

Already drawing crowds — cyclists, young families, dog walkers and, yes, military history buffs — the newest jumping-off point on Fort Worth's Trinity Trails has been a long time in the making.

Located just outside the Naval Air Station Fort Worth Joint Reserve Base (formerly Carswell Air Force Base), the Airfield Falls Trailhead and Conservation Park is a rugged, low-maintenance green space that stands in contrast to the manicured golf course across the street.

Dallas-based landscape architect Kevin Sloan remembers the scent of jet fuel in the air, the roar of military aircraft overhead some six years ago when he first visited the project site. Sloan was hired by the Tarrant Regional Water District to create the park and trailhead to Airfield Falls, formerly a well-kept secret among the few who knew how to access the natural rock formation on the Trinity.

During the site visit, Sloan asked

Flight Plan

By Laura Samuel Meyn Photos by Mark Graham

It's mission accomplished for a landscape architect charged with designing a trailhead that must honor its military roots while serving the public and promoting conservation.

The centerpiece of the park is parts of an old Navy jet pieced together to suggest an aircraft taking flight.



Cyclists prepare to hit the trail using one of several picnic tables. When the sun goes down, the park glows with carefully placed lights including directional spots mounted on metal poles with vivid red stripes.

Photo by Craig D. Blackmon, FAIA

about the wings and tail section of a retired C-9A Nightingale military plane tucked under a tree. Sloan was asked to figure out how to display those, too. “I had a sense at that moment of what the project could be,” he says. “This is more than



The signage replicates the style of one once used at the entry to the nearby base.

a nice array of sustainable plant material; it’s the history of the place.”

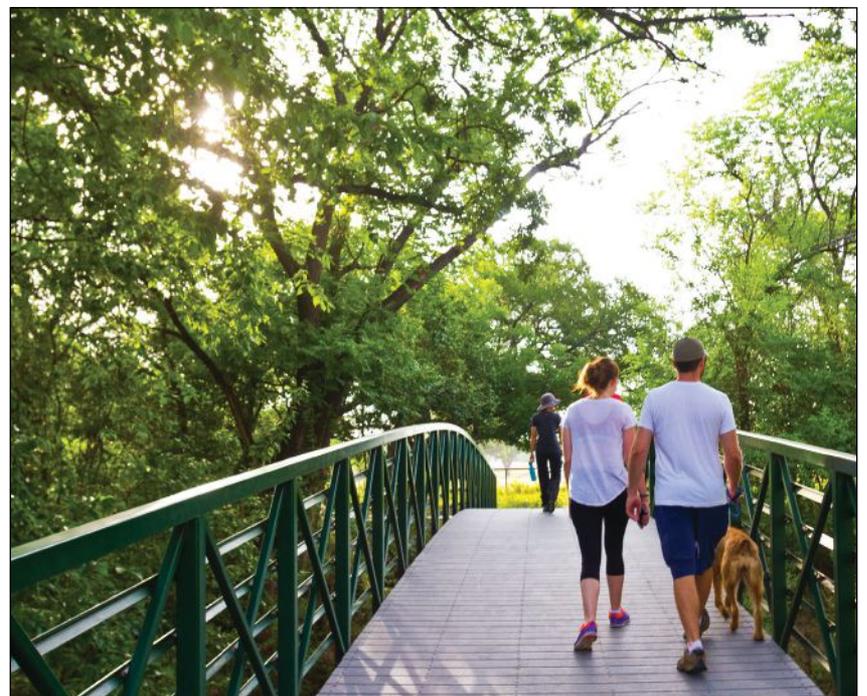
Sloan felt strongly that the plane parts shouldn’t be treated as random sculptural objects. He envisioned the wings and tail arranged in relationship to one another, with the whole craft pointed skyward as if taking off. He built a model for the TRWD — “Building radio-controlled model airplanes in my youth came in handy,” he says — and relied on the structural engineering expertise of former Navy pilot Jeff Koke.

Today, the jet’s 93-foot wingspan is on

magnificent display for park visitors, every detail visible as you walk around and underneath. Navigational lights are triggered at night by motion detectors.

From the paved helipad-like area where the jet looms, two paths, both ADA accessible, diverge. Wide and paved, one leads through the woods and over a series of bridges, an easy ¼-mile route to the picturesque Airfield Falls.

