Center City District

Fact Sheet



Sister Cities Park's panoramic views bring skyscrapers, museums, and the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul into harmony, adding a picturesque swath of green to the heart of the city's arts and cultural district.

Sister Cities Park Overview

Originally dedicated in 1976 to honor Philadelphia's participation in the international Sister Cities program, Sister Cities Park underwent a renovation completed in 2012 that converted a barren, underutilized plaza into an urban park with natural play areas and landscaping. Today, the park is a popular destination for families, residents, and visitors to Benjamin Franklin Parkway institutions.

Size: Approximately 1.3 acres

Location: 18th Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway

Original Opening: 1976

Renovation Completed: 2012

100 S. Broad Street, Ste. 1N
Philadelphia, PA 19110

Historical Background

William Penn's Original Vision

Sister Cities Park occupies a portion of what was originally known as Northwest Square, one of the five public squares planned by William Penn in 1682. In 1825, it was renamed Logan Square in honor of statesman James Logan, Penn's colonial secretary and 14th mayor of Philadelphia.

The Great Central Fair

In June 1864, Logan Square served as the grounds for the U.S. Sanitary Commission's Great Central Fair. This three-week event, notably attended by President Abraham Lincoln, raised funds for Union soldiers during the Civil War.

The Sister Cities Program

The Sister Cities International program was initiated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 during the Cold War to promote peace through people-to-people cultural exchange. The program seeks to build partnerships between cities in different countries, fostering mutual understanding, goodwill, and economic partnerships.

Philadelphia joined the Sister Cities network in 1964 and officially established its first relationship with Florence, Italy. The program has since expanded to include partnerships with cities around the globe.

Original Sister Cities Plaza (1976)

During Philadelphia's Bicentennial celebrations in 1976, this portion of Logan Square was formally dedicated as Sister Cities Plaza to recognize the city's commitment to the international Sister Cities program. However, the original plaza design failed to attract significant use or create a welcoming environment.

Transformation to Sister Cities Park (2012)

Center City District undertook a $5.2 million transformation of the plaza, working with landscape architect Studio Bryan Hanes, architectural design firm Digsau, and engineering consultancy Urban Engineers. The renovation, which began with groundbreaking in May 2011 and opened to the public in May 2012, reimagined the space as a richly planted, well-illuminated, and family-friendly park.



Sister Cities Park sits at the midpoint of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, between City Hall and the Philadelphia Museum of Art



Key Elements

Design Concept

The park was designed to balance multiple objectives: creating an intimate, natural-feeling environment within an urban setting; providing opportunities for unstructured play to engage children across a broad age range; incorporating sustainable design features; and honoring Philadelphia's Sister Cities.

Features

Fountain:
The bluestone fountain presents an abstracted globe with Philadelphia at its center. Eleven geyser-like water spouts rise from the surface, each representing one of Philadelphia's Sister Cities. Designed for interactive play, the jets are precisely positioned according to each city's geographic relationship to Philadelphia—their distance from the center reflecting actual distances across the globe.

Children's Discovery Garden:
The nature-inspired play space is designed to encourage imagination, exploration, and unstructured play. Elements include winding pathways that mimic trails through the Wissahickon Valley, scalable rocks and boulders for climbing, a meandering stream with water play features, a "mountain" with multiple routes to the summit, and native plantings to provide texture, color, and learning opportunities.

Interactive play features include a large climbing net, push-button water jets, a stream dam, and a sensory-friendly hut made of twigs and branches that allow children to "hide" inside while remaining in view of caregivers.

Pond & Playground:
The shallow wading pond is a popular destination during warmer months (late April through October) and provides a safe, supervised play environment. When the pond is closed in fall and winter, the space is transformed into the Imagination Playground, featuring oversized modular elements that encourage creative construction and collaborative play.

Pollinator Garden:
A 6,000-square-foot pollinator garden features over 4,000 native plants, flowers, and grasses from more than a dozen different varieties, creating an urban sanctuary for native and migratory birds, bees, butterflies, and other pollinating insects. The garden supports urban biodiversity and educates the public about native ecosystems.

Stone benches:
Salvaged granite was repurposed as seating.

