URBAN PARKS: QUALITIES OF SUCCESS AND APPLICATION TO INDIANAPOLIS PARKS

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Introduction

Public parks are essential components of a healthy, vibrant urban community. Planning for the needs of an entire community includes open space or areas for public use. Parks, which are shared spaces open to all users, stimulate community investment, foster relationships at a formal and informal level, and allow an escape from the concrete and structural development. Community places, including public parks, are successful only if the space is used. It would seem that the necessary planning and design characteristics of these spaces would be easy to identify and include. However, there are many public spaces created and underutilized across the country. Identifying constants of successful, highly and creatively utilized public spaces is an important focus in terms of using limited funds and space efficiently, while providing the greatest benefit to the community.

Public parks in urban areas provide many benefits and opportunities. The benefits of an urban park are both physical and mental, and touch the individual and the larger
community. Yet the most beautifully landscaped and largest green lawn will not bring users unless the initial planning involves those individuals in the process.

If municipalities want to make their cities competitive, attractive, and sustainable places in which to live, they must be planned and designed to include successful public parks. In order to build urban vibrant urban communities, city planners and stakeholders must understand the benefits of a successful urban park and the qualities necessary to create and maintain such a space.

Parks differ in character and purpose. Low, Seth, Taplin and Scheld (2005) champion that “recreation is always an important park value, but the presence of other values makes the landscape of park purposes and uses considerably richer” (p. 34). Understanding and integrating a community’s unique needs and desires into the park, contributes to the success of the space. While the planning and design process must include the intended and hopeful user groups, there are design qualities that have repeatedly led to successful urban parks. Incorporating these qualities with the needs and wants of the user groups will facilitate a park space that will bring greatest benefit to the urban area.
Chapter 1: A Public Park

To understand the value of public city parks it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what constitutes an urban park and the history behind these public spaces. While to define a park is a misleadingly complex endeavor, it is paramount for the park users, the planners, and the managers of these spaces. Springgate (2008) explained, “as a practical matter, there is no standard, widely accepted definition of a park.” Instead of a uniform system of rules, what constitutes a park has evolved over time as a reflection of societal and cultural changes.

The Council of Europe describes parks and open spaces as a public living room for the locality (European Urban Charter, art. 4 sec. 3). This definition illustrates the objectives of an urban park: to be the central meeting place for activities outside of work and home. The purpose of the park is to be a space that encourages interaction, discussion, relaxation and enjoyment of the surroundings. Park spaces that are public, are areas where any person may socialize with, converse with, or simply be near another individual whether a friend or stranger.
1.1 History

A history of the suburban park boasts an early link between the public and private ownership balance. Eighteenth century English merchants escaped crowded city life to the picturesque suburban communities. One of the earliest suburbs was Clapham, England, which saw villas surrounding the village’s green community space in the 1790s (Garvin, 1997, p. 38). The common space was ‘owned’ visually by the surrounding proprietors.

In 1850, the public realm in the United States included unpaved streets, weakly landscaped squares, marketplaces and the vast surrounding wilderness. The shared outdoor space was a grazing area or market that was soon surrounded by the church, meeting house and eateries. Serving initially as a business crossroads and for more practical reasons, the common became a more aesthetically green park space for relaxation and rejuvenation. This idea of a communal gathering place matched with a desire for a *rus en urb*, a piece of country in the city encouraged the public park creation during nineteenth-century urbanization (Garvin, 1997, p. 39). The Mayor’s office and street commissioner maintained parks before 1856 in New York City, but the City leaders realized that these important spaces should be reserved for the residents (“The Earliest New York City Parks,” n.d.). In 1856, New York City took the lead on a new era of park planning with the founding of the Board of Commissioners of Central Park and appropriation of funds for one of America’s first large public park. Central Park set in
motion governmental property acquisition and America’s park development giving us millions of acres of public green refuge from urban living. Unfortunately for the planning community, post-World War II America hoped to accomplish open space provisions with regulation instead of acquisition. Two central conflicts arose: political conflicts as communities worked to ensure privacy while government struggled to guarantee public access to open space, and an imbalance between the supply and demand of public open space as the population continued to swell.

