan was informed by meetings with neighborhood groups as well as design charrettes conducted with local skateboarders and users of the park. The NORD Commission ran community meetings in 2011 and 2012 before there was any connection with Parisite, asking the public where the city should put a skatepark, including the Red Bull skating elements then in storage. A prime candidate was along a proposed new greenspace now known as the Lafitte Greenway. Once they became aware of what was being built under the I-610, as noted in a 2013 article in



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*The project became the focus for a Tulane University School of Architecture design/build studio.*



Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

*The design was informed by input from meetings with neighborhood groups, residents, and skaters.*



Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

*The Small Center organized a two-semester design/build process.*

*The Advocate*, the NORD Commission came onboard and focused on that site as the first city skatepark.

In 2013, another series of community engagement meetings at the St. Bernard New Orleans Recreation Development Center were organized by the NORD Commission, working in collaboration with the Small Center, to discuss residents' concerns and plans for the park. There were not many active neighborhood organizations in the area at the time, so the Parisite planning team walked the neighborhood, placing meeting notices on porches.

Common issues that were voiced at meetings concerned potential noise, commotion, and crime stemming from the site. Representatives of Transitional Spaces ensured attendees that the skaters would maintain the park, including cleaning and regulating use of the site, and emphasized the availability of the park for local youth. In most cases, the responses were positive and the meetings ended with the neighborhood participants in support of the park. In some cases, neighbors who were originally opposed to the project became supporters and even helpers. Several people cited one

nearby resident who had lost a free parking spot for his truck when construction began but ended up helping, offering water to workers on site.

Transitional Space's underlying philosophy, as stated in the skatepark's master plan, is that parks should be open and free and should instill "a sense of ownership, responsibility, and pride in both their participants and neighbors" in the process of creating an important community asset. Transitional Spaces identified four principles for its skatepark mission:

- Fight blight by cleaning up and activating disused urban spaces.
- Use DIY design and build processes to support community involvement and ownership.
- "Skatejam Eco": Provide environmental benefits within the skatepark design such as stormwater overflow with the rain garden.
- Inclusiveness: Provide support and access for non-traditional skaters, such as girls, as well as the non-skating public.

The master plan for the site was developed by the Tulane University design studio. The Small Center organized two 14-week classes intended to focus on the design/build process for Parisite. The first semester involved the class collaborating with Transitional Spaces and nearby residents to develop the master plan, while the second semester largely entailed students and Transitional Spaces members working together to build the entry area (Phase Three as noted below) with its stormwater garden.

The master plan includes a skateboarding area made up of four bays defined and separated by highway support columns. Each bay was to have a distinct set of skateboarding elements, addressing both street-style skating (mostly flat surfaces with obstacles) and transitional style (steep ramps and curved surfaces). Not surprisingly, given the ad hoc nature of the Parisite effort, the way aspects of the construction were carried out, and by whom, varied for each aspect of the park. The construction plan was laid out in four phases.

Phase One focused on the DIY work done by the skaters that began weeks after the Peach Orchard site was demolished in May 2012. Building began in bay one with a massive set of concrete transitions the skaters called Pleasure Island.



A four-bay master plan (above right) was created with distinct skateboarding areas.

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Phase Two involved installation of the stored concrete pieces that came from Red Bull's Mississippi Grind barge, which were taken out of long-term storage by the City of New Orleans and installed in bay four. The pieces were designed by consultants from Spohn Ranch and included ramps, stairs, and horizontal elements. Installation was carried out by professional contractors and paid for by Spohn Ranch. As a finishing touch, they added stained outlines of the states that were the start and end points of the Grind (Minnesota and Louisiana), connected by a blue outline of the Mississippi River. Bays two and three were designated for temporary elements, and they currently hold wood mini-ramps and quarter pipes.

