



Nic Lefebvre

UP FROM THE ASHES

Frick Environmental Center is reborn as a model of sustainability and sensitive design.

BY MARY GILBERT

Memories of the devastating fire that destroyed the old, wooden Environmental Center in the Squirrel Hill portion of Frick Park in 2002 have been put to rest with the completion this month of the long-anticipated, new, and vastly improved \$19 million Frick Environmental Center. The new center, under construction since 2014 and opening to the public on September 10, is a project of Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy in partnership with the City of Pittsburgh.

The new Frick Environmental Center features a rain ravine, artfully designed to control the flow of rainwater, and wood siding that will, over time, naturally mature from its current blond color to gray.



Built in 1979, the first environmental center building was destroyed by fire in 2002. (Photo courtesy of Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy)

At 644 acres, Frick Park is the largest of Pittsburgh's historic parks. Its Environmental Center is the hub of the city's environmental education programs, introducing participants of all ages to world-class, hands-on, experiential learning among the extensive woodlands, streams, meadows, and trails there. It serves 47 classes from 19 schools and maintains a waiting list.

The previous Environmental Center was considered forward-thinking when it was built in 1979. The architecture included solar panels and a vaulted ceiling, and the structure was built into the hillside for a cooling effect. Originally conceived as a nature museum with exhibits, it morphed into a classroom space as the need for educational programs increased. The five-alarm fire that tore through it 14 years ago forced all classes, camps, and other public education into temporary classroom trailers.

Now, rising from the ashes like the legendary phoenix, the new Frick Environmental Center occupies the same site and footprint as its predecessor, just inside the Beechwood Boulevard entrance to the park. And there the comparison ends.

This Frick Environmental Center functions as a LEED platinum, net-zero energy building, dramatically surpassing its namesake with cutting-edge, 21st-century sustainable technology, design, innovation, and artistry.

Three stories high and boasting 15,500 square feet of usable space, the center strives to ensure the gentlest possible impact on its

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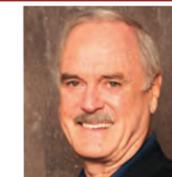
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surroundings as it enhances the visitor experience. Free and open to the public, it provides welcoming indoor learning spaces, restrooms, offices, terraces, an open-air amphitheater, and a dramatic gathering area with a view of the park that is tantamount to a living room in a tree house.

Among its program offerings this season are an adult lecture series on sustainability and the family-friendly event known as Bump in the Night, which features a campfire, pumpkin carving, and observation of nocturnal animals.



Children’s programs at the center connect young people to nature through hands-on experiences.

“Connecting kids and adults to nature is sometimes a rare opportunity in a big city, and in this day and age it’s something people crave,” says Meg Cheever, founder and CEO of Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. “The Frick Environmental Center is a base for that programming, and it’s a pretty spectacular base.”

A team of environmental restoration specialists, engineers, architects, landscapers, and artists worked on the project with the goal of

meeting the rigorous standards of both the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED Platinum designation and the International Living Future Institute’s Living Building Challenge. The latter is a performance-based certification addressing site, water, energy, health, materials, equity, and aesthetics. It requires a built environment to operate as cleanly, beautifully, and efficiently as nature’s architecture and satisfy a series of ambitious requirements over at least a year of continuous operation.

Currently, only five buildings in the world are certified living buildings, including the Center for Sustainable Landscapes at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Schenley Park. Assuming the center meets the necessary requirements at the end of a year, having two such buildings in Pittsburgh would be an important credential for a city playing a leadership role in the green building movement, Cheever asserts.

The center’s net-zero status means that the total amount of energy used annually is equivalent to the amount of renewable energy created on the site. It employs a geothermal heating and cooling system of 18 wells that extend approximately 520 feet below ground to tap

the stable temperature found there and further supports its own needs with solar power harvested on-site. Sensors direct natural ventilation, opening and closing windows according to outdoor conditions.

Construction materials are all non-toxic and regionally sourced, including the black-lucust exterior siding designed to weather to a finish that will blend with the surrounding landscape.

To capture rainwater for irrigation and other non-potable uses such as flushing toilets, sections of the parking area employ permeable pavement for rainwater to percolate into the ground, eliminating runoff. Parking lot canopies that shade visitors’ vehicles and absorb solar energy also aid the rainwater collection and irrigation system. All waste water is treated on-site through a three-step process, with a drip field that sends cleaned effluent back into the park grounds.

Another component of the water reclamation system is the striking Rain Ravine, blending form, function, and artistry. Overlapping slabs of sandstone represent how topographical layers make up the earth and how erosion and age reveal the layers. Rainwater flows from the roof of the center like a curtain and is guid-



Parking lot canopies not only shade vehicles from sun, but also absorb solar energy to be used on-site.

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Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy

Educational programs at the center take place during every season, including winter.



Scott Reiler

The base of the rain ravine, a sandstone water feature by artist Stacy Levy.

ed through a channel onto the sandstone pieces, running into a small pond at the bottom of the site to be absorbed into the ground. The sculpture is a dual attraction—lovely when the weather is clear and a reason to visit the park when it is raining.

The new center further complements the park's ecological landscape with 7,000 newly installed native plants and over 200 trees. Two historic gatehouses at the Beechwood Boulevard entrance have also been restored, and the fountain there now features conservation-minded design and an interactive public pumping system that visitors can control.

"We use nature as an inspiration for design to make people feel good and be happy to use the park," says Marijke Hecht, the conservancy's director of education. Also helping visitors navigate the park is an updated map.

Post-fire, the city's intent was always to rebuild the Environmental Center, notes Jim Griffin, Citiparks director. However, financial restraints initially put a new structure beyond its means. Finally, in 2013, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and the City of Pittsburgh executed an agreement in which the conservancy assumed responsibility for constructing, managing, and operating the new Environmental Center, as well as fundraising. The city committed an initial \$6 million for operations and maintenance from the Frick Trust, a private trust established by Henry Clay Frick at the time of his original donation of land for the park. Going forward, 85 percent of the annual Frick Trust distribution is earmarked for the center.

Griffin calls the Frick Environmental Center a valuable cultural asset with a lasting legacy, noting that "for Pittsburgh, the real value is having kids from all over the city, region, county, and country see how parks and rec is not just about athletics and art, but also about connecting with nature and healthy activities that are vital to their development. For Squirrel Hill, it's an incredible opportunity for kids and families to play and explore safely in a space not defined by rules. And for Frick Park, it's an entry point for discovering this wild urban place."

The Frick Environmental Center Public Celebration is Saturday, September 10, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. There will be guided tours, entertainment, food trucks, prizes, and environmental education programs. For more information, visit pittsburghparks.org/frick-environmental-center.

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