CITY RENEWAL AUTHORITY

Haig Park Experiments evaluation summary

June–December 2019

ACT Government | CITY RENEWAL AUTHORITY



“I already felt fairly positive but recent activities have demonstrated the park’s awesome potential for community events.”



Dog-Walking Experiment Photo: Martin Ollman

Cover: Kids outdoor Play Day Photo: Martin Ollman

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is Ngunnawal country. The ACT Government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region.

The region is a significant meeting place to the Ngunnawal and surrounding Aboriginal Nations who have gathered here for thousands of years.

The City Renewal Authority acknowledges and respects the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

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Festival of the Forest Photo: Martin Ollman



Seating Community Co-Design Experiment Photo: Martin Ollman

Introduction

Haig Park, in the heart of our city, is one of Canberra's most prominent urban open spaces.

Located on an Aboriginal pathway — (once) used to travel from Mt Ainslie and Mt Majura, past Black Mountain to the west to meet up at the Ginninderra Creek[1] — Haig Park was planted in 1921 as a large-scale, 19 hectare shelterbelt comprising 14 rows of mixed evergreen and deciduous trees. A heritage-listed urban forest, it is largely intact and over time it has assumed the role of a significant informal city park.

Haig Park's central location, connections to the past and links to the city centre and surrounding suburbs, make it a key destination, transit route and green belt brimming with potential. While past perceptions were that it was unsafe and provided limited respite and recreation opportunities, Haig Park is perfectly positioned to meet the needs and aspirations of a changing and expanding city.

The City Renewal Authority (the Authority) developed the *Haig Park Place Plan*[2] in 2018. The place plan seeks to strengthen the unique qualities of Haig Park and elevate the place experience for everyone who uses it. Created following extensive research and community engagement between 2017 and 2018, the place plan sets out the values, principles and short and long-term actions to guide renewal to realise the community's vision for Haig Park.

"A great park (that is) truly representative of the community who uses it… an active and reflective place geared toward recreation, relaxation and pleasure."

Taking a 'people-first' approach, which puts the community at the heart of the process, the place plan prioritises the following desired outcomes:

- **Heritage** — conserve and respect the heritage values of the park
- **Linkages** — strengthen connections into and within the park
- **Infrastructure** — enhance the function and use of the park
- **Biodiversity** — enhance Haig Park's status as a green lung
- **Identity** — celebrate the unique identity of Haig Park
- **Safety** — ensure Haig Park is a safe place to be at all times
- **Play** — strengthen connections between nature and activities

The Authority, in association with the University of Canberra, Tait Network, Ainslie and Gorman Arts Centres and Dionysus, conducted the Haig Park Experiments in 2019 as a first step towards the revitalisation of this city park. Testing short-term actions recommended in the place plan, the experiments comprised 26 transformational temporary activations, events and installations between June and December 2019.

With a strong focus on community, activity and sustainability, the experiments provided new, interesting and enjoyable ways for almost 30,000 people to experience, view and understand the park. They demonstrated that Haig Park can and must be a place for people; becoming a vital space for public life that provides greater health and wellbeing outcomes for the community.

1 Wally Bell, Ngunnawal Elder, sign installed during National Reconciliation Week and located in Haig Park as part of the experiments program 2020.

2 https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1466705/Haig-Park-Place-Plan_FINAL_SPREADS-FORMAT-.pdf

Haig Park Experiments

Designed to test and understand which improvements would best help the park to become a place all Canberrans enjoy, the experiments included community activities such as a dog-walking group, events such as the Festival of the Forest, and temporary installations such as a nature playground for children.

The Haig Park Experiments set out to:

- **test the potential of placemaking[3] in Haig Park**
- **improve community stewardship of the park**
- **experiment with ways to improve the diversity, number and dwell time of people using the park**
- **improve community perception of Haig Park; and**
- **explore ways to ensure heritage, cultural and environmental values of Haig Park are respected.**

Each experiment was designed to test all aspects of implementation including logistics, regulatory frameworks, heritage permissions, community engagement and environmental constraints. The experiments were then subjected to an ongoing evaluation process — propose, test, monitor, change — to help understand how to achieve the best outcomes over the short and longer term.

By putting 'people-first' at the core of the process, the experiments provided a unique opportunity to listen to what the community and key stakeholders had to say about their perceptions and experiences in Haig Park.

Quantitative and qualitative data was gathered though a combination of place audits, surveys, observation and social media. This information was compared with baseline data from the 2017 place utilisation study[4], previous community consultation and 'spot audits' undertaken in May 2019 to help evaluate the effectiveness of the program on community use and perceptions of Haig Park. The information gathered will be used to guide future infrastructure improvements to the park.



Festival of the Forest Experiment Photo: Martin Ollman

3 Placemaking is an iterative collaborative process of creating places that people love and feel connected to.

4 The Haig Park Utilisation Study was undertaken in 2017 to provide an understanding of the number and characteristics of users of the park.

The following 26 experiments were undertaken between June and December 2019:

- First Nations Project
- Entrances Experiment
- Running Path Experiment
- Desire Line Experiment
- Signage and Wayfinding Experiment
- Seating Experiment
- Litter Reduction Experiment
- Park Caretaker Experiment
- Lighting (Formal) Experiment
- Dog-Walking Experiment
- Community Welcome Experiment
- Art Cart Experiment
- Heritage Signage Experiment
- Carpark Experiment
- Pavilion Experiment
- Lighting (Decorative) Experiment
- Nature Play Experiment
- Bike Pump Track Experiment
- Winter Festival Experiment
- Public Art Experiment
- Kids Movement Experiment
- Seating Community Co-Design Experiment
- Native Plantings Experiment
- Women's 'Health in Nature' Experiment
- Spring Carnival Experiment
- Community Activities Experiment



Women's 'Health in Nature' Experiment Photo: Sarah Hope

"Honestly, having a multi-use green space with regular and varied community events has improved my mental health massively these past few months. I feel more connected and in tune with Canberra as a people and as a place."