Phase Three addressed the entry and welcome area at the northwest end of the park, along with "rain gardens and a storm water diversion system to alleviate flooding and beautify the site." The plan also included outdoor classroom, public viewing, and seating and picnic areas. The goal of the entryway design was to serve as an identifying and welcoming space for the park with elements that "provide a counterpoint to the hard, loud, and impervious materials of the highway, marking a public point of entry and announcing the space as a 'park.'" This was meant to show that the park was not only for skateboarders by providing attractive views of the park (especially desired by neighborhood residents); a raised area, reached by an accessible ramp, from which spectators could view skateboarding moves and stunts; and a contained planting space designed to catch, hold, filter, and slowly release stormwater runoff from interstate overpass scuppers. The design extends to the sidewalk with a variety of amenities, including seating and vegetation, as a way to offer a welcoming face to the neighborhood.

The designers noted that "creating a sense of landscape with a few built elements allowed for the design to economically



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Construction began with "Pleasure Island," a set of large concrete transitions built by skaters.



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Contractors installed elements from the Red Bull Mississippi Grind barge.



meet the scale of the residual space while softening the severity of the highway infrastructure” with berms and plantings. Faculty and students from the Small Center led the entry and stormwater garden building effort. Transitional Spaces members helped out by volunteering on weekends, video recording the effort, bringing snacks to the student team, and participating in site visits by city officials. Since Tulane University was concerned about liability issues related to ramp building, the Small Center team built platforms up to the ramps while Transitional Spaces skaters and professional builders completed the remaining ramp work. The proposed outdoor classroom and picnic areas were less exciting to the skaters and did not get built.

Phase Four, completed in 2019 and funded by a Kickstarter campaign, installed a peanut pool to fill in the area between the original ramps and Paris Avenue.

The building materials included poured concrete—used for walking areas and formed into ramps, tubes, pipes, and a variety of skateable shapes—as well as found materials such as chairs or tables that could be used as skating elements to jump over or ride along. New ideas for skating elements were often tested by building them with plywood before permanently forming them in concrete. The edge of the park includes steel and concrete ramps, railings, and walkways, along with hand-painted informational signs along the highway and on the cylindrical highway pillars.

The engineering aspects of this project were not especially complex. The requirements were, first, to create concrete forms, sometimes in complicated shapes, that were smooth, safe for skating, and lasting; and, second, to ensure that none of the elements or the work entailed with construction would interfere with highway traffic or infrastructure. The former was accomplished as the skaters learned how to work with concrete, initially on their own through trial and error, and later through training from professional contractors and by working alongside Tulane faculty and students on the construction of the entry area and rain garden. There were issues that had to be addressed with pouring concrete because the ground was so frequently wet and spongy that additional reinforcing was required, using rebar and high-strength concrete mixes. None of the park elements touch or otherwise connect to the massive concrete supports of the highway.



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Students designed and built the park's entry and stormwater garden.



Michael Wong



The park includes (clockwise from bottom left): the entry and stormwater garden, the "peanut pool," an area for street-style skating, and bays offering ramps for transitional skating.

### Landscaping and Sustainability

The original iteration of the park, the Peach Orchard, largely made use of discarded and found objects. Parosite also makes use of existing materials, such as the large skateboarding elements that were donated by Red Bull, and, at a smaller scale, discarded chairs, tables, and the like for street skating.

Stormwater management was an important concern at this site, as elsewhere in New Orleans. Local flooding occurs here not only during hurricanes but also after heavy rains. The problem at Parosite is exacerbated by the heavy water runoff from above—polluted water from highway scuppers that drain onto the site, bringing intense flows during heavy storms. The plan for dealing with stormwater overflow and flooding called for building three areas with layers of gravel and soil with plantings to absorb and hold water, allowing more gradual runoff after a storm.

Planting Zone 1 starts at the curb of Paris Street, at the northwest edge of the park. It provides large spaces to capture and hold water, with an emphasis on native plants with visual variety and attractiveness.

Planting Zone 2 lies along the viewing ramp off Paris Street and under the highway scuppers, where it captures the heaviest stormwater flows. According to the planting plan, this area uses a “mixture of rocks and hardy vascular plants” that can survive these flows and soak up the water, including Little Blue Stem, Coastal Love Grass, Swamp Sunflowers, Equisetum, and Bull Tongue.

Planting Zone 3 lies at the southern edge of the skateable areas and is designed to be an area for gathering and social interaction—a spot where skaters and visitors can sit (or fall) and watch the action. The plantings include porous grass pavers seeded with dwarf mondo grass, a hardy grass-like plant used for groundcover, chosen because it can survive heavy use and soften falls while allowing for drainage.

