

RIVIERA STAGE

PAYING HOMAGE TO A THRIVING COMMUNITY

WORDS : DREW CLARK **IMAGES :** BARBER PHOTO STUDIO AND CAMERON CAMPBELL, AIA, INTEGRATED STUDIO **ARCHITECT :** ASK STUDIO

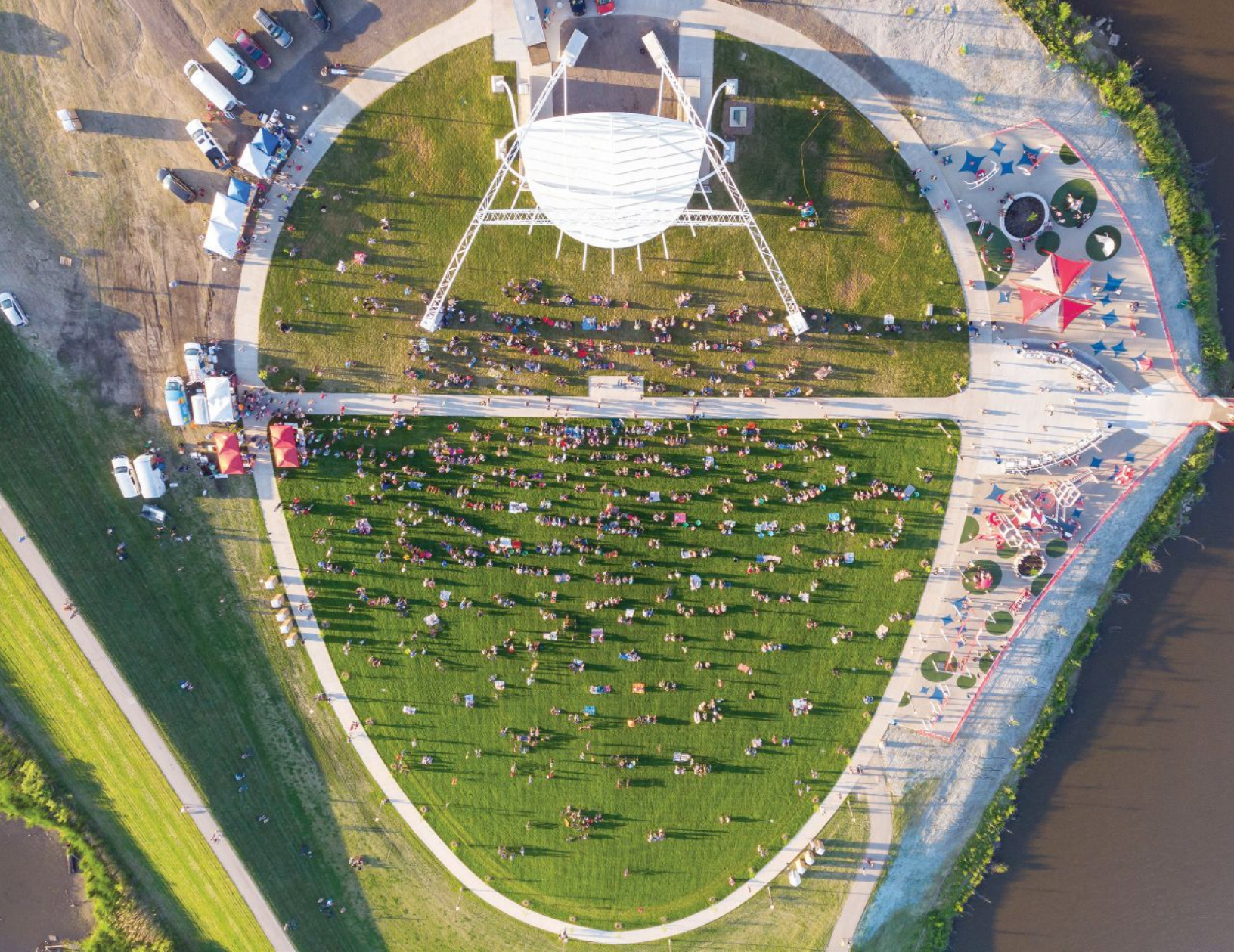
A sculptural structure of concrete and steel in a park lush with history, the Riviera Stage by ASK Studio is an homage to the past in a revitalized community space.

Riverview Park, open from 1915 to 1978, was once home to an amusement park and music venue. Its Riviera Ballroom hosted some of the greatest musicians, including Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and more. Located in Des Moines and serving the Oak Park, Highland Park, and Union Park communities, the site was also home to many carnival rides: a steel coaster named “Wild Mouse” and wooden coaster simply called “The Coaster.”

