



## **La Petite Roche**

Design Narrative

Little Rock, AR

January 2009

It has been noted that the second most asked question from visitors to our city is, "Where is the little rock?" The landmark and the city's namesake, "La Petite Roche," is located at the north end of Rock Street overlooking the river and is part of the thirty-three acre Riverfront Park. Geographically speaking, it is at the intersection of the Ouachita Mountain foothills, the Gulf Coast Plain and Arkansas River delta.

In 1722 the French explorer Bènard de LaHarpe sailed up the Arkansas River and upon sighting the first rock bluff since leaving the Gulf of Mexico and Mississippi River (a journey of 700 miles), he noted it in his journal as the "big rock", which is upstream and on north side of the river from the little rock. By proximity and to date of finding the "big rock", only spoken words have been available to describe the physical location and history of the little rock. La Petite Roche project aims to create an interpretive and hands-on experience to showcase the significance and history of our city's landmark and namesake.

The historical magnitude of La Petite Roche has motivated an inspired effort to see that the little rock is appropriately featured and interpreted as part of the city's cultural landscape. Sanctioned by the Little Rock Board of Directors, La Petite Roche Project Group has representatives from a wide range of stakeholders including historians, citizens, Arkansas Young Professionals Association, Central High School, Civitan Club, Keep Little Rock Beautiful, Little Rock Visitors and Convention Bureau, Surveyor's Association, Trail of Tears Association, Downtown Partnership, Central Arkansas Library and Little Rock Parks and Recreation. This group is charged with defining the scope of development, assisting in interpretation, and helping promote awareness of La Petite Roche's significance.

In the first stage of construction, the City of Little Rock will utilize staff labor and equipment to excavate the hillside and expose as much of the rock as possible. The second and third stage of the plan calls for private and public funding in order to successfully complete final implementation.

Therefore, City in a Park Conservancy and Land Trust as a non-profit agency whose sole mission is supporting park projects throughout the city successfully obtained a gift of \$250,000 from the Roy and Christine Sturgis Foundation to fund the La Petite Roche project. In addition, Riverfest whose mission is to support solely improvements in Riverfront Park donated \$100,000. An additional \$100,000 is planned from the refinancing of Park Bond Funds to further the financial support.

These funds combined with City of Little Rock staff and equipment will make this over a \$1 million project. The ultimate outcome of the project will raise La Petite Roche to a level that is equal to its significance as the landmark and namesake of the City of Little Rock, which was recently designated as one of the Dozen Distinctive Destinations in the United States by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

In order to accomplish a setting that makes La Petite Roche a focal point from a distance and at several angles, the plans call for extensive excavation at the base of the Junction Bridge and towards

the River Market and Peabody Park. This not only exposes more of the namesake rock, but it also allows for the development of a large stone bluff, which will be dramatically visible from the River Market, Interstate 30 and North Little Rock. Additionally, the plan creates a way for pedestrians and cyclists to access the rock along the Arkansas River between the Peabody Park and Riverfest Amphitheatre. Access will also be provided from the Junction Bridge, the nationally recognized Medical Mile (a section of Arkansas River Trail) and the River Market. Each of these perspectives will offer a unique, quality experience for all who approach the rock.

The excavation will be as much as twenty feet from existing grades near the Junction Bridge. Consequently, a combination of vertical stone walls and slopes to terraced, leveled areas will provide for a variety of spatial experiences and settings. Within these spaces will be the interplay of light and shadow against native plant material and stone boulders. The rock itself will be exposed with the use of native grasses and shrubs to soften its edges. As visitors arrive at the plaza, they will be subtly introduced to a myriad of storylines associated with the rock describing the geological formation, the use of the rock by explorers, Indians, settlers, the Quapaw Line that separated Indians and settlers, the railroad, as well as the Kerr Navigable Stream project for commercial enterprises. In addition, the plaza can be a stage setting for schools, museums, nature centers or the River Market for presentations or special events.

Additionally, Riverfest Amphitheatre due to its proximity to the above will see some new improvements as well. Specifically, there will be earthwork that focuses audiences' views back towards the stage and amphitheatre, where before it was focused away. At the top of the earthwork will be a large vendor pad that can accommodate several concessions operations. This same area will also improve the access and set up for these along with temporary restrooms which are needed significantly in this area of the amphitheatre.

Project design was careful to replicate a riparian zone that includes native boulders and native plant materials one would find on the Arkansas River. In fact, due to the interpretive stories planned in the area, it was important to maintain the native look to enhance peoples' experiences of what it was like before settlement. Consequently, creation of a native river riparian area will have low water and fertilization requirement. It will also lend support to the geophysical needs of soil organisms, which will enhance the native plant population. Impervious surfaces will also be minimized to the areas of circulation and the plaza, which will allow for water percolation within the soil and recharge the aquifer. All purchases for development of the project will be sought within the regional area in order to reduce the use of fossil fuels transporting them to the site from long distances.

It is anticipated that La Petite Roche will have a huge tourist impact. Due to its proximity to the River Market which draws over one million annual visitors, its attraction to a large cross section of the socio-economic populations and other improvements like the Medical Mile and recently added Peabody Park, it is expected to generate much community synergy between all these facilities. Additionally, located just down the street, the William J. Clinton Presidential Center and Heifer International Center draw a combined 500,000 visitors annually, both of which draw on national and international tourist. These centers are expected to continually attract travelers as young as twenty and from around the globe who will visit La Petite Roche.