Early parks in U.S. cities existed to provide a public sanctuary from urban hustle. Meaningful design stimulated social interaction, community investment, and urban residential and employment choices. In order to meet the growing needs of an ever-increasing population, parks must be the result of land acquisition and the limited space left must be maximized for successful provisions of what users need and desire of a public park. The park allowed for time away from congestion, dirt and industrialized noise: a green lung. Parks were democratic. In a time of machine and money control by the elite and powerful, the people’s gardens represented the, “social idea of public open space as a meeting ground for persons of different social classes (40).” The green space was an environmental counter to the Industrial Revolution. They had positive associations: physically and emotionally healthful, along with an uplifting and less structured moral force. Today, cities hope to retain to some degree these public park values.
Frederick Law Olmsted echoed this motivation for public parks in 1870, describing Central Park and Prospect Park as “the only places where vast numbers of persons are brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others” (as cited in Sutton, 1971, p. 75). The value of social interaction and assimilation Olmsted witnessed must be the motivator for continued park planning and design for our increasingly diverse urban populations.

1.2 Working Definition

Urban, by definition, is pertaining to a city, and a park is land set aside for recreation. The public aspect is most clearly described as an area that is open and accessible to all members of the public in a society, in principle though not necessarily in practice. Parks are a public good that provide access and benefits to all users.

Narrowing a park’s definition to four specific criteria helps one to understand the space. A park is publicly open and accessible, has identifiable boundaries, contributes to the aesthetic and natural elements of the community, and provides a space for community gathering and interaction.

“Open and accessible” means that people are free to come and go and to use that space however they see fit: passive or active recreation, meeting friends, sleeping, eating,
rallying, dancing, etc. The use of a public space is not conditioned upon membership in a particular group like a political party or religious community. Public parks, in theory, do not discriminate based on economic status, race, income, education, sex or age. The accessibility includes both physical access limitations as well as mental: all of which do not exist in a truly public public space. The openness and accessibility is a theory of best practice, since a park without benches or without safe playground equipment does not provide full accessibility or openness.

A park has identifiable boundaries. Whether the park stands alone or in connection with a greenway or environmental system, the park is a distinguishable space that accommodates a variety of public uses. The parks boundaries indicate where the public and private spaces meet and in what space the park’s activities take place.

Parks with trees, lawns, bushes, flowers, and natural elements contribute to the aesthetics of a community. They allow users an opportunity to connect with nature and be among green elements. As Springgate (2008) states “parks develop or preserve natural beauty” (p. 5).

The outdoor park venue provides an opportunity to share ideas, and the space facilitates a greater sense of community. Where intimacies occur such as a wave or smile, or even conversation; the social life of the city is strong. When residents feel a part of their community; there is a natural sense of ownership and investment in its wellbeing. Specific benefits of public parks are discussed in Chapter 4. Places to sit and relax such
as walls, benches, or landscaping encourage these important relationships. An urban park provides something to look at or do. Jacobs (1961) points out in that “the sight of people attracts still other people” and explains that when there is nothing to look at or watch such as other people walking, working, playing or talking the space is not used to its best potential. Parks host gatherings from major concerts to family birthday parties. Fourth of July parties, hiking groups, soccer teams, and family reunions often take place in public parks. Parks allow for this community use while providing the core mission of a recreational space with aesthetic value.

