



## **A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW — PARKS & REC BUSINESS MAGAZINE (PRB)**

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# **WHITING FOREST PROVIDES A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE THAT FOSTERS INTER-GENERATIONAL INTERACTION**

By Alan Metcalfe

Photos: Nic Lehoux Photography

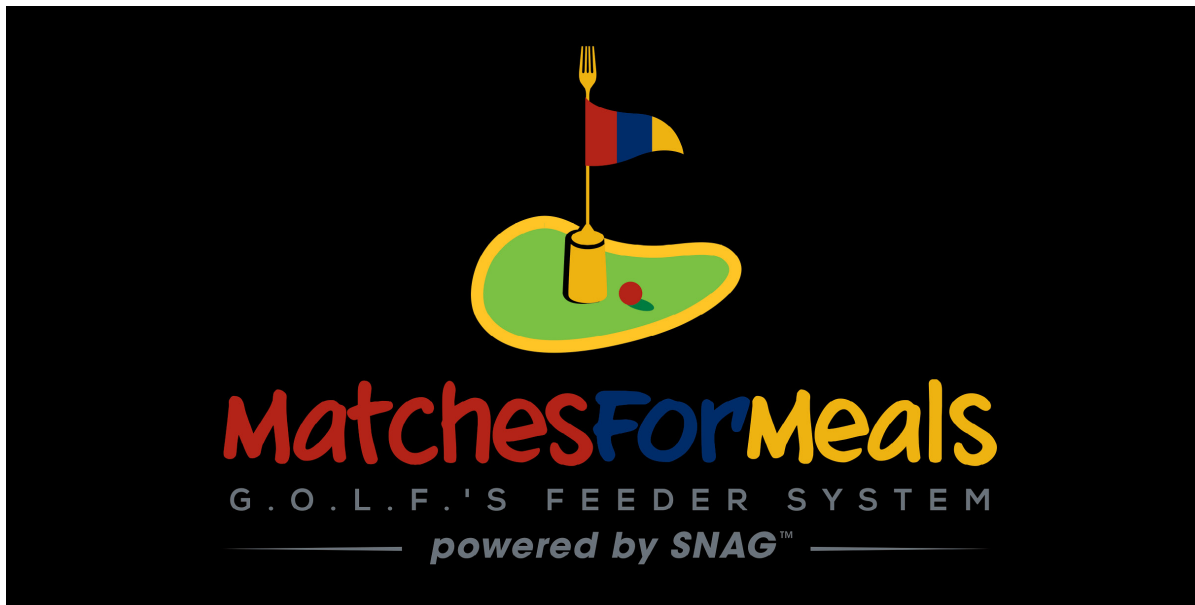
As parks administrators—and parents—know all too well, children are plugged into electronic devices and tuned out of “live” action for too many hours in the day. The quintessential childhood experience of running out the back door and spending the day outside has largely disappeared, as have other critical developmental processes: group socialization, physical fitness, competition, and just plain play.



Thoughtfully designed outdoor spaces like Whiting Forest of Dow Gardens in Midland, Mich., offer an alternative to today's overconnected world. In contrast to the typical playground filled with off-the-shelf recreational equipment, these spaces use the outdoors to create an interactive environment. By generating excitement, the perception of risk, and challenging group activities, the design for this park encourages kids and their families to interact directly with nature and each other. It's a place of discovery. Unscripted social and nature games and hands-on nature experiences provide opportunities for youngsters to take control of their environments, set their own challenges, assess their own risks, take their own responsibility, have their own adventures, learn from all these experiences—and, most of all, to have fun without being told how.

A too-common mistake in park design is environments that are totally focused on kids—to the exclusion of adults. Appealing to entire families—not only young children—is key. If parents or grandparents are relegated to being mere playground observers, they aren't going to jump at the chance to pay a return visit to a park. And if teenagers aren't enticed by what the facility has to offer, they'll opt out as well. Featuring memorable experiences that foster inter-generational interaction will make repeat customers out of one-time visitors.

The highlights of the Whiting Forest installation include the longest tree canopy walk in the United States, a 13,000-square-foot nature play area with child-scaled furnishings and play structures, an amphitheater, and a forest classroom. Terraces and bridges connect these features, with a restored mid-century modern house repurposed as the visitor center, which acts as a hub for the various activities.



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# MORE THAN A MASTER PLAN

One of the first steps in the project was to create an interpretative master plan (IMP). Unlike a conventional master plan, which focuses on a site's physical attributes, the IMP is conceptual: it frames the goal and purpose of the owner of the park (whether an individual, a municipal agency, or a nonprofit organization) and acts as a road map for the institution's growth.