### Signage

Signs are important to Parosite as a way to announce its presence, communicate rules and events to the many regular as well as occasional visitors, and



Hand-painted signs reflect the youthful, DIY character of the park.

visually reinforce the youthful, freewheeling style of the park. Heidi Tillman, a skateboarder, professional graphic artist, and sign painter, and friend of Skylar Fein, became responsible for Parosite’s signs, as well as stickers and patches promoting the park. Like many others, her interest in working on the project was piqued by the sense of community that formed around this space. Because of the proximity to the interstate highway, signs had to be approved by the federal Department of Transportation, though those officials did not interfere in the creative process.

The largest sign is the long “Parosite Skatepark” announcement on the extended horizontal beam undergirding the roadway, which Tillman painted over several days while riding in an articulating boom. This sign was painted using high-gloss and fade-resistant auto-grade paint and has an intentional dripping and melting quality.

Other signs at ground level include educational panels that describe the stormwater garden, several painted signs mounted on the cylindrical



Signs announce cleanup days, events, and park rules.

highway support columns that announce cleanup days and other events, and signs that describe rules (“no drugs,” “keep it clean,” “respect our neighbors”) and special events.

#### *Programming and Maintenance*

The site is often busy and active with the intended but unprogrammed activity of skaters, especially on summer afternoons, after school hours, and on weekends. There are also many programmed events such as weekly contests (e.g., “worst trick”) and skate jam competitions. Programming, however, is not developed by Transitional Spaces, which sees its purpose and focus as limited to building skateable infrastructure. Instead, programming is created on an ad hoc basis by skaters. Recent events have included a pro skater demonstration sponsored by Red Bull, a memorial for a skater who died, and a queer skate jam sponsored by a group from California. Other events on the site have special purposes, such as to encourage skaters who otherwise might feel unwelcome or intimidated (such as the monthly girls’ skate night sessions), continue



Transitional Spaces

Programming and events are organized on an ad-hoc basis by skaters.

Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design



Mayor Mitch Landrieu celebrated the opening of Parisite Skatepark with a "Reuben" cutting.

construction (ramp-building days,) and promote positive neighborhood relations (barbeques). At cleanup sessions every Saturday at noon, volunteers pick up trash and leave the bags of rubbish at a designated point for pickup by a parks crew. The stormwater garden plantings are maintained by volunteers from Tulane University and other groups who come several times per year.

Unlike many organizations, Transitional Spaces does not use facility rental as a source of revenue. Outside groups can use the park for events and parties at no cost, but only if they don't close areas of the park or make them inaccessible to skaters.

Transitional Spaces is still trying to work through a process and set of rules to govern events held at the park, including whether and how much money to charge and cleanup requirements.

## FINANCING

Parisite had a very small capital budget that was largely met with donated labor, services, and funds, cobbled together from a wide array of foundation and corporate donors as well as two Kickstarter crowdfunding campaigns. As squatters on the site, the skaters had no initial costs for the land. Later, as a result of the negotiated MOU, Parisite was recognized as a designated city park on state land, with no funds changing hands. Almost \$300,000—60% of labor, services, and materials—was donated, in addition to the nearly \$200,000 raised from foundations. Actual funds paid for materials and services totaled \$150,000. Similarly, Parisite is very inexpensive to maintain. The users—skaters and others—clean and maintain the site themselves, largely in Saturday invitational cleanup sessions.

Two Kickstarter campaigns also raised funds to support the park. The first, in 2015, was for what was called "Phase 3.5" to build additional concrete ramps and raised \$51,866 from 722 contributors. The second campaign, launched in 2017, was for Phase 4 to build a peanut pool to fill in the area between the original ramps and Paris Avenue. That campaign enlisted 318 backers who pledged a total of \$44,121. While donations ranged from \$7 to \$10,000, two-thirds were \$50 or less.

