More sparkle for a Fort Worth jewel of a park

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Forty years ago, a group of Fort Worth visionaries, most of them women from the Junior League, was the driving force behind creation of the Streams & Valleys Committee, an organization that would focus its attention on reclaiming the Trinity River.

The river had become a dumping ground -- literally. Businesses and residents had turned their backs on it, and a 20-year project by the Corps of Engineers in response to the 1949 devastating flood had removed most of the trees that lined its banks.

A commissioned study by famed architect Lawrence Halprin suggested a grandiose plan of massive tree plantings, miles of bike paths, lighting, water spouts and the adding of low-water dams to keep a constant level in the river rather than what had become barely a trickle in large stretches.

There was also an idea for a bluff overlook below the site of the original fort named Worth, a position that offered a breathtaking view of the West and Clear forks of the river. The city's newly formed 1976 Bicentennial Committee would make the design and creation of "Heritage Park" its major project, to be a permanent gift to the people of Fort Worth.

The design, with its historic plaza and terraced bluff-side walkways, offers both a majesty and a tranquility rarely seen in the heart of a major downtown. The plaza, designed by Halprin, is described by the Texas Historical Commission in part as a half-acre of "interconnected rooms constructed from concrete and activated throughout by flowing water walls, channels and pools."

Unfortunately, those pools are drier today than the Trinity River bed was 40 years ago. The park has been closed since 2007 because of its disrepair and concerns about safety and access. A chain-link fence surrounds the plaza and entrance to the park, which has been placed on the list of Texas' Most Endangered Historic Places.

But this month Heritage Park Plaza, in what is a beautiful ironic twist, received the prestigious honor of being added to the National Register of Historic Places.

"More than any other public park in Fort Worth, Halprin's Heritage Park Plaza is evocative and respectful of the city's past and simultaneously optimistic about its future, as expressed in its combination of modern building materials and methods with symbolic forms, native place species and water," the Texas Historical Commission said in its nomination application.

Charles Birnbaum, founder and president of The Cultural Landscape Foundation, said, "Heritage Park Plaza is of national significance as the design precursor to the FDR Memorial in Washington, D.C. All of the contributing design elements Halprin employed in Fort Worth -- the sequence rooms, the application of narrative art and the use of water to move you through and animate the public spaces -- are refined and incorporated into the FDR Memorial, which opened to the public 17 years later."

Many in Fort Worth have known that this public space was a jewel and have been embarrassed that it was allowed to fall into such disrepair. As a result, a public/private partnership has been formed to raise the $7.3 million needed to renovate the park and return it to public use.

The latest honor should cause those involved to put those restructuring plans on the fast track.