



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

Sandwiching in History Tour Laman Plaza Gazebo

2801 Orange Street, North Little Rock

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*The Laman Plaza Gazebo
Photo by AHPP staff, 2022*

Welcome and Intro

Welcome to Laman Plaza! We're here to talk about the history of this special gazebo. Typically, we take you to a property that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This gazebo, however, is not listed. Many people believe it is eligible—but there's an argument against it too. I will give you a glimpse behind the scenes into the inner workings of the National Register, and in twenty minutes from now, you will be able to make your own judgment on whether or not the Laman Plaza Gazebo is eligible for listing.

In this presentation, we delve into the historical and architectural journey of the Laman Plaza Gazebo, situated here in North Little Rock. This exploration navigates through the city's revitalization period during the late 1960s and early 1970s under the leadership of Mayor Casey Laman. It further delves into the life and contributions of the renowned architect E. Fay Jones, who was instrumental in designing the Laman Plaza Gazebo. The presentation also highlights the significant changes to the gazebo over the years and the implications of such transformations on its historical value and recognition.

North Little Rock, Mayor Casey Laman, and Urban Renewal

The late 1960s into the early '70s was a time of revitalization for North Little Rock. Not only were they repaving the way for businesses and rehabbing underdeveloped areas, they were working on giving the city a better reputation and burying its past. If there were any mayor to undertake this job, it was Casey Laman. Although Laman was known for his “brash, intimidating style” as mayor, he was also known to approach decisions with logic and an open mind, he listened to the people, saw votes for what they were, took pride in his city and was loyal to those that were loyal to him.¹ North Little Rock's slogan, “Pledged to Progress” was taken no less than literally by Casey Laman.

In his efforts to modernize the city, North Little Rock participated in the urban renewal movement during Laman's administration. The nationwide urban renewal program's main purpose was to rehab specific areas of a city that were poorly developed or underdeveloped. When we think of urban renewal it can be easy to focus on everything that is lost. We lose homes, churches, schools, and so much more—buildings and places that give the city its physical history, history we can see. On the other hand, with urban renewal we are given the opportunity to create something new. With a clean slate, the city has the chance to offer extraordinary advancements to its community.

¹ (Bradburn, William Fewell "Casey" Laman (1913–2012) 2023)

The urban renewal program is how we lost the historic downtown core of North Little Rock. Without stopping there, multiple areas of North Little Rock were demolished including the area known as Military Heights which was a predominantly African American community of North Little Rock that contained a school, nine churches, numerous residences, and a large 70-year-old Odd Fellows cemetery. Military Heights was a lower-income area of the city which led to poor development and a lack of maintenance. Many people inside and out of Military Heights disagreed with the demolition of this part of the city and had claimed that there were other areas that were worse off. Though the city was at odds with the decision to reconstruct Military Heights from the ground up, it happened anyway. One-hundred-and-forty-acres was set for clearance.

With the demolition of this area came modernized developments—in other words, “out with the old, and in with the new”—not a motto *we* like to use, but without it, we wouldn’t have the pleasure of presenting this gazebo we see here before us. Casey Laman’s take on the urban renewal program was revitalizing this park by creating a public civic center containing a fine arts museum, public library, North Little Rock School Board and administration office, a new city hall, a police and courts building with a city jail, a health center, city garage, a post office, a new central fire station, a municipal auditorium and at the center of it all is where E. Fay Jones comes in; the architect behind the Laman Plaza Gazebo.

E. Fay Jones

Aside from being a father, a husband, a teacher, and a veteran, E. Fay Jones was an internationally well-known architect—born and raised right here in Arkansas. In 1990, Jones was awarded the American Institute of Architects’ highest honor, the AIA Gold medal. Jones was most well-known for his creation **Thorncrowne Chapel** in Eureka Springs, which many of you are most likely familiar with already.

Jones’s talents were seen from a very young age. As a boy, you would most likely find Jones drawing, building tree houses or constructing underground forts. It took viewing a movie on Frank Lloyd Wright and his creation of the **Johnson Wax Building** for Jones to realize his love for art and construction could be combined. After this viewing, it was his mission to put the two together. Unfortunately for

Jones, when it became time for him to attend college, the University of Arkansas did not have a school of architecture. The only classes that pertained to architecture were engineering based, so for two and a half years, Jones studied civil engineering which had amounted to be a very important building block for the designs he would create later on in life.

Frank Lloyd Wright, another internationally well-known architect, played a big role in Fay Jones's life. For many people, it is nothing more than a dream to meet their childhood inspiration, never mind work with them. In 1949 Jones got the opportunity to meet Frank Lloyd Wright at an American Institute of Architects Annual Convention in Houston, Texas, where Wright was to receive his AIA Gold Medal. From this point on Jones and Wright would be forever linked. The two would continue to meet over the years and develop a profound professional relationship. Fay Jones drew much of his inspiration from Frank Lloyd Wright, even as a young child. If you analyze their work, you can find many similarities between the two.