It is important to contrast the urban park with that of the suburban and industrial. Suburban parks more often take on the form of country club, numerous soccer or baseball fields, and golf courses. These outdoor green spaces are often called the suburban equivalent to the urban park, yet differ greatly in social significance. In neighborhoods and communities of characteristically class and race homogeneity, the purpose of a public park as a meeting ground for heterogeneous populations is lost. Golf courses are molded creations meant for one private activity. Country clubs are in general more exclusive than golf courses, and is a privatized park only available to members. Neither of these spaces offers a chance to run, have a picnic, walk a dog or simply relax in the shade without privilege of membership or fee. Perhaps furthest from the traditional purpose of a public park is the industrial, corporate, or business variety. ‘Park’ in this sense only refers to an area zoned or planned for the purpose of industrial or business development (Garvin, 1997, p. 41-42).
As the purpose of these green spaces has evolved, so too has the design of parks. Urban parks began as unimproved commons; places originally intended for cattle grazing and militia training. Boston Common in Boston, Massachusetts is a strong example of this commons design that has remained as the park serves the purpose of a permeable space between commercial buildings and green lawn. There is ease to moving between the two distinct spaces that encourages appreciation and use of both as extensions of the urban space surrounding the park and an escape from it. No perimeter plantings screen the surrounding streetscape from the view. In contrast, Central Park in New York City is a striking example of a landscaped park. A refuge from the noisy hustle of the city, these parks reflected the Romanticism Park and the “belief that nature and natural scenery had the power to uplift and restore the human spirit” (Low et al., 2005). It was an imitation of nature for enjoyment by the public. Understanding the context and motivation for creating or improving the park is important in reaching the necessary audience.

Tarkington Park in Indianapolis, Indiana similar to Boston Commons is not shielded from the surrounding structures and busy streets but instead a safe, easy-to-reach green recreational splash in the community. Replicating natural scenery with gardens and water features would crowd the popular playground, tennis and basketball courts, and green lawn. Including playgrounds, athletic courts, and lawns was a facet of the Recreation and Facility Park, which came about in the 1920s and 1930s to provide an active recreational outdoor space for users with a focus on children.

A classification system developed by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) works to distinguishes the park typologies. This allows specific policies,
planning, management, and design to be more clearly directed at the use and capability of each park. For purposes of this paper, the focus will be neighborhood and community parks. Table 1 highlights the classification (Mertes & Hall, 1996).

Table 1: Park Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Service Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mini park</td>
<td>&lt; 5 acres</td>
<td>Immediate surrounding area for unique or isolated recreational needs</td>
<td>Limited, isolated or unique space such as pocket parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood park</td>
<td>5 - 10 acres</td>
<td>¼ - ½ mile radius</td>
<td>Recreational and social focus of the neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community park</td>
<td>30 - 50 acres</td>
<td>½ - 3 mile radius (2+ neighborhoods)</td>
<td>To meet community recreation needs while preserving the natural and unique landscapes and open spaces</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All three categories of urban park serve the purpose of a contrast of environment from the bustling cityscape of automobiles, transit, commercial and retail strips, and the heat and pollution of these elements. The layout and amenities of each park are unique yet should reflect the needs of the intended users while enhancing the natural elements and providing a place for recreation, relaxation and community gathering.
Chapter 2: A Park’s Purpose

When identifying the elements of a city, key features come to mind: businesses, shopping and dining spots, infrastructure, public services and parks. But why use economically valuable urban land as a park? What is the purpose of having an urban park when the land could instead be a more profitable development, and allow residents to retreat to the outer edges of the urban core to enjoy the natural environment? While preserving the natural state of the environment with reduced sprawl should be a priority; there is significant value in utilizing central urban space as a park.

Observable benefits of the urban park are as an escape or refuge from the congestion and noise of the city as well as a place to touch the natural environment amidst a tangle of asphalt and brick. Yet the question lingers as to why provide public park areas that are susceptible to vandalism, abuse or neglect in lieu of private green areas. The answer is in the benefits derived from the shared communal space of public parks. Thompson and Travlou (2007) advise that “public spaces provide sites for the many types of person-to-person interaction that constitutes public life: civic, antagonistic, artistic. But, as such
spaces disappear or become less open, so too do the opportunities to engage in these activities” (p. 202). Urban parks connect people. And these interactions and shared spaces are important for strong community engagement and investment. Parks establish and maintain a quality of life in the community, ensure health of users, and contribute to the economic and environmental well being of a community and region. The NRPA measures that parks have three values that make them essential services to communities: economic value, health and environmental benefits, and social importance. Echoing that of the NRPA, the Ontario Federation of Parks and Recreation (OFPR) summarizes the benefits of urban parks into the four categories of personal, social, economic and environmental. Understanding the park’s value builds a foundation for creating park spaces that maximize benefit for users while garnering the deserving economic and political support.