With its emphasis on evolution and adaptability, the IMP fights the universal enemy of public parks and recreational spaces: boredom. For Whiting Forest, the plan maximized social interaction in a reflection of the park's mission of restoring the physical and playful connection between people and nature. The design offers a variety of immediate experiences for the visitor as well as being able to accommodate a diverse range of programming in the future.



Three key objectives directed the design for the project:

**1. Freely—and frequently—engaging the mind.** Throughout the Whiting Forest installation, there are unexpected (albeit carefully planned and designed) events that stimulate and then surprise visitors. An example of a “perceived risk” scenario is the glass-floored viewing platform overlooking the orchard. Defying conventional behavior, visitors are enticed to walk onto the

transparent floor. Emboldened, they often playfully jump up and down—and the platform starts vibrating and sets off clanging sounds in the adjacent sculptures. Taking a risk generates a reward: the experience is fun, a little scary, and confidence-building.

The cargo nets located at the end of one of the arms of the canopy walk are another illustration of play intersecting with perceived risk. Kids are always the first to explore them, leaping onto the suspended rope openings. Rolling and tumbling across the webbing, they bump into other children, triggering an instant kinship through the shared experience and entering fully into the realm of play. Around the secure edges of the nets, parents congregate, sitting and conversing with their peers about nature, the weather, and the fun that the children are experiencing—or simply contemplating the moment.



These spontaneous, personal connections are the complete opposite of the isolating digital experience. When traversing the canopy walk, bouncing on the nets, or hanging out in its large wooden “pods,” visitors are exposed to the sights and sounds of nature in the round, understanding a new point of view through experience, rather than being lectured. Few of us have had the pleasure of seeing a tree from the vantage point of the canopy. We have not had the opportunity to view the ground the way a bird does when perched in the crown. That’s the novelty that proves irresistible to visitors and engages

them physically and emotionally in the experience. It opens the mind and gets families talking.

**2. Selectively engaging with nature.** As Buckminster Fuller famously said, “Don’t fight the forces. Use them.” At Whiting Forest, the outstanding features and views offered on the 54-acre site were identified, and a design was developed that complemented, rather than competed with, the landscape. A variety of environments, including dense forests of native trees, cultivated apple orchards, open meadows, hills, vernal ponds, and streams weren’t a backdrop for the design; they actively shaped it. Nature determined the routes of the canopy walk and ground paths, the location of viewing platforms, and a series of pod-like wooden pavilions and cargo nets situated along the canopy walk.

**3. Actively engaging the body.** The design team looked at Whiting Forest as a sequence of physical experiences that put people outdoors and allow them to explore their surroundings. To ensure a memorable visit, guests are encouraged to experience the forest and their bodies in a different way. Key to that is the 1,400-foot-long canopy walk.

The canopy walk is quite literally a path to the diverse experiences of the forest. It’s very high—up to 40 feet above the forest floor—and open and wide, and can be a little scary. Arriving at the pod-shelters situated along the walk, one feels as though he or she has done some physical work to get to them. An individual is momentarily enclosed, feeling far away from everybody else.

The pods, platforms, and cargo nets all instigate intentional experiences of nature, meant to make visits to Whiting Forest memorable. But, of course, such physicality can’t compromise the safety of the construction. Built on steel stilts, the elevated walkways were engineered to the load and vibration tolerances of commercial bridges. This is especially important with regard to ADA access; the entire length of the canopy walk is wheelchair-accessible, as is a mile and a half of its hard-surface trails running through the forest. From baby carriages to walkers, this feature helps keep families and friends together as they experience the magic of the forest.



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## GOOD DESIGN BRINGS GOOD RESULTS

Throughout Whiting Forest, design was used to inspire a sense of wonder. Good recreational-space design is a catalyst, an excuse for people to let down their guard and be the social animals they really are, in a natural setting. At its essence, it is an informal learning process, which, if executed well, can last a lifetime.

The outcome of this design strategy is quantifiable. Since Whiting Forest opened in November 2018, visitors to Dow Gardens have increased by 30 percent, with average attendance—even through the cold, snowy months of the Michigan winter—ranging from 2,000 to 3,000 people every day.

*Committed to creative, intentional invention as a design process and an outcome, **Alan Metcalfe** founded Metcalfe Architecture & Design in 2001. Providing architecture, exhibition, and graphic design for schools, museums, arboreta, and hospitals, the Philadelphia-based firm is intensely focused on user experience and behavior, both within and around its architecture, combining physical, visual, and experiential elements to socially engage*

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