



2019 Winner

Lake Merritt Park Master Plan + Implementation



Lake Merritt is considered the “Jewel of Oakland” by many, which serves as an important open space for not only Oakland’s neighborhoods, but also for other East Bay communities. The inland estuary connects portions of downtown with its many diverse neighborhoods. Open water and shaded green shoreline parks attract a host of users including bicyclists, joggers, sailors, child craft students, picnickers, garden lovers, and bird enthusiasts. Designated as the first United States Wildlife Refuge in the 1880s, the saltwater lake is home to a range of wildlife species.

The City of Oakland adopted the Lake Merritt Park Master Plan in 2002 with the mission that the restored park will serve as a park for all of Oakland. Its green space, water area, playgrounds, and attractions should serve the widest audience of Oakland citizens and visitors, where they learn about the park as a natural resource – unique ecology within a densely urban environment. Thus, the park’s plan was guided by four key tenets – Ecology, Education, Recreation, and Culture.

The ring road that surrounds the park connects to the city grid with easy access to buses, three train stations, and a network of pedestrian and bike routes. Over the years, it has become a venue for multicultural festivals such as Afro Soca Love, Lake Fest, The Pride parade, July 4th, and various festivals that attract thousands of people from all over the Bay Area. It has also become an important venue for political and social movements such as the Women’s March.

Throughout its history, Lake Merritt has been a subject of notable Oakland philanthropy and civic engagement that has contributed significantly to the revitalization and improvement of the park, and the official park master plan.



Lake Merritt’s historical evolution is marked by layers of ecological heritage, unique neighborhood cultures, and recreational resources. The Lake – a part of the original estuary system – its bay connection, and the stream corridors leading in to it, once played a major role in the function of this ecosystem. Creek restorations, reopening of the estuary, interpretive elements, habitat restorations, and improving water quality were ecologically transformative features of the Park Master Plan that have been implemented.

Gateways are coordinated with the locations of creeks and borrow from that character. Lake Merritt is central to both the downtown core, as well as the many historic neighborhoods that surround its edge.

Each neighborhood district projects a unique culture rooted in a social story of ethnic diversity, architectural patterns, and urban form. Small plazas, docks, promenades, and other design elements tell these unique stories. Street tree species are associated with each neighborhood. Special history markers advance the efforts of Oakland to identify and present its rich past. For the recreational benefit of all, new, uninterrupted jogging and walking paths were created around the Lake. Similarly, new bike lanes were added to the roads surrounding the park.

The landscape and urban design improvements have dramatically increased the amount of commuter cyclists, recreational riders, children, and pedestrian strollers in the parkland and adjacent streets around the lake, while rehabilitation of historic elements reestablished these important public places as valuable social spaces for community members and visitors to enjoy. Two historic resources – the Oakland Heritage Alliance and the Oakland Museum – are located on Lake Merritt. History markers are proposed to present the history of the lake – its events, people, related Oakland lore, and the history of the surrounding neighborhoods.



The history of Lake Merritt dates back to the late 1700s when it was marshy brackish tidal marsh resulting from the upland drainage of four streams. Over the years the marshes were subject to sewage disposal and damming. In the 1870s, it was declared by the state government as the first wildlife refuge in the United States. It was listed as a National Historic Landmark in 1963 and National Register of Historic Places in 1966. Over the years, the patterns of use around the lake have evolved to give it a defined urban edge. Several civic, institutional, and recreational projects such as the Laney College, Children's Fairyland, Rotary Natural Science Center, and, more recently, the Church of Christ the Light were built – making it an important civic core of Oakland. As the population of Oakland grew, access to the park became more critical as it provided the much-needed connection with nature. In the early 2000s, the process of restoring water health, adding park space, renovating park facilities, and altering surrounding infrastructure for calming traffic began. Today Lake Merritt is an enduring and successful public space and an indispensable part of civic life.