2.1 Economic Development

A well-maintained and planned park increases property values adjacent to the space, improves commercial and retail health, and attracts businesses, employees and residents. Private property values increase the closer the space is to parks, and this increases tax revenues and improves local economies. Quality parks and recreation are cited as a top reason for business relocation decisions. A Texas A&M review of the economic impacts of parks on property values found that the “real estate market consistently demonstrates
the people are willing to pay more for properties located close to parks.” A study by Nicholls (2004) examining the economic effects of parks on property values found that homes facing a neighborhood park have up to a 20 percent value increase, and the residential real estate in proximity to a community park may provide value benefit as high as 33 percent.\(^1\) While the effects are contingent upon variables, including maintenance, safety, visibility, noise and congestion by park users, and accessibility, it is clear that the proximity to an urban park has an affect on the economic health of a community.

A park can often serve as an anchor tenant attracting commercial and retail investment. A well-designed public space and park will have a positive ripple effect on the surrounding area. Just as property values increase so too do commercial and retail occupancy rates. After the renovation of Bryant Park in New York City, the occupancy rates of those residential units adjacent to the park increased dramatically. Research by Eysenbach (2008) found this increase proved to owners and the renovation committee that the special assessment financial commitment was worthwhile. Quality of life including beauty and access to parks is an important variable for the creative and educated workforce when determining where to work. A survey by CEOs for Cities (2008) “revealed that two-thirds of highly mobile 25- to 34-year-olds with college degrees say they will decide where they live first, then look for a job.” This statement

\(^1\) The study further noted that the property values were positively affected for homes within a certain distance from the park. For homes not facing the park but still within 600 to 800 feet of a neighborhood park and as far as 2,000 feet for a community park also saw an increase in property values.
alone stresses the importance of providing employees the sought-after amenities including city parks and green spaces.

A park may also drive revitalization and rejuvenation of the neighborhood and community of which they are a part. Marvin Gaye Park in Washington, D.C. highlights how parks help address the community disinvestment. After the park maintenance was turned over to the District of Columbia in 1970, the limited funds led to deterioration of the space and attracted crime and vandalism. But starting in 2001, a nonprofit, citizen-led organization led an effort to clean up the park. The five-year process involved 24,000 volunteers, a million dollar rejuvenation, and removal of 3.5 million pounds of trash. When it reopened in 2009, the park included hiking trails, mosaics, and playground equipment. But the long-term economic value continues as a nearby school is undergoing a complete renovation and new townhomes are under construction. On a larger scale, the District of Columbia has begun a community revitalization plan for the area that includes improvements to the transportation systems, streetscapes, businesses, and neighborhood.

2.2 Public Health

Public park programs and facilities promote health and facilitate positive lifestyle choices for children, adults, and seniors. A neighborhood or community park influences the
health of urban residents by encouraging physical activity, providing a place to be in contact with nature, and improving environmental quality, which ultimately improves health.

Parks are spaces where physical activity is encouraged. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, creating and promoting places to be physically active improve community health by raising the percent of residents who regularly exercise by 25 percent. Children and adolescents benefit in particular from urban parks. The Edinburgh OPENspace Research focused on the relationship between childhood access to nature and the health benefits therein (Travlou, 2003). Studies show strong correlation between child’s play and healthy-being outside doing physical activity both alone and with other young children, teach sharing, safe active and passive play, appreciation for the environment and instill values of healthy lifestyles. Children’s play is “shown to be important for social development including collaborative skills, negotiating skills, confrontation and resolution of emotional crisis” (Travlou, 2003, p. 202). Since the type of play that children engage in varies with age and interest, it is important that public parks provide the opportunity for this variation. A pioneer in children’s play studies, Hart (1998), concludes that it is important that the environment should be able to be modified by children in order to facilitate the necessary play. Other qualities of parks that increase success for children’s play are places to hide and explore, vegetation and water features.
According to Pretty et al., (2005) engagement with green spaces and nature affects human health in “three levels of engagement: viewing natural environments; being in the presence of nearby green space or nature; and active participation and involvement in nature, for example through walking” (p. 29). Contact with nature reduces stress levels. Reducing mental fatigue lowers frustration, tension, and irritability levels. The interaction with nature that parks provide, “gives the mind an opportunity to recover” (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1998). The natural elements found in urban parks improve water quality, clean the air, provide vegetative buffers to development, provide a habitat for wildlife, and allow users a place to connect with nature.