Jones's Architectural Style

Fay Jones's work could not be classified as just one style of architecture. Jones seemed to have invented his own style, combining many past and present styles. He created something organic, sourcing locally and submerging his work in nature rather than the opposite. Some key attributes that we find in Jones's work are gabled roofs, exaggerated eaves, vaulted ceilings, natural lighting, dramatic angling, exposed elements, and above all else—nature. Jones did an excellent job at designing a building to fit seamlessly into its surroundings—to create a man-made structure and have it reflect and complement the organic material around it. We can see examples of this in the **Thorncrown Chapel**, the **Shaheen Goodfellow Stoneflower Cottage**, and the **Edmond House**. In the summer of 2022, we held a virtual Sandwiching in History Tour of the **Orval E. Faubus House** designed by Fay Jones as well. This tour can still be found on our Facebook and YouTube. If you have not already seen this tour, I recommend checking it out to have a better understanding of what Jones was capable of creating.

The Laman Plaza Gazebo still holds many similar attributes that Jones’s past work exhibits, though this one differs slightly. Jones primarily focused on creating residential buildings, so the most significant difference is the fact that this is a *gazebo* in a public park. Similarly, we can still see his use of exposed elements, dramatic angling, exaggerated eaves and a vaulted ceiling. Not all that long ago, we would have also seen his ability to incorporate nature seamlessly into his design.

The Laman Plaza Gazebo and the “Operative Opposite”

The job to design the Laman Plaza Gazebo was introduced to Jones in 1970 and was completed by 1972. This opportunity was presented by Shaheen and Goodfellow whom he formally designed a weekend retreat for. Jones jumped at the opportunity to design a public structure after working mainly with residential structures for 5 years. This would give Jones the opportunity to experiment with different materials, design styles and gain some more public exposure in hopes to expand from his residential portfolio.

For the Laman Plaza Gazebo, Jones decided to experiment with a new technique. The concept of the operative opposite is a creative method of taking historical precedents and reinventing them through a creative interpretation of their functional and/or visual foundations. In an interview with Brandyn Criswell in 1990, Jones stated that:

You’re pressing something here that stems from a source, and there are certain creative connections there, but somehow the impression becomes more innovative, more inventive, and it becomes something to these materials, to this time, to this place; it is trying to be an architect here and now. It’s not trying to ape or mimic that architecture, but it’s trying to extract from that something that has excellent and proven quality.²

An example of the operative opposite can be seen in the Shaheen-Goodfellow weekend retreat. Jones used wood and steel rather than stone to “reinvent” the gothic style buttressing system—internally opposed to externally.

² Quoted in (Williams 2010, 40)

The Laman Plaza Gazebo was inspired by Roman architecture, specifically the Temple of Hercules Victor. Here we can see Jones's use of the operative opposite in the materials used and the overall structural design. Composed entirely of steel, with a copper sheathing on the roof, Jones used these materials vs. the traditional stone to produce a light and airy feeling while still incorporating temple-like designs.



*The Temple of Hercules Victor, Rome, built in the mid-2nd century BC
Photo by [ChromosomeGun](#), 2019, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons*

Jones's design incorporated 8 steel columns that supported the weight of the roof. By using a material that could withstand both tension and compression rather than stone that could only brace the weight of compression—Jones had some more flexibility with his design. By reversing your typical solid column, he designed a hollow tube composed of multiple vertical steel rods that were welded to two circular steel rings at the top and bottom for stability and unity. The capitals on the columns for the Temple of Hercules Victor gradually widened outward. In contrast, Jones designed steel cones in place of the burly capitals found on the Temple of Hercules Victor. These cones gradually invert to a point that are then fixed to the internal steel webbing that is supporting the octagonal roof. To further his design, Jones decided to push the gazebo into the pond while leaving a portion of space

between the water and the bottom of the structure, making it appear to be floating above the reflection pond.

A Change of Setting

The setting we see here today, is not the setting that was intended by Fay Jones, and it is not the same setting we would have been experiencing even just 5 years ago. In 2020, the Laman Plaza was renovated to attract more individuals and provide more purpose to the community of North Little Rock. Part of this renovation entailed infilling the reflection pool and incorporating an accessible playground. Draining the pond did not cause structural damage or even change the physical structure itself in any way.

An important characteristic of Fay Jones's designs is how he is able to incorporate structures almost seamlessly into nature. His structures are truly just a reflection of the nature around it and this gazebo was no exception. His initial design spoke of reflection and rhythms in water. Without the water, without the pond or the ducks he intended the occupants to feed, what is this gazebo? Does it still encompass all Jones was trying to achieve? Did removing the pond really change anything? It truly is all in the eye of the beholder.

