Cities across America have found creative ways to integrate green infrastructure with recreation in new and existing parks.

Many cities align development along a river, lakeshore, or ocean, but for landlocked Birmingham, the focal point has long been the city’s railroads. Even though the railyards have shrunk and industrial areas have opened up for redevelopment, trains still regularly rumble through downtown.

By the early 2000s, several studies had suggested converting Railroad Reservation, one of the old industrial sites downtown, into a park. The slowly rebounding central core needed a high-visibility project for future development; a park could reconnect the bifurcated city by linking the historic downtown with the booming University of
Alabama Birmingham campus and hospital south of the tracks. The concept finally gained traction in 2002 when Planning Director Bill Gilchrest arranged for the Urban Land Institute to come down for a study. A positive review, plus the advocacy of Friends of the Railroad Reservation District, pushed the city to update its City Center Master Plan with a focus on the new park. As a bonus, it appeared the park could be designed to reduce the flooding that had plagued the former marsh since the early 1900s.

Public and private funding was in place to start the 19-acre project, which includes five acres of green infrastructure, so development began quickly. Today the park collects and filters all the precipitation that lands on the site and also provides emergency flood protection for the immediate watershed. A wetland pond on one end of the site spills into interconnected lakes that double as a detention basin. From there the system cascades westward through a meandering stream; ultimately, the water is pumped back up to the original pond to keep the system from stagnating. Along the lakeside boardwalk, an 80-foot-long rain curtain circulates water; dramatically backlit at night, it is one of the park’s most popular features.

Original plans called for extending the park to adjoin the 11 active train tracks alongside the site, but the railroad was reluctant so the city settled on a 90-foot setback, forcing changes to the plans. Creative design still makes trainspotting possible, though: excavated soil was mounded into knolls, creating an elevated path with views over the railyard.

But the park was not without controversy. The planned two-and-half-year project took twice as long (and required several groundbreakings) because of political infighting, fundraising challenges, and the land use disputes. But when it finally opened in 2010, it quickly proved its worth: the park became an iconic Birmingham cultural site, attracting over 500,000 visitors annually.

Since the opening, downtown has seen great growth, with some $185 million in development around the park, including a hotel, a renovated vaudeville theater, and several condominium developments. Moreover, Regions Field, an 8,500-seat baseball stadium has even brought the minor-league Birmingham Barons back from the suburbs.

Design and construction, which cost $23 million, was paid for by a mixture of private and public sources, including the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, the Railroad Park Foundation, Alabama Power, Regions Bank, the City of Birmingham, Jefferson County, and even the EPA’s Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program.

According to Railroad Park Foundation Director Camille Spratling, the park’s green infrastructure has been one of its greatest assets. “People love to see species of birds that had disappeared from downtown but are now living in the wetlands,” she explained. “When the lake was built, it was the first time we saw the Birmingham skyline reflected in water, and that was a real point of pride. The park has been a great equalizer, bringing suburban and urban Birmingham together.”