2.3 Social Capital

Along with economic and health benefits, public parks also contribute to the social health of an urban area. Parks are a third place, which according to the American Planning Association, are locations outside of work and home where people seek community. Third places foster casual social interaction that strengthens feelings of belonging, community, and safety. These public spaces also provide specific facilities that attract people and provide social interaction such as the playground, soccer lawn, or water fountain. Parks reflect the quality of life of a neighborhood. They provide an identity for residents and the given community and create a sense of connection for those who live, work, and play there. Parks allow for equity of access in that they are gathering places
for individuals regardless of their age, economic status or race. While different cultures perceive and use parks differently, parks are democratic spaces allowing access to users from all walks of life. The important interactions between the park users may foster acceptance of different cultures, demographics, and economic situations. Research by the Project on Human Development in Chicago found that community involvement in parks is associated with lower levels of crime and vandalism as there is a sense of ownership and pride in and around the space. The access to these green spaces is strongly linked to reductions in crime and juvenile delinquency.

2.4 Recreation and Cultural Expression

The clearest benefit of a public park is the social opportunity, or the chance for users to ‘do’ something in the space. Whether that activity is alone or in a group, parks allow the public to use the space for themselves, take part in activities or events, or enjoy the outdoors with friends and family. Public park space is necessary for the very definition of the place: it is public. This allows, as discussed previously in Chapter 1, enjoyment from all user groups regardless of economic, ethnic background or age. Parks must provide for the capacity of groups to utilize the space as desired in order to be successful. Structuring the space so to discourage unwanted activities such as vandalism, drug and alcohol use, or violence is another goal that must be met.

A park provides a place where people can escape from the congestion and noise of the city. While these are both reasons for enjoying urban parks, Whyte observed that
although the park was an escape from the congestion and busy life of the city, users were drawn to and tended to remain in clusters or activity with other users. The peoples’ actions revealed that they preferred being part of the activity rather than solitary. Often referred to as the father of public spaces, Whyte (1980) went on to explain, “what attracts people most, it would appear, are other people.” If I belabor the point, it is because many urban spaces are being designed as though the opposite were true, and that what people liked best were the places they stay away from” (p. 9). This shows that individuals enjoy the company and communal feeling of other individuals. Parks that are empty or are used by a homogeneous group do not attract the energy and variety of use that other spaces do. Parks should provide spaces both for individual reflection and solitude, but also areas that maximize human interaction and clustered activity.
Chapter 3:  A Successful Public Park

Parks provide important nurturing, cleansing, and relaxing spaces that offer connections to the natural environment. How then should an urban public park be measured as successful or not? Not all parks draw the same proportion or variety of users who would ultimately benefit from the green space. Furthermore, each park is unique in its location, design and purpose. Therefore, it is necessary to determine how to measure the success or failure of the park and the subsequent means of reaching that rating.

Parks exist for the public interest. The NRPA defines parks as having core components but with an individualized element defined by each user. The park itself typically contains shrubbery, grass, trees, walking paths, seating, and may include playground equipment or sports fields. However, the definition of a park is an individual one. A child may refer to a neighborhood park as the place to play with friends on the playground, where an elderly user may define the same space as one in which to relax and connect with nature. A young adult may define a city park as a place to socialize with friends away from home, where the lunchtime business crowd may define the same space
as an informal outdoor venue. The park definition is unique to each user, but the space itself addresses important community and societal needs. Urban life creates a foundation for parks as sources of renewal and reinvestment for neighborhoods and communities. Parks mediate urban situations of overcrowding, crime, pollution, and disinvestment, while serving as an inspiration that encourages city living. Urban parks are planned, designed and managed for outdoor informal and active recreational use by the residents.