The DIY attitude of the project is reflected in funding. Payments and contracts for construction of the Red Bull ramps were managed by the New Orleans Capital Project Administration. Large donations for the skatepark included \$10,000 each from the Tony Hawk Foundation and Sheckler Foundation (both of which were founded by professional skateboarders), \$15,000 from the Arts Council of New Orleans, and \$8,000 from the Black Rock Arts Foundation, whose mission is to support and promote community, interactive art, and civic participation. Other support came from the Drew Brees Foundation and the Platforms Fund. The Small Center design/build and master planning work was supported by Johnson Controls, Inc. and the Surdna Foundation.

## PROJECT EVALUATION

One of the basic lessons of Parisite is the value of a truly "bottom-up" process that taps the natural energy and creativity of a group of volunteers wanting to build something that they are passionate about and that reflects their identity and needs. Skateparks, like golf courses, don't fit a prescribed set of dimensions and geometries and are adaptable to the unique ideas and imaginations of their designers. Operating in a city still reeling from a devastating hurricane, badly under-resourced and understaffed, squatting on an unused piece of public land and building the skatepark themselves, without permissions or permits, may have been the only way such a place could have come into being.

There are distinct risks of such a DIY effort being stifled by a more formal and bureaucratic process and regulations. Negotiating with the city was a long and slow process, reflecting at least in part very different backgrounds, approaches, and goals. City officials were focused on the longer term and necessarily much more concerned with codes, uses, and liability. Those negotiating for Transitional Spaces often felt stuck in the middle—hearing city concerns for codes and processes on one hand and fielding frustration from Transitional Spaces members who thought they were being too bureaucratic and restrained on the other. The risk throughout this process was that skaters would feel less than well represented in these discussions, get discouraged at the slow pace of talks and other limitations, and walk away from the project. That the volunteer

**TABLE 1: DEVELOPMENT BUDGET****SOURCES****Funds**

Kickstarter 2015 - initial ramps	\$47,000
Kickstarter 2017 - peanut pool	\$44,000
Tony Hawk Foundation	\$10,000
Sheckler Foundation	\$10,000
Black Rock Arts Foundation	\$8,000
Platforms Fund	\$2,500
Drew Brees Dream Foundation	\$2,500
Harrah's	\$1,000
Arts Council of New Orleans - skateable art piece	\$15,000
Johnson Controls Inc., Surdna Foundation - entryway materials	\$45,000
Johnson Controls Inc., Surdna Foundation - subcontractors and sign artist	\$7,000
Subtotal	\$192,000

**IN-KIND (estimated value)**

Red Bull - skating pieces	\$200,000
Red Bull - installation	\$50,000
Small Center/Tulane University - student and staff labor	\$28,000
Small Center/Tulane University - architect/landscape architect	\$20,000
Subtotal	\$298,000

**Total \$490,000****USES****Phase One**

Red Bull skating pieces	\$200,000
Installation	\$50,000

**Phase Two**

Student and staff labor	\$28,000
Architect/landscape architect	\$20,000
Entryway materials	\$45,000
Subcontractors and sign artist	\$7,000

**Phase Three**

Initial ramps	\$47,000
Entry	\$34,000
Skateable art piece	\$15,000

**Phase Four**

Peanut pool	\$44,000
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**Total \$490,000**

Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design



Parasite Skatepark transformed an unused underpass into the city's first public skatepark.

Michael Wong



The initiative tapped university resources and significant volunteer creativity and energy.

effort survived 18 months of negotiation is testimony to the enthusiasm and dedication of the skaters.

Transitional Spaces remains focused solely on building skateable infrastructure at Parasite and, eventually, in other places. As such, it takes a hands-off approach to other aspects related to running this kind of public space, such as programming (done by skaters) and maintaining vegetation (taken care of by volunteers). Transitional Spaces sees the plants as a liability, creating a need for care that can take its attention away from its mission.

#### *Mutual Benefit*

Parasite went from being a squatter site under threat of being bulldozed to a recognized city park opened and celebrated by the mayor. The city gained a park that has become nationally known and was created quickly and at no cost to the city. Transitional Spaces gained security and a sense of permanence by having its park become a part of the city park system, eliminating the risk of demolition. The young developers, however, can no longer be so free-wheeling in their planning, design, and construction. Plans must be submitted to the city and then to the state Department of Transportation and Development, and approvals can take many months—or years.