Outcomes

The Haig Park Experiments successfully increased visits and activity in Haig Park and helped change how people use, experience and view the park

Some of the most notable outcomes were:

- a significant increase (47 per cent) in visits[5] to the park with almost 30,000 additional visits over the six-month program
- a very significant increase (614 per cent) in daily use by children aged 0-14 years in the park between May and October 2019
- people spending more time in the park with visits ranging from 15 minutes to five hours
- people changing how they see Haig Park to now considering it an asset to their community
- people feeling more connected to the park, each other and their community
- increased community enthusiasm and optimism about the opportunities of the park
- building community and stakeholder capacity to support and host activities and events in the park
- a major increase in physical activity and participation
- increased diversity across all age groups, particularly within the 25 to 34 age group; and
- changes to negative perceptions that the park is unsafe.

The program also provided valuable insights on how the park could be improved in the longer-term and inform the implementation program.



Nature Play Experiment Photo: Sarah Hope

"Nature Play area is AWESOME. Pleeeeeease make this stay when the experiments are finished. This has GOT to become a permanent feature!!!"

5 The Haig Park Experiments were undertaken before the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes to requirements for using public spaces, designed to help protect the community and prevent the spread of COVID-19, has since resulted in reduced visitation and use of Haig Park during the pandemic.

Key statistics

Visits to the park increased by 47 per cent from May (prior to the experiments) — to October (during Haig Park Experiments).

Mid to large scale events were particularly effective in increasing park visititation, with four events attracting 19,650 visitors (65 per cent) of the 30,000 visitors.

- **Big Spring Picnic** → 10,000 visitors
- **Festival of the Forest** → 6,150 visitors
- **Kids Outdoor Play Day** → 2,500 visitors
- **Pop!** → 1,000 visitors

Mid to large scale events also encouraged people to spend more time in the park by providing interesting and diverse activities, food and beverages, and temporary infrastructure such as seating and nature play. These events encouraged people to spend between 15 minutes and five hours in the park.

The experiments program saw increased visits to the park across all age groups. It also built community capacity and social connection to the park, with an extensive range of local individuals and organisations engaged in its implementation, including:

- **230 artists**
- **80 businesses**
- **Eight educational institutions**
- **26 community organisations**


Big Spring Picnic Photo: Martin Ollman


Kids Outdoor Play Day Photo: Martin Ollman


Festival of the Forest Photo: Pat Rose


Pop! Photo: Martin Ollman

Recommendations

Community and stakeholder feedback and site observations have informed a range of recommended actions that have helped make the vision for Haig Park a reality. These actions include improvements to park facilities, events delivery, community engagement and park management.

Actions for greater activation

- Continue to run an events program that builds on the success of the experiments. The activities will focus on areas adjacent to Braddon and Turner. They will include events and placemaking initiatives from August until December 2020 that facilitate community engagement and capacity building.
- Continue to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and representatives in park renewal efforts.
- Build community activity and custodianship through placemaking initiatives and providing tools and resources to support the community to use the park.

Actions for better facilities

- Improved paths, lighting and amenities.
- A permanent nature play area, building on the nature play experiment.
- A pavilion that provides weather protection for events and community activities and is sympathetic to the park's character.
- Provide more physical activity and dog friendly facilities.

Actions for governance and maintenance

- Improve the standard of park maintenance to create a more habitable environment that meets the needs of the growing local community.

"Kid's pump track, running track, dog walking, nature play/kids outdoor play, festival of the forest ... Brought it life, enticed my daughter to ask to play there on multiple occasions."

Next steps

The City Renewal Authority is supporting a program of events, and implementing staged infrastructure improvements for Haig Park based on the recommendations, outcomes and success of the experiments. These actions will provide social and environmental sustainability outcomes for the city.

The program of events and activations will be delivered with the lead support of the University of Canberra, along with Ainslie and Gorman Arts Centres and Dionysus. It will build on those activities that proved most successful during the experiments. Activations will range from small-scale activities that encourage everyday regular routines, temporary interventions that entice the community to spend time in the park, and larger scale seasonal and drawcard events that celebrate the park's unique identity and drive visitation. This is expected to develop into an annual events program.

The program will respond to the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic providing an opportunity to rethink how we use public spaces into the future while still creating places that make a positive difference to people's lives.

Placemaking and community development initiatives will also continue, with initiatives to provide tools, resources and the foundations to help realise the community's vision for Haig Park as a better place for people.

The Authority will meanwhile retain and reuse the facilities and infrastructure from the experiments that were well received by the community, including the nature play, bike track, seating, signage and public art.

The Authority is also currently planning infrastructure improvements. These improvements will build on the findings of the experiments report, the *Haig Park Place Plan* and community feedback received during previous rounds of consultation, including addressing community concerns about safety and visibility in the park.

Improvements include:

- footpath and lighting upgrades
- a new nature play playground; and
- a new community centre comprising a pavilion, parts of the repurposed former depot building and associated landscaping.

The infrastructure improvements will conserve and respect the important heritage values of Haig Park, while supporting gatherings, events and activities that are inclusive and accessible to everyone.

The program of events and infrastructure improvements will adopt the same iterative approach as used in the development of the *Haig Park Place Plan*. The Authority will collaborate with the community and key stakeholders throughout the design process to build on their ideas, skills and knowledge of the park. A process of evaluation and feedback will be maintained so the community and stakeholders can continue building a strong sense of belonging and ownership to achieve the vision for Haig Park.

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Recommended citation
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