

**Civitas/W Team Wins Design Award for Calgary's New St. Patrick's Island Park**  
*Engaging places, revitalized habitat draw crowds—and honors—for nature in the city*



Kids splash in The Seasonal Breach (left), a restored channel on Calgary's St. Patrick's Island that provides gentle water for play. The Tip (right), allows green space for contemplation with downtown and river views. (Photos courtesy Civitas Inc.)

Denver, Colo. – Oct. 14, 2015 – Just weeks after the opening of St. Patrick's Island park, more than 1,000 Calgarians gathered at The Rise – a 30-foot grassy knoll that doubles as a winter sledding hill – for a showing of 'Jurassic World.' And thousands more have gotten their feet wet at "The Seasonal Breach," a restored channel for wading and waterplay. Representing the completion of a four-year design collaboration between Denver urban design and landscape architecture firm [Civitas](#) and W Architecture and Landscape Architecture of New York, Calgary's new 31-acre urban island oasis in the Bow River is drawing awards as well as crowds. The innovative park design has received the just-announced 2015 President's Award of Excellence for Design from ASLA Colorado, as well as [earlier honors](#) from the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects and AIA NY.

Despite envisioning the \$20 million project that would bring the Calgary, Alberta community flocking to the once-derelict St. Patrick's Island for an authentic experience of nature in the city, Civitas founding Principal [Mark Johnson](#) was gratified by the community response at the fall grand opening ceremony. "It was a love fest," Johnson says. "We believed in its success, but it was still a surprise to see how quickly the public took to the revitalized island and claimed it as their own. They're using it exactly as we hoped they would."

Barbara Wilks of W Architecture and Landscape Architecture agrees. "The most significant impact our project has is to bring Calgarians back in touch with the river at the very point where it was founded," says Wilks. "By reviving this forgotten and underutilized park, it also provides a new place to forge traditions bringing people, the river and the city together."

The St. Patrick's Island project was awarded to the Civitas/W team in a 2011 request for proposal process initiated by Calgary Municipal Land Corporation (CMLC), which has spearheaded the new vision for the park and surrounding urban redevelopment of the East Village community. "We knew we had found the right talent for this project," says Michael Brown, CMLC president and CEO. "Their interpretation of our vision was right on the mark and reflected what the public told us. Calgarians wanted St. Patrick's Island to retain its natural beauty, but also wanted the island to be safer, more accessible and more user-friendly."

Calgary's oldest park, St. Patrick's Island had become neglected over the years. Historically used by buffalo and Canada's aboriginal people as a crossing, the island had attracted crime and drug trades that ultimately left a decayed landscape. Today, the reimagined park lies geographically at the center of an ambitious redevelopment strategy for the city's downtown.

The Civitas/W design builds on a biophilia theme and extensive community input included in CMLC's original master plan, explains Civitas Principal Scott Jordan, who served as project manager for the revitalization. "The island had basically stopped evolving and functioning as an island. With this design transformation, we've reintroduced a resource that's set within one of the most beautiful rivers flowing through a downtown metropolis in North America," adds Jordan, who refers to the island park as a "new backyard" for downtown Calgary.

Rather than starting from scratch, the multi-disciplinary team led by Civitas and W approached the project very strategically, says Jordan. "CMLC and thousands of Calgarians' had expressed that they wanted it to feel like nature in the city, and they wanted to 'get their toes in the water.' We took those ideas to heart and went in very thoughtfully and surgically with our decisions. We focused on areas that were previously degraded and changed non-native lawn areas while preserving and enhancing existing native areas. It was our team's desire to make it a living island within the river that's also a park."

In addition to The Breach and The Rise, the new [St. Patrick's Island](#) includes The Tip – a western vantage point for overlooking the river and downtown Calgary; The Lowland Channel – a seasonal riparian wetland with an elevated boardwalk for no-impact access to the wetland and the Gallery Forest, an important habitat for nesting eagles, owls and songbirds; The Playmound – a children's playground area; The Picnic Grove – an accessible, family-friendly gathering spot; The Cove – a river access for fishing and rafting; and The Lookout Plaza – providing seating areas with an amphitheater and water features.

"Through our design we've been able to preserve the native ecosystems that were on the island before we started and enhance them with new ecosystems and a variety of activities for the community." says Civitas' Jordan. "It's amazing; by 9:30 a.m. you'll see probably two or three hundred people – many of them families with

small kids – already on the island, and the majority of them walked or biked over from adjacent neighborhoods. The park is helping create a heart for downtown Calgary.”

With a core purpose of creating healthier cities, Civitas is an idea-based practice of urban designers, architects and landscape architects engaged in strategic planning for urban change and project design for built works. Having celebrated its [30<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#) in 2014, the consultancy and design studio advises on a wide range of strategies for re-imagining urban life and places. For more information, visit [www.civitasinc.com](http://www.civitasinc.com).

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