Accomplishing the goal, then, is having users in the park. Drawing these users to the park is a result of providing the desired and necessary qualities. This starts with the planning of the space. If the purpose of having an urban park is to provide a space for the individual to run, have a picnic, play soccer or basketball, to relax in a garden or wander a meandering path, or have a space to each lunch outside of a building; then a successful park is one that provides this. Simple as it seems, Whyte (1980) once said, “It is difficult to design a space that will not attract people – what is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.” It was that curiosity that fueled Whyte’s life work of understanding human behavior in urban public places. The candid observation stresses the importance of not simply providing the public urban park but providing a public urban park that attracts users. The latter is not without deeper understanding of the community and its users.
3.1 Defining Success

Authorities on the study of public spaces including urban parks have also attempted to define a successful city park.

Project for Public Spaces or PPS (2000) has five indicators of a highly successful public open space. These measures help indicate if a public park space is a working successful space for the intended users.

1. High proportion of people in groups use the space demonstrating that the space is understood as a gathering place for socializing and interaction.
2. Higher than average proportion of women use the space, which indicates a sense of safety and comfort.
3. Different age groups use the space, together and at different times of the day indicating respect and shared understanding of how other groups interact with the space.
4. A range of varied activities occur simultaneously, which is another indication of a variety of users enjoying themselves while feeling safe and welcome in the space.
5. More activities of affection are present: smiling, embracing, kissing, and holding hands, illustrating emotions of comfort, happiness and interpersonal communication.
3.2 Understanding the User Group

Parks are for people to use. The design, planning, management, and organization of the park space should target the user group and will ultimately dictate whether or not the park is successful. The surrounding neighborhood, businesses or cultural district that will draw the majority of users must be included in the planning process to help planners to understand what the priorities of that user group are. Harnick (1997) found “user needs have been identified by organizations such as the Urban Parks Institute, PPS, and Trust for Public Land as one of the most critical considerations in planning, designing and managing urban parks and open spaces.”

3.3 General User Preferences

Park planning authorities tend to agree on several user preferences, which should be provided at minimum to encourage park use. They include comfort, informal and active engagement opportunities, accessibility, and safety.
3.31 Comfort

“For an open space to be well used, it needs to be comfortable” (Carr et al., 1992, p. 20). A comfortable park includes comfortable seating, well-maintained lawns, and a variety of spaces for seating and relaxing. The park should also be comfortable in that management and maintenance create a sense of safety for the users. These safety measures include informative signage, lighting and design that prevent dark corners and areas that invite unwelcome activity and crime. According to Francis (2003), “satisfying needs for ‘food, drink, shelter from the elements, or a place to rest when tired requires some degree of comfort to be satisfied’” (p. 20). Without comfort it is more difficult for users to have other needs met. This comfort includes relief from sun or access to the sun, as “sun is a major factor in the use of public spaces (Whyte, 1980, p. 23). Comfort is also in the form of accessibility within the space, including physical access for special needs of children, elderly and by the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

3.32 Informal Engagement

Francis (2003) wrote that research on open spaces indicates that people frequently seek outdoor settings for relaxation (p. 23). Areas where users can be near water or vegetation provide relaxation, while elements of the natural environment provide specific health and
psychological benefits such as reduced blood pressure and stress. Passive engagement is “the central way most people experience open spaces” and users may enjoy the space without having to be actively involved (Carr et al., 1992). Frequently observed passive activities include reading, sitting, people watching, sleeping, day dreaming, napping. According to Project for Public Spaces, observing games and programmed activities help to facilitate passive engagement.

### 3.33 Active Engagement

Moving around a park is generally understood as a top priority of use especially in dense urban areas where private yards are a luxury. Active engagement includes playing sports, or involvement in physical activities, walking and gardening. Providing lawns, playground equipment, athletic fields or equipment, hiking trails, and trees to climb encourages active engagement, which is a primary reason for visiting and using an urban park. Active engagement also includes the element of discovery. Discovery ranges from viewing public art, a natural landscape, or animal habitat. Parks create for opportunities for discovery-based learning and education that is valued among all user groups. Seemingly obvious, an important element of providing for activity is the element of fun. Francis (2003) wrote, “an important and often overlooked user-need is the desire for fun or excitement in public spaces” (p. 25). Adventure, mystery, challenges and interacting with friends in a less-structured environment are all elements of the fun quality of user-
needs in public urban parks. Providing this element of fun can be as simple as an open green lawn to an extensive trail or playground amenity.