In a resource-challenged city like New Orleans, there was particular value in this DIY process that created a new park without any city funds or facilities. Moreover, the willingness and demonstrated capability of the users to maintain and clean the site not only made the project acceptable to the city, but also keeps Parasite from suffering from the vagaries of the city budgeting process. By connecting to the Small Center at Tulane University, this DIY model was able to gain the benefit of significant professional expertise and construction (design/build), as well as help negotiating with public agencies and navigating the permitting process. Tulane's design/build students, in return, were able to work with this group and the community and gain the valuable educational experience of turning those interactions into a park design and participating in the implementation of the entry and stormwater garden.

#### *DIY Design*

With little reason to believe that the funding and effort required to create a



skatepark was imminent from the city of New Orleans, young skaters took matters into their own hands. The process, although at first ad hoc and not deeply planned, was effective in creating skateable spaces and recruiting willing participants. When confronted with the possibility that the city might want to tear down the beginnings of the second park under the interstate, skaters noted the irony that the first dollars ever spent by the city on skateboarding would have been for demolition of a useful park.

The Transitional Spaces team was effective in creating two skateparks using a simple and efficient iterative process of brainstorm, design, build, test, and redesign or move on. A democratic model of decision-making led to widespread feelings of ownership of the space, which enabled the self-maintenance approach to work and bolstered confidence that the park, the organization, and the process could survive changes in leadership over time. Several participants built upon this experience by enrolling in professional graduate training programs.

The design offers a model for stormwater management for a city that needs it. The work with the Small Center and Tulane University architecture studio led to the construction of a system for dealing with elevated highway runoff that could become a model for use in other areas of the city.

### *Bootstrapped Financing*

Parasite's financing is unusual in that it depended largely on donated labor and services. In its earliest stages, the project was built by volunteers who planned and designed the skating elements and then built them, often using found materials. Later, as the project evolved and became a more established place supported by the Small Center and recognized by the city, the volunteer labor was supplemented with donated material and services as well as paid contractors, supported with funds from foundations and Kickstarter campaigns.

### *Gaining Legitimacy*

By connecting to a respected local university, Transitional Spaces was able to borrow credibility and gain the ear of city officials. This extended to the development and implementation of a long-term master plan for the park.



Jose Corto

*The collaborative, DIY process yielded the City of New Orleans' first public skatepark.*



Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

*Tulane students gained valuable experience engaging with skaters and the community.*



Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

*The design/build process gave students firsthand construction experience.*

## IMPACT

### *On New Orleans Recreational Facilities*

Because of the DIY effort to create Parisite, New Orleans now has a free and public skatepark that is open to any and all skateboarders. The existence of this skatepark is, in itself, evidence of need, since it was born out of user demand and by user efforts. Other skateparks are needed in New Orleans, and officials have noted many similar unused spaces around the city that could be candidates for development.

By building this park on their own, the skaters created an unorthodox model for development that relied on citizen energy and bypassed traditional planning approaches to service specific needs in a place that was resource poor and overwhelmed with issues of recovery from a major natural disaster. City officials noted that Parisite is viewed as model within New Orleans—both specifically for skateparks and more generally as way of taking unused and undesirable spaces, such as those under elevated highways, and turning them into useful neighborhood places. They cited another under-highway



Jose Corto

*The park illustrates how unused spaces beneath highways can be transformed into neighborhood amenities.*

site—beneath Interstate 10—that is being programmed in a way inspired by Parisite. This site, the Claiborne Corridor Cultural Innovation District, is planned to include an open market under the highway and was supported by a 2017 New Orleans City Council ordinance that allows the city to lease land for such purposes.

Importantly, Parisite is more than a skatepark and was intentionally designed to be used by non-skaters as well. Some use the site to display and sell photographs, homemade clothing lines, and other items, again in an ad hoc fashion that is not organized or controlled by Transitional Spaces. It has become a home base for artists and crafts people and other local “creators of culture.” It is also a site where users reflect the diversity of the city and is a place for people from different neighborhoods to meet.

#### *On the Skaters*

The process of creating the skatepark helped change the lives of some of its founders. In several cases, early members of the group, inspired by their experiences at Parisite, went on to earn professional degrees and start careers related to their work on the site, such as in architecture and early childhood education.