Take your time to experience this gazebo. After you have had the chance to immerse yourself in this structure, to watch the children play, hear their laughter echo through steel design, and feel the breeze across your skin while being exposed to the elements in Fay Jones unconfined creation... I want you to close your eyes and imagine yourself here, without the playground. Instead, imagine yourself surrounded by water, rather than laughter you're listening to the ducks quacking in the background. Imagine reading a book or gazing over the railing and watching the ducks swim. Imagine the way the ripples of the water would reflect off of the roof and the way a pebble would echo off of the steel after falling into the water. Imagine a place so calm, where the sound of falling water masked the sound of nearby traffic. Do we get the same experience now as we would have prior to the renovation? Do you think the experience you get here today is relevant to what Jones had anticipated in his design?

In 2019, prior to the renovations, the *Daily Record* published an article written by Mason Toms, where he states, “These days the pavilion is a perfect spot to curl up with a warm cup of coffee and a great book to enjoy the brisk autumn weather.”³ The addition of the playground certainly changed the ambiance and though it may not entice a coffee-sipping-book-reader anymore, it has attracted many other types of individuals.

Having an accessible playground in the heart of the city has given so many children with and without special needs the ability to play with others and has given their parents peace of mind knowing their children are safe. Spoken directly from a mother of a special needs child who has had the pleasure of enjoying this park, she says “This is what North Little Rock has done. It has said, not only do we see you and hear you, we are going to build a special place for you where you feel loved, included, and where you feel like you belong in this city.”⁴

Though many people may be saddened by the loss of a serene location to relax and enjoy their warm beverage, the addition of this park has brought immense joy to many families, encouraged laughter, and has promoted inclusion for children who may not have had that in many other places. The setting may have changed, but the Laman Plaza Gazebo still stands, and it is serving the people who need it. Again, there are different ways of looking at this renovation.

The National Register of Historic Places

Casey Laman’s actions to transform and modernize North Little Rock under the urban renewal program is an excellent example as to why having programs like the National Register is immensely important to ensure the security of our city’s history.

The National Register of Historic Places is a program that is able to recognize districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects of significance in our prehistory and history through documentation of the appearance and importance of the location. Recognition of these properties is important so for years to come, we are

³ (Toms, Natural State of Architecture: November 25 – December 1, 2019 2019)

⁴ Quoted in (Breen 2021)

able to appreciate our local and national heritage and culture. By this, we are able to observe the evolution of places, buildings, sites, and objects. In order to have something listed on the National Register, the National Park Service has created a set of standards that must be met. Places can be registered under one or more of the following criteria:

- **Criterion A** – By being associated with events that have made significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- **Criterion B** – That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- **Criterion C** – That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- **Criterion D** – That has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information in prehistory or history.

Within each criterion, there are additional standards that must be met to ensure that each property is accurately depicting its time period. Ultimately, “the final evaluation and listing of properties in the National Register is the responsibility of the Keeper of the National Register.”

Unlike most of the tours given over the years, this structure unfortunately is not registered on the National Register of Historic places... yet. The Laman Plaza Gazebo was nominated under Criterion C. This structure happens to be most significant for its architecture. Not only was it designed by Fay Jones, it actually was the first design that portrayed the “operative opposite,” which would later become a leading characteristic in his work.

The National Park Service initially declined the nomination for the Laman Plaza Gazebo to be registered as a historical property and requested more information on the infilling of the reflection pool that occurred in 2020. This happens to be important for this nomination because the gazebo holds potential eligibility under Criterion C: Architecture, under the Multiple Property Documentation Form (MPDF) which states that each property must retain all seven aspects of integrity. These seven aspects include location, setting, design, material, workmanship,

feeling, and association. By infilling the reflection pool and adding a playground, it can be argued that this has disturbed the setting and feeling that was intended by the initial architect. In order to have the gazebo officially recognized, it will have to be resubmitted and pose an argument strong enough to convince the Keeper of the National Register as to why the removal of the reflection pool and insertion of a playground does not take away from this property's historical integrity.

You may find yourself torn. You may find yourself at odds with how Casey Laman served as mayor—you may find he was too harsh, or he was simply the right man for the job and was doing what needed to be done. Where do you find yourself with the changes that occurred under the Urban Renewal Program? On one hand it redeveloped some really poor areas and brought new purpose to the land and the community—on the other it also happened to demolish populated neighborhoods—homes, schools, and churches. Finally, you're also likely experiencing mixed emotions in regard to the renovations done around the gazebo. The intended design is no longer here, and the setting has been altered—and in the same breath, this new design has given so many children the opportunity to laugh and play safely while feeling included.

Due to the changes made to the Laman Plaza Gazebo, the gazebo's nomination for the National Register of Historic Places was initially declined, highlighting the importance of maintaining historical integrity in architectural structures. We invite you to ask any questions you may have and take this time to walk around the gazebo and admire the remaining attributes designed by Fay Jones. The story of the Laman Plaza Gazebo does not end here. Nationally recognized for its unique architecture or not, we are happy to appreciate its significance here and now and we hope you will too.

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