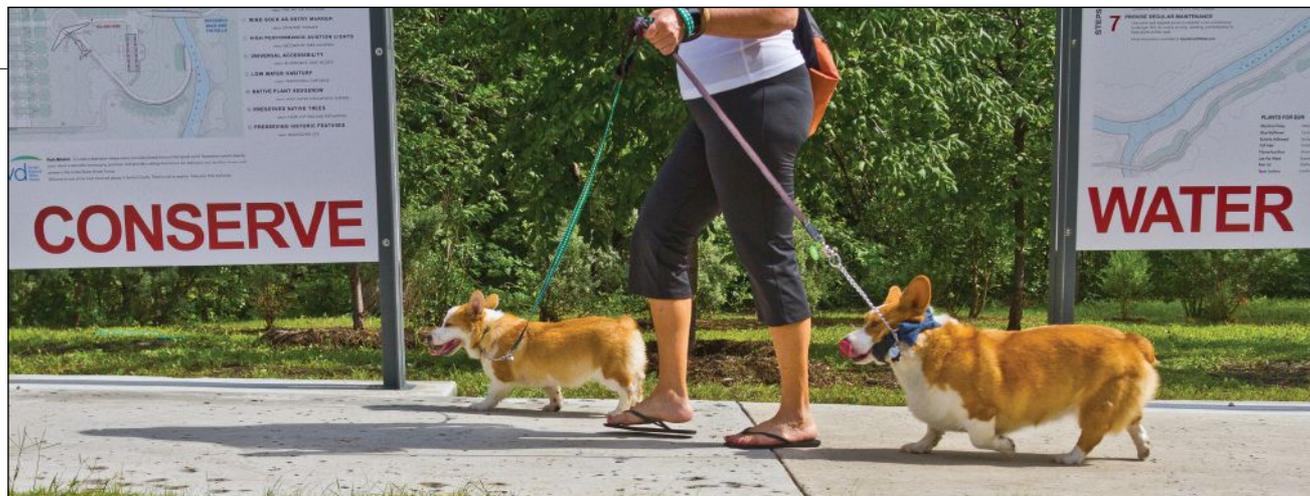
The other curves down to the park’s creek. The path’s fishhook shape follows what was once the driveway to the base commander’s home, winding past where the house originally stood and the semicircular back porch that is still intact. “There were probably a lot of conversations about how Carswell was going to protect North America held here,” says Sloan. Drawing inspiration from Mies van der Rohe’s iconic Farnsworth House, Sloan planted a modern pavilion atop the home’s extant foundation. The



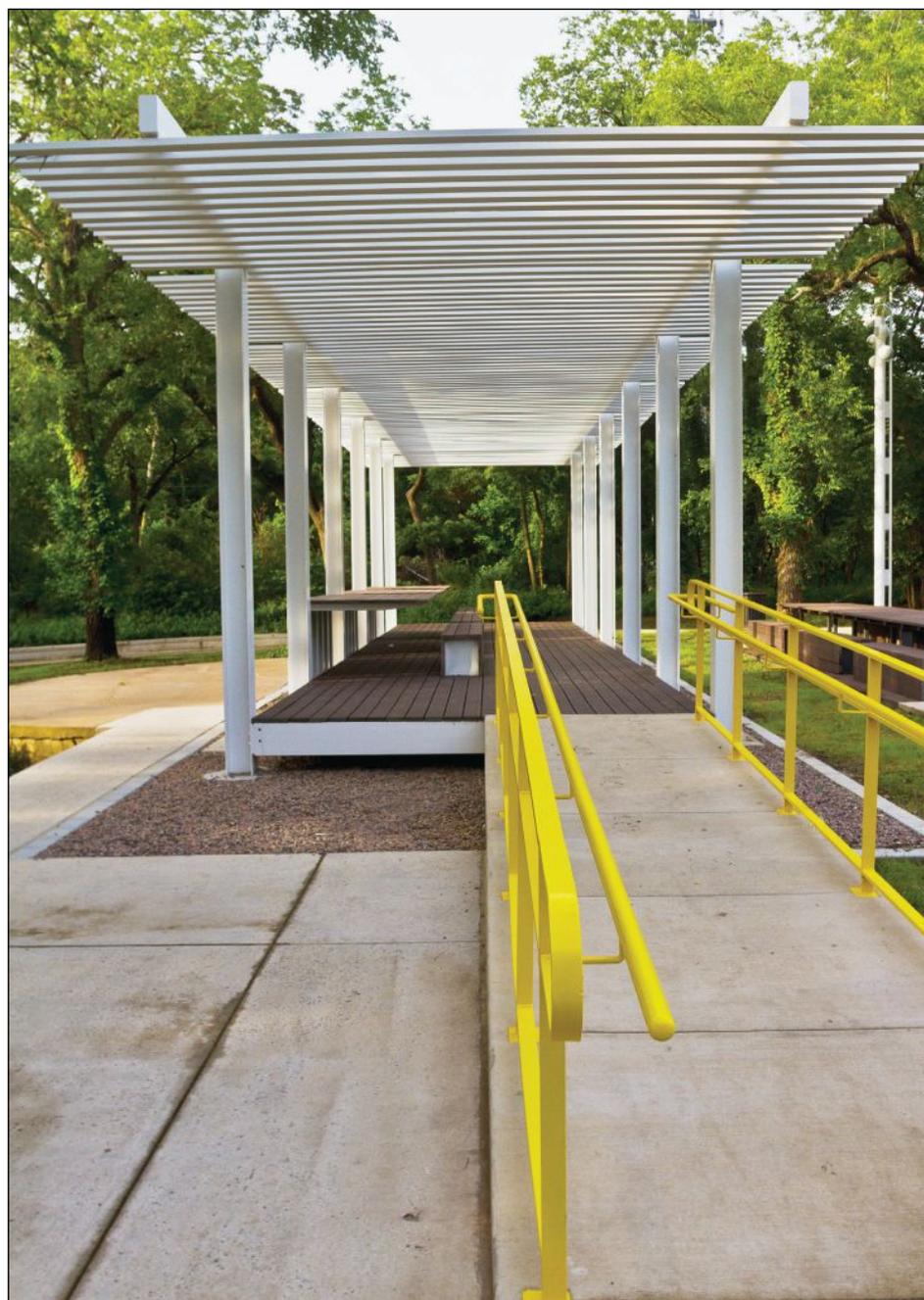
Wide bridges take visitors through the park.