By being able to maintain an orderly, neighborhood-friendly, clean, and well-maintained site, the project also helped change stereotypes, particularly the image held by many adults, including city officials, about the nature of young skateboarders as scofflaws and vandals.

Some have gone as far as to say that Parisite has played an important role in saving the lives of some of these young skaters. Visual Anthropologist Aubrey Edwards conducted an ethnographic study of the users of Parisite Skatepark, interviewing over 100 young people. She concluded that “Parisite was a space that allowed them to create new narratives for their lives ... outside of the culture of crime and violence so many of them were already accustomed to.” Many told her that spending time at Parisite gave them an alternative to the culture of illegal activity, including doing and selling drugs. Mayor Landrieu said that, if anything, it was an understatement. The likelihood that poor Black youth would get involved in criminal activity and have a difficult encounter with police had been fairly high here, and



*Parisite Skatepark has helped to change perceptions about young skateboarders.*



*The park is intentionally designed to be used by both skaters and non-skaters.*

providing an opportunity for these kids to connect to a positive after-school activity—in this case skateboarding and involvement with the site—has proven to be an important alternative to hanging out on the streets.

#### *As a National Model*

Organizations that promote skateparks, such as the Tony Hawk Foundation, use Parisite as an example for the national audience. While there are other examples of DIY skateparks around the world, the foundation sees Parisite as a particularly good example for its creativity and design and for its achieved status as a city park. Parisite shows what can be done from the “bottom up,” creating a well-used space with little capital and virtually no maintenance budget.

Transitional Spaces has not, as originally hoped, been able to follow up the Parisite space with development of skateparks in other sites. The organization’s capacity seems fully engaged in completing Parisite.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

#### *Challenging assumptions and “changing the narrative”*

Parisite was developed by a group of people who saw a specific need in the community, not just for a skatepark but for a place where at-risk youth could channel their energy and get off of the streets, and they wanted immediate action. There was little faith that waiting for the New Orleans city government to act would pay off, since the city’s governing body was overwhelmed with recovery efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Instead, individuals interested in effecting change found a promising space and acted, building themselves a skatepark. In doing so, they violated city codes and statutes, hoping they stayed out of sight of officials. As a result of the guerrilla nature of the construction, their first skatepark was demolished and the second threatened with a similar fate. With perseverance and by bringing in critical expertise and support through the Small Center, however, Parisite was accepted, completed, and even embraced by the City of New Orleans.

#### *Using and transforming obsolete and underutilized infrastructure to serve the demand for outdoor amenities*

The skaters who built Parisite had no choice but to find and use out-of-the-

way, out-of-sight, and unwanted spaces in which to build; they would have been quickly evicted from any more desirable and developable site. In the process of building the skatepark, however, they showed how this kind of undesirable urban void could be transformed into critical urban recreational infrastructure. Transforming such spaces became a key part of the mission of Transitional Spaces.

#### *Equity, diversity, and inclusion*

Equity, diversity, and inclusion were inherent in the formation of Parisite Skatepark. It was begun and built by and for people of diverse genders and races, deliberately including those who are not usually considered mainstream in the skateboarding community through formal activities such as the monthly girls skate night and an informal inclusive atmosphere in what is often a male-dominated sport.

#### *Bootstrapping and challenging the rules*

The people who began to build a skatepark came with little or no financial resources or political power. They leaned heavily on the energy and optimism of their young group of supporters. Using and leveraging scraps of found material, they built places they wanted to use and enjoy. The skaters, and eventually the city, came to them. This was, by most ways of accounting, a hugely risky endeavor, in that the property owners could have (and in one case did) legally evict them and demolish the development. Even so, the level of risk was acceptable for these skaters who in many ways had little to lose and did not see waiting for the city to act as a viable option.

#### *Changing perceptions about people and places*

Many of the people involved in building and using Parisite are at-risk youth, including young Black residents who, on their own and even more so on their skateboards, are often seen by city officials as anti-establishment and potential criminals and vandalers of public space. At least some of these perceptions appear to have changed for officials who watched the skaters channel their energies into building, responsibly using, and maintaining Parisite Skatepark.

#### *Responding to social needs when the city government can’t or won’t*

New Orleans was not a wealthy city before Hurricane Katrina, and afterwards



Many of the people involved in building and using the park are young Black residents.



