The 1933 campus pond known for its turtle residents has undergone a renovation

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A popular spot for generations of University of Arizona students, faculty, staff and campus visitors to enjoy a little bit of nature and to revive their spirits is undergoing a period of rejuvenation itself.

Over the summer, Facilities Management crews made a series of improvements at the President's Pond, which hides in plain sight along Park Avenue near Second Street. Considered a campus treasure both for its charm and history — and known colloquially as the Turtle Pond — the pond and surrounding garden once sat on the property of a Queen Anne-style home that served as the University president's official residence from 1894 until it was razed in 1937 to make way for Gila Hall just to the east.

(See more pictures, past and present[1] of the President's Pond in an online gallery.)

The updated design, developed by Mark Novak, University landscape architect, called for the creation of a small brick-lined plaza filled with decomposed granite along the south, east and north sides of the pond, with space for commemorative benches to come later. Additionally, a wheelchair-accessible pathway now connects to the nearby service road, and a spillway made of water-permeable pavers at one end of the plaza will accommodate the occasional pond overflow. A combination of bark mulch and specially selected trees and shrubs will provide a more defined perimeter for the entire space.

"It's an area that attracts a wide variety of people who use it in a variety of ways. Some folks come here to sit and relax and contemplate but it's also a popular spot for school field trips to have lunch here, or sometimes groups do yoga or other workouts," Novak said. "A few years ago, the Campus Arboretum put in a bench, and with that came the idea to make the whole area more amenable for people while also fitting it into the landscape context of the Park Avenue Greenbelt (the historic part of campus), which called for a fairly light touch."

The improvements made over the summer were funded by donations to the Campus Arboretum[2].

Novak consulted with the state of Arizona's Historic Preservation Office to ensure the nothing significant was damaged or removed in the renovation. Built in 1933, the pond anchors one corner of the Campus Historic District[3] and is maintained under the guidelines of the University's Historic Preservation Plan[4], which seeks to preserve and protect historic and cultural resources within the boundaries of the main campus.

"It's a real gem of a project," Novak said. "It's a terrific example of how landscape stewardship and campus development benefit from cooperation between academic and operational arms of the University and from the engagement of the larger community. As University landscape architect on a campus that has a long tradition and history of leadership and innovation in land use and sustainability, my first priority is to preserve what's important to the campus and the community."

Like nearly every other landscaped space at the University, the pond incorporates the overarching goals of the arboretum, which seeks to both preserve important aspects of the University's landscape history and to include the lessons learned from previous projects in the design of new campus green spaces.

"This campus grew up around faculty research," said Tanya Quist, Campus Arboretum director and professor of plant sciences. "Much of the campus is botanically significant because faculty brought plants here from around the world to test whether they were suited to grow in our climate."

One thing the Arboretum doesn't oversee is the pond's starring attraction: turtles. While part of the pond's appeal is the chance to watch the turtles that live in it, Quist says, most, if not all of those residents are abandoned pets.

"We don't know exactly how they came to reside in the pond. It also held koi at one point," Quist said. "As I understand it, they are mostly box turtles. They are not native."

While the lushness of the location has given countless people a place to collect their thoughts and connect with nature, it also proved to be particularly fertile ground for the improvement project's primary benefactors: a pair of now-married university alumni who found it to be a convenient midpoint between their respective classes on the opposite ends of campus.

According to Quist, they wish to remain anonymous.

"It's really remarkable that these relatively recent graduates already have that perspective about how it (the University) affected them and how they want to give back," Quist said. "Over the last five years or so, their gifts have made the area
more suitable and attractive for future donors. I just love their vision."

The final piece of the project will be the installation of a bronze commemorative plaque, which will take place without a dedication ceremony. The next phase will focus on fundraising for the Campus Arboretum to support similar landscape improvements on campus.

Arboretum supporters [8] will be able to purchase commemorative bricks that will be used in the new walkway leading to the pond, or they can sponsor a hand-forged iron bench around the newly refurbished plaza. The Campus Arboretum also plans to raise funds to support similar landscape improvements on campus. For more information, call 520-621-7074 [6] or email infoarboretum@cals.arizona.edu [7].

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