painted steel structure invites visitors to sit and stay awhile. Large built-in picnic tables overlook the creek below, and overhead slats filter the light.

The project’s water conservation details are just as purposeful, if more subtle. The parking lot’s slope directs water to plantings and funnels runoff back into the creek. Native grasses propagated at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center are



Airfield Falls is popular with dog walkers and pups. Signage along the way offers background to the park's mission.



Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House was the inspiration for the park's pavilion. Table and benches sit beneath and next to the wheelchair- and stroller-accessible steel structure. Visible to the left is part of the curved foundation of the former home of the base commander.

Flight Plan

just beginning to take root. The addition of pecan, elm and willow trees is evidence of what Sloan calls “rewilding” — a movement that goes a step beyond xeriscaping. “It’s sustainability taken to its most logical extent, using a lot of materials that attract urban wildlife,” he says.



The park at the entrance also offers

A special water fountain offers a hydration stop, including a feature for filling a bottle with filtered water.

open areas for play, a long harvest table to inspire gatherings and a few creature comforts. Filtered water fountains come in both human and dog heights, and a mister stands ready to offer relief on hot days. Aeronautical inspiration can be seen in the runway lights lining the parking lot, practical in their durability, and bright orange wind socks that mark the turnoff into the park.

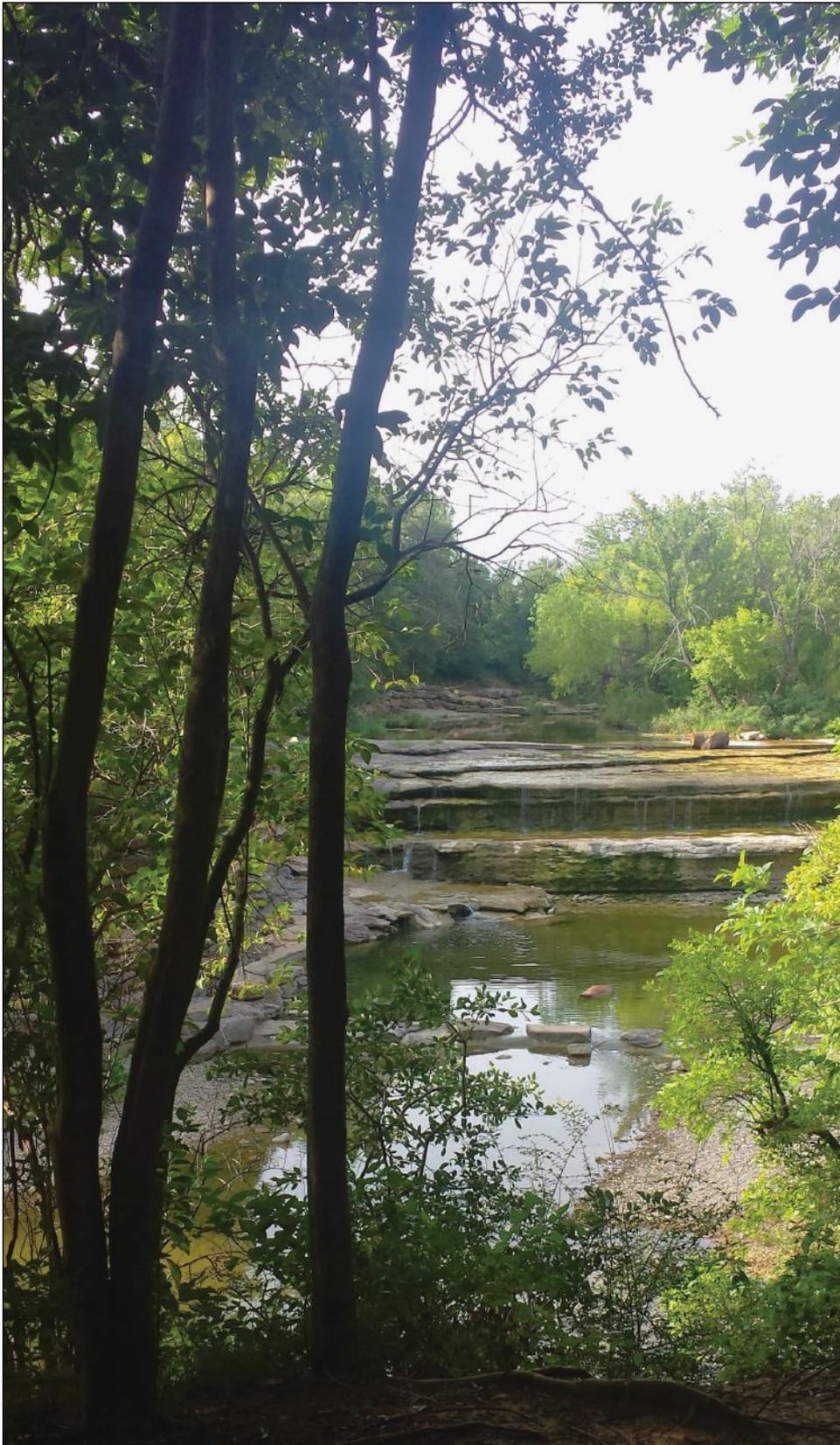
As you head toward the falls, a lushly planted pollinator garden filled with blackfoot daisy, blue mistflower, butterfly milkweed, flame acanthus and lantana abuts the path. “On a warm, windless day, the butterflies are so thick you practically have to brush them away from your face,” says Sloan. The sounds of songbirds indicate that where the pollinators congregate, the rest of the ecosystem follows. Wild turkeys have



