

Riverfront Revival

Reinvented urban parkland breathes new life into downtown Omaha

BY LISA WATERMAN GRAY

On a warm weekday morning, children splashed in cascading water and rode down long slides at Gene Leahy Mall in Omaha, Nebraska. Other kids performed acrobatics inside a brightly hued play structure built both above and below ground. A father and daughter played Ping-Pong while professionals and students tapped away on computers and socialized with one another at shaded tables.

Bustling with life, the updated space emerged in 2022 after the park—previously sunken 13 feet—was raised to the surrounding street level, adding more than 40,000 square feet of parkland in Omaha’s urban core. This project was just the first component of The RiverFront—an enormous redevelopment enterprise near and along the Missouri River that has combined the mall with 2 other reimagined parks. The result is a 72-acre destination with activities and appeal to rival any urban park.

Within Gene Leahy Mall, modern sculptures now complement young trees, flowers, shrubs, and cozy seating beside small gas firepits. At one end of an expansive green space, a massive archway hosts public performances. Flowing grasses line a lagoon and artificial turf covers low hills inside a large dog park.

Next door is the revitalized Heartland of America Park, which reopened last summer. Since the early 1990s, the park’s lake, fountain, and walking trails have welcomed anyone

seeking an urban respite. Today, the updated area also features a riverfront promenade, a lakeside amphitheater, bocce courts, and the stylish Farnam Pier, which overlooks the Missouri River. A newly constructed Skate Ribbon accommodates winter ice-skating and warm-weather roller-skating.

The third and final phase, Lewis and Clark Landing, also reopened last summer after several years of transformative construction, resulting in expansive green space, a prairie garden, and a sandy beach with firepits. Other amenities include volleyball courts and an elaborate playground. All 3 parks connect, linking Omaha’s charming Old Market Entertainment District with the hip NoDo (North Downtown) Entertainment District, which both offer an array of restaurants, coffee shops, breweries, and stores.

While The RiverFront’s activities could keep you busy for hours, no trip to the area would be complete without a visit to the Kiewit Luminarium, which opened last spring within Lewis and Clark Landing. Here, more than 100 interactive displays examine scientific, art-focused, and human-perception concepts.

With its array of natural and man-made attractions, The RiverFront offers a dramatic gateway to the heart of Omaha. Together, these 3 parks create a single dynamic landmark worthy of a visit, whether to sit, stroll, skate, climb, or dig your toes into the sand.

If you go

For details about The RiverFront, call (402) 599-6565 or go to theriverfrontomaha.com. For more information about Omaha, call Visit Omaha at (402) 444-7762 or go to visitomaha.com.

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