

Memphis native, riverfront parks leader recognized as top female urbanist

Carol Coletta among the world's most influential female thinkers in urban planning and urban design

MEMPHIS, TN, UNITED STATES, March 26, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Among the world's most influential female thinkers in urban planning and urban design, Memphis native and longtime Downtown Memphis resident Carol Coletta ranks near the top of the list.

Coletta is president and CEO of the nonprofit Memphis River Parks Partnership. She's number 12 among [women on Planetizen's list of Most Influential Urbanists](#). The list includes 23 women both living and deceased; Coletta ranks eight among living urbanists on the list.

Planetizen highlighted women on its Most Influential Urbanists list in honor of International Women's Month. The original list of [Most Influential Urbanists, Past and Present](#) included men and women and was published in July; Coletta ranked 62nd on that list and rose four spots from the last time the list was published in 2017. In 2023 Planetizen also ranked Coletta number 32 on its list of [Most Influential Contemporary Urbanists](#).

Coletta has devoted her career to getting more out of public space – more imagination, more equity, more civility, more community, more allure and more performance. She is leading the Memphis River Parks Partnership, a public-private partnership to develop, manage and program six miles of riverfront and nine parks along the Mississippi River in Downtown Memphis. In only five years, the Memphis River Parks Partnership built new river's edge trails and connected them into a seamless trail for pedestrians and cyclists, produced signage that won national design awards and developed three new parks, culminating with the 31-acre, \$61 million Tom Lee Park.

Prior to leading Memphis River Parks Partnership, Coletta was with The Kresge Foundation,

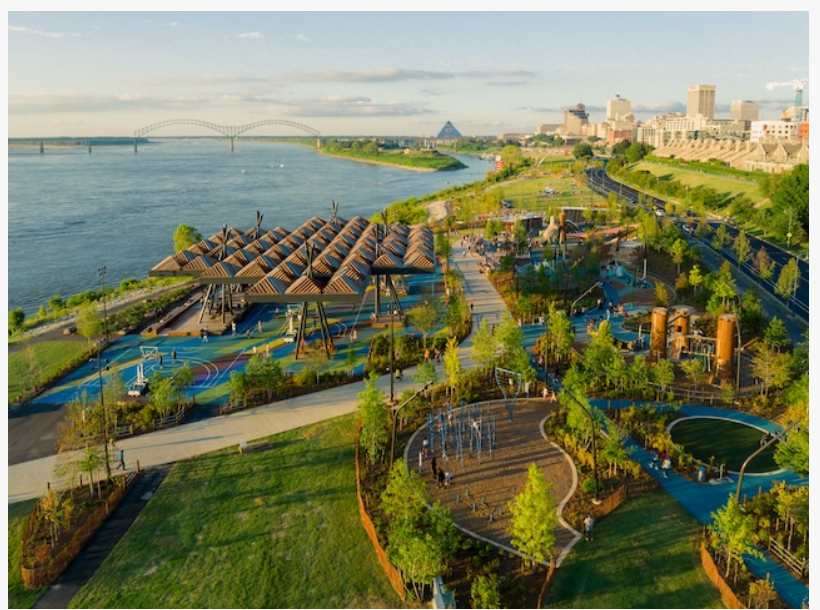


Carol Coletta ranks among Planetizen's Most Influential Urbanists

where she was a senior fellow in the foundation's American Cities Practice. She led a \$50+ million collaboration of national and local foundations, local nonprofits and governments to Reimagine the Civic Commons in five cities. It was the first comprehensive demonstration of how a connected set of civic assets – a civic commons – can yield increased and more widely shared prosperity for cities and neighborhoods.

Coletta previously was vice president of Community and National Initiatives for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, executive director of the Mayors' Institute on City Design and founder and CEO of Coletta &

Company, a Memphis-based public affairs consulting firm. She led the two-year start-up of ArtPlace, a public-private collaboration to accelerate creative placemaking in communities across the U.S. and was president and CEO of CEOs for Cities for seven years.



The 31-acre, \$61 million Tom Lee Park is managed by the Memphis River Parks Partnership, led by Carol Coletta

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*Kresge Foundation President
and CEO Rip Rapson*

Coletta's influence in urban planning and urban design is wide-reaching. In one 18-month period alone she spoke in 100 cities, where she inspired new thinking and action. As world-renowned architect Jeanne Gang of Studio Gang said, "Every city should have a Carol Coletta."

Kresge Foundation President and CEO Rip Rapson said, "Carol is a peerless thinker, actor and influencer in the urban policy and practice space - her experiences, her passion, dynamism and expertise have contributed in

profound ways to improving the trajectory of American cities. She has worked with mayors, city managers, council members and civic leaders to test new approaches to urban problem-solving. And she has galvanized philanthropy to work in different forms of partnership with the public, private and academic sectors in pursuit of urban imagination."

As part of the work at Kresge, in 2018 Coletta was loaned to the Memphis River Parks Partnership to lead a process to activate the potential of undervalued public assets like libraries and the city's riverfront. She worked with Studio Gang and a mayor's riverfront committee to develop a concept for the riverfront and later with Studio Gang and SCAPE, a plan for 31 acres

named in honor of Tom Lee, a Black man who could not swim but in 1925 saved 32 people from drowning after their sternwheeler capsized in the Mississippi River. Ultimately, she accepted the job as president and CEO of the Memphis River Parks Partnership and undertook the \$61 million transformation of the park designed by Studio Gang and SCAPE.

The new Tom Lee Park opened to rave local and national reviews on Labor Day weekend, 2023. At the opening ceremony, Pitt Hyde, founder of AutoZone and the Hyde Foundation, said, "We could not have created this world-class park without Carol's incredible leadership."



Tom Lee Park is home to a public monument of 33 stone thrones – one for Tom Lee and each of the 32 people he saved from drowning – by artist Theaster Gates. The Monument to Listening is part of the Mellon Foundation's \$500 million Monuments Project.

Tom Lee Park was designed to accelerate equity, community-building, socioeconomic mixing and physical connections between the park, Downtown Memphis and the distressed neighborhoods just beyond Downtown. The park is surrounded by racially and economically stratified neighborhoods, presenting the park with the rare opportunity to create public space to serve and connect people across the demographic spectrum.

Tom Lee Park is home to a public monument of 33 stone thrones – one for Tom Lee and each of the people he saved – by artist Theaster Gates. The Monument to Listening is part of the Mellon Foundation's \$500 million Monuments Project, designed to support broader and more diverse stories in the nation's public spaces. Lonnie G. Bunch III, secretary of the Smithsonian, said Mellon's initiative "could help a community to rethink itself. It has the ability to be a ripple of transformation." That's Coletta's hope for the Tom Lee monument and Memphis.

Coletta's work with Memphis River Parks Partnership continues. Watch for more news about exciting developments on the Memphis riverfront.

About Planetizen

Planetizen creates, curates and amplifies stories and resources to inform planning and people passionate about planning. Planetizen reaches 90 percent of the U.S. urban planning community through news, editorial, job postings, online courses, books and product sales. More information is available at planetizen.com.

About Memphis River Parks Partnership

Memphis River Parks Partnership connects the people of Memphis to their river through five park districts along six miles of the Mississippi riverfront. The park districts include Tom Lee Park, a 31-acre park on the Mississippi riverfront in Downtown Memphis. The park was named to honor the heroism of Memphian Tom Lee, who couldn't swim but saved 32 people when a sternwheeler capsized in the Mississippi River in 1925. More information is available at memphisriverparks.org.

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