

Ping Tom Memorial Park

Chicago, IL



Chicago Chinatown's Ping Tom Memorial Park is a verdant oasis in a densely populated urban neighborhood that hasn't had a park since it lost its only green space to highway construction almost four decades ago. Landscape architect Ernest Wong, principal of Site Design Group, Ltd. in Chicago, led the transformation of a derelict switchyard wedged between the Chicago River and the railroad tracks into a vibrant public space that reflects the culture and traditions of the community it serves.

The long, narrow, six-acre parcel was purchased by the Chicago Park District in 1983. "I had been familiar with the site for a long time, but the potential wasn't evident until the Chicago Park District cleared it and started the seawall construction," Wong explains. Access on both sides was a major problem. The railroad blocked entry from city streets and the steep drop from the land to the water impeded access to the river. Site Design Group provided access via an at-grade crossing over the railway and by grading the land and terracing it to a promenade along the river's edge. The park's overall design was inspired by the traditional Chinese walled garden. Here, four distinct spaces claim their ground: an entry plaza, a playground, a memorial plaza, and a riverfront plaza and pavilion. Instead of walls, these spaces are defined by their varied natural settings, which include a bamboo forest, and by a series of pathways that lead visitors in meandering sequence from one setting to the next. "The pavilion itself is based on a structure that I'd seen in the Chinese city of Suzhou," Wong says, "and we designed a lot of the ornamentation and the railings to complement it."

Ping Tom Memorial Park is a magnet for the neighborhood. It is used at all hours of the day and by every segment of the Chinatown community. And it has become a destination for residents of other Chicago neighborhoods and visitors to the city as well. As one looks toward the river, the traditional Chinese pavilion stands in stark contrast against the industrial steel lift bridge beyond, a graphic metaphor for the layering of culture and history, tradition and change that defines the community.



PING TOM MEMORIAL PARK (CHICAGO, IL)

Designed by Site Design Group, Ltd., Chicago, IL.

Landscape Architecture Project Director: Ernest Wong

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