Sustainability Elements

Green Infrastructure:
Native plantings reduce irrigation needs, filter air, and reduce urban heat island effects; pollinator garden supports urban biodiversity; green roof on the café building moderates temperatures and reduces stormwater runoff, geothermal heating and cooling systems for the pavilion

Water Management:
Permeable surfaces allow rainwater infiltration; native plantings capture and filter stormwater runoff; educational water features that demonstrate natural water systems

Materials:
Salvaged granite from the original plaza repurposed as benches and hardscape elements; locally sourced materials including limestone and wood

Food & Beverage

The Sister Cities Café offers food and beverages with both indoor seating and outdoor tables overlooking the garden and parkway. The café is constructed of transparent structural glass walls for sweeping outside views, along with natural materials including Emerson limestone and warm wood ceilings.



Groups of young volunteers from local schools assist with planting in the spring.



The Children's Discovery Garden's rock-lined stream, inspired by the Wissahickon Valley, invites climbing and exploration.



The Sister Cities Café offers indoor and outdoor seating with light fare and refreshments.



The park's Earth Fountain features water spouts positioned to reflect each Sister City's location relative to Philadelphia.

Public Art

AMOR
Robert Indiana (1998)

Robert Indiana's 6-foot-tall AMOR was permanently installed in Sister Cities Park in 2016. It was originally placed atop the Philadelphia Museum of Art steps in September 2015 to commemorate Pope Francis' historic visit to Philadelphia.

The red and blue painted polychrome aluminum sculpture complements Indiana's iconic LOVE sculpture in nearby John F. Kennedy Plaza (also known as LOVE Park), creating a thematic connection between two of Philadelphia's most photographed public art pieces.



Thomas Fitzsimons
Giuseppe Donato (1946)

An Irish immigrant, Thomas Fitzsimons founded a major trading company that provided supplies and funds to American forces during the Revolutionary War. A signer of the U.S. Constitution, he served three terms in Congress. The 8-foot bronze memorial was commissioned by the Society of the Friends of St. Patrick.



Don Diego de Gardoqui

Luis Antonio Sanguino (c. 1977)

Don Diego de Gardoqui served as a financial intermediary during the Revolutionary War, helping bring funds and arms from Spain to America. He then became Spain's first ambassador to the United States. The 8-foot bronze sculpture of Gardoqui was a gift from the Spanish government for the U.S. Bicentennial.



Park Namesake

The Sister Cities program links Philadelphia to 11 cities and regions in 10 countries. Each partnership is formalized through mayoral agreements, committing to exchanges of delegations including political and business leaders, cultural representatives, educators, technical experts, and students.

The program is administered by Citizen Diplomacy International Philadelphia in partnership with the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia.

Philadelphia's Sister Cities and the year of designation:

Florence, Italy
(1964)

Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel
(1966)

Toruń, Poland
(1976)

Tianjin, China
(1980)

Incheon, South Korea
(1983)

Douala, Cameroon
(1986)

Kobe, Japan
(1986)

Nizhny Novgorod, Russia
(1992)

Abruzzo, Italy
(1997)

Aix-en-Provence, France
(1999)

Frankfurt am Main, Germany
(2016)

Recognition & Impact

Since its transformation, Sister Cities Park has been cited as one of the nation's leading multigenerational parks. The successful renovation has been studied as a model for how underutilized urban spaces can be transformed into popular family amenities through thoughtful design and park programming.



A haven for bees, butterflies, and birds — the park's pollinator garden brings native plantings to the heart of the city



The park is close to cultural institutions including the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Ownership & Operations

Ownership:
City of Philadelphia
(leased to Center City District)

Management, Programming & Maintenance:
Center City District

Ongoing Enhancements:
Continuous improvements to the park have been supported by foundations, corporations, and individual donors to the Center City District Foundation.

Visitor Information

Address:
18th Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia PA 19103

Hours:
Daily, 6 a.m. to 1 a.m.

Children's Discovery Garden:
Seasonal; pond typically operates from April to October.

Public Transit:
Multiple SEPTA bus routes serve the Parkway | Nearest subway stations: Race-Vine and Spring Garden on the Broad Street (B) Line | Seasonal PHLASH Downtown Loop stops at the Barnes Foundation (short walk to park)

Accessibility:
ADA accessible with no stairs or barriers from street level

For information about seasonal operations, special events and rentals, and park programming, visit centercityphila.org or call 215.440.5500.