The park is a powerful example of a grassroots approach to reclaiming urban spaces.

it was overwhelmed with soaring demands for services and infrastructure repair and replacement while funds were shrinking. Parisite is an example of residents responding creatively to their own needs and demonstrating that important innovation often occurs outside the bounds of formal programs. It is to New Orleans' credit that the government recognized the value of what these DIY builders had created and accepted and embraced the park.

### MEETING PROJECT GOALS

Parisite met and in some ways significantly exceeded the initial goals of its founders in becoming a heavily used skatepark that gained official status as a city park with a diverse mixture of thoughtful and carefully constructed skating elements. While it is still unclear how much this place will be used as a model for other sites in the city and elsewhere, it provides a useful example of a grass-roots approach to recovering and reviving abandoned, unwanted, and deteriorated urban spaces.

*GOAL: Create a free and open skating and recreational space for New Orleans youth that meets the desires of local skateboarders through a DIY process.*

Parisite is very successful in providing a site for skateboarding youth, both local and from all over the city (and sometimes from quite a distance away). It is kept very clean by volunteers who come on regularly scheduled cleanup days. Parisite also succeeds in going beyond being a skatepark; it is used by people in the neighborhood as a park and public gathering place for barbecues and other events.

*Goal: Turn an unused, neglected piece of public land into a welcoming, inviting place for skaters and non-skaters alike, using a variety of activities to attract nontraditional skaters and residents of nearby neighborhoods divided by the highway.*

Parisite's design does a good job of activating a previously unused and unsafe space, though it is unclear how much it connects people from neighborhoods separated by the highway. Parisite seems successful in attracting a variety of people, including non-traditional skateboarders, through events such as the monthly girls skate night.

Jose Corito



The effort succeeded in creating a heavily used new park in a under-resourced community.

Michael Wong



The project created a valuable resource for skaters and the broader community.

*GOAL: Develop a model for water capture, filtering, and retention systems in underpasses where high levels of polluted stormwater flow are disruptive and destructive.*

The systems for water capture, filtering, and retention appear to be effective, reportedly working well in storms dumping up to one or two inches of rain in a brief period of time.

### SELECTION COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

The Selection Committee found Parasite Skatepark—a small, grassroots, do-it-yourself effort that succeeded in creating a new city park that is heavily used by Black youth in a disenfranchised neighborhood—a particularly interesting story. The scrappy, “un-sanitized” collaborative effort illustrates how a small but passionate group of volunteers with no funds or infrastructure can overcome enormous obstacles to make their vision a reality. The committee was particularly compelled by the idea, as suggested by a Facebook post, that the park, built by and for at-risk youth, is saving lives.

Although the project was initiated by and for skateboarders and creates a valuable resource and community for those who use it to skate, the park was designed with the broader community in mind. It offers a variety of spaces that can be used for different purposes as well as places for people to sit and watch the people and activities there. The incorporation of the rain garden offers a small-scale, adaptable model for addressing stormwater management, particularly for cities on the front lines of climate change like New Orleans. The committee observed that the project sends an important message about what can be done, especially to people and organizations responsible for urban infrastructure like state highway systems.

The committee was impressed with the overall effort and degree to which collaboration made the project possible. They praised the project leaders for persevering for 18 months and agreed that the project provides a good illustration of how a small, tenacious group can overcome significant hurdles, including negotiating with a hesitant city government. The committee commended the Tulane University Small Center and its critical role in facilitating the design, development, and building processes that enabled the

“The scrappy, ‘unsanitized’ collaborative effort illustrates how a small but passionate group of volunteers with no funds or infrastructure can overcome enormous obstacles.”

realization of the project. The center and its staff provided essential support in helping the team engage the surrounding community, obtain necessary approvals, address liability and ongoing maintenance, and communicate and coordinate with government entities.

The Selection Committee acknowledged that the project got a lot of outside help along the way and wondered if that left the community empowered to do the work without outside help. The involvement of Tulane University prompted a broader discussion about the role and value of university outreach centers in communities. Although they observed that the project had an air of academia about it, the process yielded a tangible result. The committee lauded the Small Center’s role as “academic translators” and its ability to act as a facilitator and agitator to address community needs. Such work provides opportunities to lift up community visions while challenging and expanding the traditional perception of what constitutes “architecture.”

