

# The Woodland Discovery Playground

## Shelby Farms Park, Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.A.

Most playgrounds today have remained unchanged since the 1900s. Consisting of steel and concrete, they can be colorful and fun for children, but research shows these structures don't encourage active play, which is imaginative, explorative, and improves creative thinking skills. National play expert Susan Solomon has found that "active play" not only positively impacts a child's physical health, but also has a direct link with positive brain development. Drawing on this research, James Corner Field Operations set out to create a playground in Memphis, Tennessee -- a city with one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the United States -- that would encourage physical activity in a natural setting filled with a sense of discovery.

The Woodland Discovery Playground was created at Shelby Farms Park, a 4,500-acre park, in Memphis. Both the master plan for the entire Shelby Farms Park and the new 4-acre playground were created by James Corner Field Operations. The goal is transform a formerly-agricultural landscape into an international model for sustainable landscape design.

Woodland Discovery Playground is found on a four-acre upland site that was previously home to a twenty-year-old traditional playground that had fallen into disrepair. Woodland Discovery Playground improves upon a degraded play space that had been overtaken by invasive Chinese privet and no longer engaged local children. The design for the new playground capitalizes on its location to accomplish two goals: woodland restoration and a blending of play space and nature for the health and development benefits of children.

The new playground was planned with the input of children from the community. Children participated in a public workshop aimed at identifying what makes a

great playground. Adventure, health, nature, and fun — all criteria determined during the public workshop — were central to James Corner Field Operation's landscape design.

The organization of the playground is defined by a planted arbor of native trees and vines that link six outdoor play rooms. These spaces are topographically interesting and offer different play experiences, each appealing to children of different ages, development stages, and outdoor interests. Ultimately, the playground provides an environment that promotes interaction and active learning — children must move around and look for opportunities to build, climb, and learn. Building upon current research about children's developmental learning, the playground encourages children to discover and learn on their own.

The playground is a model of sustainable landscape design. The playground includes more than 80 new native trees. Some 24,000 square feet of Chinese privet was eradicated. And 39,250-square-feet of diverse, locally adapted, native understory was established. James Corner Field Operations controlled erosion with a new soil management plan.

Sustainable materials were incorporated throughout. In contrast to many toxic materials used in conventional playground, Woodland Discovery Playground uses recycled athletic shoe material as a surface for several play areas and recycled boot material as a soft landing under several playrooms. These surface materials are not only recycled, but they are also permeable and allow stormwater to soak into the ground, feeding the surrounding tree groves.

Embedding the playground in its larger natural

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context creates many opportunities for environmental education. The Woodland Discovery Playground allows for transformation and growth in the environment and children's development.

The playground was one of the first three projects to be certified by the Sustainable Sites Initiative (SITES), the nation's most comprehensive system for rating the sustainable planning, design, construction, and maintenance of built landscapes.

## Project Resources

LEAD LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT AND PROJECT  
MANAGER

**James Corner Field Operations**

CLIENT AND OWNER

**Shelby Farms Park Conservancy**

GENERAL CONTRACTOR

**FlintCo**

LOCAL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

**JPA, Inc.**

ENGINEER

**Pickering, Inc.**

SOIL SCIENTIST

**Pine & Swallow Environmental**

FORESTRY

Dr. Allen E. Houston

HORTICULTURE

Chris Crosby

GEOTECHNICAL ENGINEERING

**Hall, Blake & Associates, Inc.**