

Martin Luther King, Jr. Playground

Buffalo, NY

SETTING



Urban

COST



N/A

SIZE



0.2 acres

OPEN SINCE

October
2019

GRANTEE

Local
non-profit

A magnetic neighborhood play space for all abilities

Project Overview

Martin Luther King, Jr. Park is a signature historic park in Buffalo, New York designed by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in 1874. The park rose to the top in KABOOM!'s community-engaged project prioritization process for needing improvement, notably due to its aging equipment and lack of ADA-accessible pathways.

Prior to the renovation, MLK Jr. Park Playground was an already active site in need of capital investment. Rather than start from scratch on a separate site, the reconstruction project leveraged existing community familiarity with and ties to the site – with a slight site change to improve pathway accessibility. Today, the playground serves residents of adjacent neighborhoods and visitors from a wider area in search of accessible playground.



When we have community meetings, folks will comment on how much they appreciate being able to bring kids with special needs to the site. In the past, they would have to drive out to the suburbs.

STAFF MEMBER
Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy



The conservancy recently received follow-on funding to improve pedestrian lighting along the pathways surrounding playground

↑ In addition to the playground, **Olmsted park offers other recreational amenities** such as sports fields and a large splashpad, all connected by well-kept and shaded pathways



The accessible features set an example for universal design in other New York parks

↑ The playground design is characterized by **universal design features**, or features that make them accessible to people regardless of age or ability, maximizing the number of people that can use them.



↑ **Picnic shelters** located at the playground's edge are typically used for family gatherings and are easily bookable for a small fee.

Origin story

THE SPARK – A COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE A COMMUNITY PLAYGROUND

At the same time that the playground was identified in the Conservancy's 5-year plan as a place that needed improvement, KABOOM! approached the Conservancy with the grant opportunity.



The old playground had outdated equipment and no accessible pathways

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION – BREAKING NEW GROUND IN BUFFALO

The new playground was designed with features for kids of all abilities. By relocating it closer to existing paths and picnic structures, the space today is more easily accessible and comfortable to use. The Conservancy overcame construction challenges on Build Day and today is proud to have led volunteers in building the city's first accessible playground.



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION – TO CENTER COMMUNITY DESIRES

KABOOM! helped implement a fully in-person community engagement process in collaboration with the nearby Buffalo Museum of Science and a local public school. Engagement included small focus groups of parents and current playground users, design sessions with kids and families to dream up future park features, and outreach through community groups and religious institutions. KABOOM! staff facilitated engagement with support from the Olmsted Parks Conservancy, helping translate kids' bold ideas into feasible playground features.



TOP: CHRIS CAYA, WBFO NEWS
BOTTOM LEFT: KABOOM!
BOTTOM RIGHT: BUFFALO OLMSTED PARKS CONSERVANCY



Lessons learned



OUTCOME

THE PROJECT HONORED NEIGHBORHOOD TIES TO THE SPACE.



"I'm here with my daughter and grandson. **I used to bring my daughter here [to the old playground] when she was a baby, and now we're here at the new playground with her baby!**"

– Grandparent at playground

LESSON

Prioritize beloved community spaces in need of investment.

Leverage existing community relations to and association with specific sites and their surroundings rather than forging these from scratch.



OUTCOME

CO-LOCATED AMENITIES MADE THE PLAYGROUND MORE INVITING.



"**There are lots of places to hang out; anybody can come here,** and it's close to school."

– Child playing at playground

LESSON

Consider activity at the playground's edge.

Adjacent amenities that provide basic comforts like shade and water can enhance the overall playground experience for kids and guardians alike, and extend and complement playground use, providing a place to watch, rest, and refresh.



OUTCOME

PLAY BECAME ACCESSIBLE FOR MORE KIDS IN A DISINVESTED NEIGHBORHOOD.



"**We live across town, but bring our child with autism here** because it's such an inviting and accessible place for him. We like going to lunch before or after our time here in the neighborhood."

– Parent at playground

LESSON

Universal design is not a luxury, but a magnet.

Universal design is a critical part of creating more opportunities for all kids to play, regardless of where they live. When put in place, universal design can also become a magnet for visitors from other areas, who participate in the neighborhood economy.