Recently installed historical markers offer visitors more background on the park's military history.

Go Outside

The waterfall, as seen from a bench along the trail, is now more accessible. Right, a mom and her two sons enjoy a warm morning playing in the shallow waters.



been spotted, as have bobcats on the prowl.

Airfield Falls itself remains relatively unchanged, except for the steady stream of visitors. The falls show their full glory only after heavy rains; you can stand carefully on the rock ledges when the water levels are low.

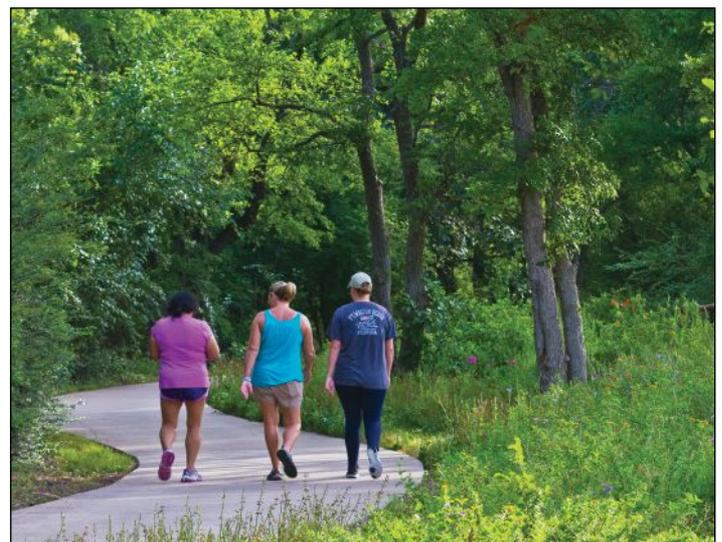
Strategically placed benches offer views of the falling water, as does the bridge that connects the Airfield Falls trail to another stretch of the Trinity Trails. The periodic roar of jets overhead is a reminder that in the midst of the natural beauty, you're in a city — and next to an air base. While Sloan would eventually like to see some lighting at the waterfall, today it's best to head back to the entrance come sunset.

Relax there until nightfall and you'll hear "Taps" played over the loudspeaker at the nearby base, the park's chorus of frogs in the background. As the jet's navigational lights turn on, crisscrossing beams of light illuminate the installation.

"Projects that are high in purpose aren't always easy," says Sloan. "Airfield Falls accomplished many things I think will be beneficial and in addition is a delightful place. It's telling a story." 



Wildflowers planted along the winding path connecting the park to the main trail attract bees and butterflies.



THE DETAILS

Airfield Falls Trailhead and Conservation Park Open 6 a.m.-10 p.m. daily. Free. 200 Pumphrey Drive, Westworth Village. Find a downloadable map of the Trinity Trails at streamsandvalleys.org.

Kevin Sloan Studio 1218 W. Davis St., Dallas, 214-269-7650, kevinsloanstudio.com.