In its heyday, Riverview Park was an entertainment staple in the Des Moines area. When the park shut down in 1978, the property was left vacant. After being closed for so long, a grassroots effort jump-started by the Parks Area Foundation—and picked up by the Des Moines Parks and Recreation Department—revitalized the site and led to the design and construction of the Riviera Stage amphitheater.

The stage project was completed in three carefully thought-out phases that accommodated budget needs. The first phase focused on the concrete, which involved constructing the stage platform, ramps, and the piers for the steel structure. The second phase was sitework, which included grading, seeding, planting, road turn-around, lighting, and utilities. Finally came the steelwork, with its expressive trussed arches.

Although the stage is modern in design, the main goal of the project was to pay homage to the park’s history. Architects at ASK Studio researched other outdoor stages for design inspiration, the most prominent being the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago designed by architect Frank Gehry. According to Kurtis Wolgast, AIA, architect at ASK Studio, the team aimed to build a structure that created a space not only for performers but for the audience as well. Similar to the structure in Chicago, the Riviera Stage’s massive steel arches “reach out” from the stage and over the enormous lawn. Thus, the arches create an outdoor



Opposite: The Riviera Stage's massive steel arches "reach out" from the stage and over the enormous lawn. **Top:** The effort to revitalize the landscape led to the assembly of an all-inclusive playground that is wheelchair-accessible and modeled after the Coney Island-inspired amusement park. **Bottom left:** The park is situated on an island that can be accessed via a pedestrian bridge. **Bottom right:** The arch design serves as a callback to the roller coasters of the old Riverview Park.



The stage itself is situated on a massive green lawn surrounded by water.

room that brings the audience and performers together into one interconnected space. “When you look at some outdoor amphitheatres, they have spaces that are more confined by seating or how the landscape works around it,” explains Brent Schipper, AIA, principal at ASK Studio. “While we do have some earthen berms around us ... the large arches actually start to define an outdoor space.”

The hard-to-miss truss arches have their own interesting story. To build the stage while working with a more modest budget (“We certainly didn’t have a Frank Gehry budget,” Wolgast jokes), the ASK Studio team had to think outside the box when coming up with materials. “Something that we’ve always strived for at ASK Studio is how [to] take ordinary, off-the-shelf products and elevate them to extraordinary levels,” Wolgast explains. With this in mind, the team utilized trusses that are typically used in agricultural buildings, and barrel barns, to construct the unique contours they had in mind for the stage.

The trusses themselves were cost-effective, and their design serves as a callback to the roller coasters of the old Riverview Park. The arches soar above the park and can be seen from many angles from the surrounding neighborhoods; the curves of the arches mimic the twists and turns of the old roller coasters that once roamed the spot. “I think when people see the Riviera, they don’t see those [trusses] as something that barrel barns are made out of,” Schipper notes. “The use of those components save money, but people don’t see them as storage building parts. Once they see them as a roller coaster, it’s kind of fun.”

The park is situated on an island that can be accessed via a pedestrian bridge. In addition to the stage, the effort to revitalize the landscape led to the assembly of an all-inclusive playground that is wheelchair-accessible and modeled after the Coney Island-inspired amusement park. The stage itself is situated on a massive green lawn surrounded by a lagoon. As described in an article from the *Des Moines Register*, the venue can hold up to 9,000 people during events.

While paying homage to the park itself, ASK Studio also wanted to incorporate the Riviera Ballroom’s old design in the stage. In addition to hosting notable musicians, the ballroom hosted local sock hops and

“The idea of creating spaces and environments that serve a large community is always an exciting thing to be a part of.”

— KURTIS WOLGAST, AIA

teen dances throughout the 1960s. Before the music venue burned down in 1980, one of its most notable characteristics was the open-air dance hall, which had open side walls and exterior seating. When coming up with design ideas, ASK Studio had to contemplate how they could pay tribute to the old Riviera Ballroom with an outdoor stage. While the old ballroom was an indoor structure, its open walls served as design inspiration, and the metal arches come into play once again. Although the arches are meant to resemble roller-coaster tracks, the design also calls back to the old ballroom’s open-air feel: The arches bring the once-indoor space outside. The stage is also located almost exactly where the old dance hall once stood.

Now open to the public, the renovated Riverview Park has not only become a hallmark of the surrounding neighborhoods, but to all of Des Moines. Schipper explains, “I think that what we’ve accomplished is much bigger than the neighborhood; it is citywide—the city [of Des Moines] now thinks of the Riviera Stage as one of its markers.”

“The music venue brings more people to an area that was underutilized and it’s providing new life for a space that was once vibrant,” Wolgast says. The park’s concert series, “Rendezvous on the River,” is now more popular than ever, and the park is home to music festivals, film festivals, movie nights, and more. The stage’s modern design brings life back to the once-abandoned site but also pays respect to the memories of what it was at its core: a gathering place for the city.