The committee suggested that Parosite Skatepark offers valuable lessons about the benefits of collaboration, noting how it can help government meet its responsibility to serve and help communities access resources to resolve issues. They agreed that while the project highlights the shortcomings of government’s ability to help people who need it most, it also offers hope by providing an example of how people and government can work together to overcome hurdles and create change.

## RELATED RBA WINNERS

While there are many parks and recreational spaces among RBA winners, Parosite Skatepark is unusual in its focus on skateboarding and its creation of a city park constructed and maintained without municipal funding. Although unique in some respects, it shares similarities with other winners that reclaimed and improved overlooked places through scrappy, do-it-yourself initiatives and volunteer labor.



**STOWE RECREATIONAL PATH** in Stowe, Vermont (1989 Silver Medalist) is a five-mile greenway including a paved trail for biking, walking, and cross-country skiing created through community grit and determination. Seeking a safe recreational alternative to busy roads, a local resident led a grassroots, volunteer effort to secure donations of land and funding for the project’s implementation.



**CONGO STREET INITIATIVE** in Dallas, Texas (2013 Silver Medalist) engaged low-income homeowners along a forgotten city block in the reconstruction of five houses and the street. Completed in collaboration with a local community design center with significant volunteer labor, the project incorporates energy-efficient construction, a sixth house that provided temporary housing, and Dallas’ first “green street.”



**TENANT INTERIM LEASE PROGRAM** in New York, New York (1989 Gold Medalist) empowers renters to become owners by engaging them in the repair and maintenance of their homes. Managed by the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the initiative provides training and technical assistance to residents to gain ownership and control of otherwise ignored and abandoned buildings.

Other RBA winners that were initiated through grassroots and volunteer efforts include the Heidelberg Project in Detroit, Michigan (2005 Silver Medalist); Hunts Point Riverside Park in Bronx, New York (2009 Silver Medalist); and Quixote Village in Olympia, Washington (2015 Silver Medalist).

More information about these and other RBA winners can be found at [www.rudybruneraward.org](http://www.rudybruneraward.org).

## Resources

This report was compiled from information gathered from the project application; an extensive site visit by Anne-Marie Lubenau, Robert Shibley, and Richard Wener (lead author) in March 2019; and research and interviews conducted during those processes and throughout the writing of this report. Titles and positions of interviewees and URLs listed below were effective as of the site visit unless otherwise noted.

### INTERVIEWS

#### City of New Orleans

- **Jared Brossett**, City Councilman, District D
- **Haley Delery**, former Project Manager, Capital Projects Administration
- **Mitch Landrieu**, former Mayor
- **Annie LaRock**, former Director, NORD Foundation
- **Vincent Smith**, Director of Capital Projects Administration
- **Emily Wolff**, Director, Office of Youth and Family Development

#### Community

- **John Coyle**, Project Manager, Youth Rebuilding New Orleans
- **Flozell Daniels**, CEO and President, Foundation for Louisiana
- **Aubrey Edwards**, Author, Visual Anthropologist, and Writer
- **Chris Morvant**, District Administrator, Louisiana Department of Transportation
- **Chris Prochaska**, Sergeant, New Orleans Police Department
- **Jeff Schwartz**, Executive Director, Broad Community Connections
- **Alphonse Smith**, Deputy Director, Arts Council of New Orleans
- **Jonathan Tate**, Principal, OJT

#### Consultants

- **Gaylan Williams**, Senior Associate, Dana Brown Associates

#### Transitional Spaces

- **Jackson Blalock**
- **Ally Bruser**

- **Skyler Fein**
- **Heidi Tullman**
- **Julian Wellisz**
- **Various unnamed skaters**

#### Tulane University

- **Matt DeCotiis**, Adjunct Lecturer, School of Architecture
- **Doug Harmon**, Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Architecture
- **Ali Rex**, graduate, School of Architecture (worked on project as a student)
- **Emilie Taylor Welty**, Design/Build Manager, Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design
- **Ann Yoachim**, Director, Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

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