3.34 Accessibility

Accessibility is a main ingredient for successful public spaces (PPS, 2000). This includes equal access for people of all abilities, and walkability to and from the space with sidewalks and pedestrian crosswalks. Public transit stops should be located near park entrances when possible. Connectedness of the park and surrounding area also affects levels of accessibility. Fences or barriers between the park and surrounding neighborhood are elements to consider as well as the potential impact on ease of user movement to and from the space. Visual access is important to consider as well. Adequate visibility encourages activity, reduces the uneasy feeling that the park is obscured from the neighborhood, and creates a sense of continuity between the private yard or porch and the public park.
3.35 Safety

As an element of comfort, the ability of a user to enjoy the space to its fullest extent relies on its actual and perceived safety. Franck and Paxson discuss the obvious, yet important point, that a fear of crime and violence, especially against women, can cause seemingly good spaces to go unused. Feeling unsafe in a park leads to fear, which discourages use even in well-designed public parks. The perception of an unsafe area is a frequent deterrent of park use. Women, children and the elderly are most dependent on urban parks as a space for recreation and relaxation; yet display the greatest levels of insecurity in parks (Werkele, Gerda & Whitzman, 1995, p. 109). A successful urban park must be planned, designed and managed to be a safe space for outdoor use. If the motivation of the park is to invite a variety of users then women, children and the elderly must feel welcome. Werkele et al., (1995) found that “approaches to minimizing opportunities for crime and to help park users feel less vulnerable include design changes, increased maintenance levels, provision of security patrols and emergency telephones, and introduction of new activities to generate greater levels of use” (p. 111). Design guidelines for safety are discussed further in Chapter 4.
Vital to determining success is the preference of different ethnic groups. Different demographic groups have varying priorities of how and what they hope to do in an urban park. Successful park planning and design must first understand these individual groups and create a space with their priorities in mind. For example, an extensive study in Los Angeles found that Latino users visited parks frequently and in large family groups, and often used the park for celebrations of birthdays, engagements, holidays and picnics (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). Loukaitou-Sideris (1995) found that “unlike other racial groups observed, Latino users actively appropriated park space, changing it and adding to it with items brought from home including streamers, balloons and blankets which help define and claim territory” (p. 88). This use of a park mimics that of the plaza role in Central America and thus supports the type of comfortable and interactive activity. Another example is the Chinese user. This group was smaller in study and brought to light the dissonance between American parks and the ideals of a Chinese park. Instead of the American park expanse of green, athletic fields and walking paths, Chinese users perceive the ideal park as an aesthetic element of gorgeous design with ponds, pavilions, and flowers. In Seattle, Washington local planners worked with Chinese residents in the area and Seattle’s sister city, Chongqing, to facilitate the creation of the Seattle Chinese Garden.\(^2\) This Sichuan garden features streams, ponds and symbolic planting design

\(^2\) The Seattle Chinese Garden is a 501(c)(3) created to connect the Seattle residents with a global community and citizenship. http://www.seattlechinesegarden.org
traditional in Chinese park and garden planning. This park provides an ideal garden space for the Chinese residents, which offers visitors access to physical, spiritual, emotional and philosophical health.

3.5 Effect of Income on Park Use

Income affects the needs and desires of park users. Acknowledging this as a priority of the planning and design will facilitate a more successful urban park.

A study done in Seattle published by Tuttle (1996) found that, “while spaces are used differently, people seem to value similar qualities in outdoor space” (p. 89). These qualities include clean air, trees, natural landscapes, safe places for children to play, and comfortable places to walk and sit outside. Providing basic park qualities is important for universal park use including in low-income areas. However, the same study in Seattle found an extreme difference in use preference between high and low-income women (Tuttle, 1996, p. 89). Low-income women had the highest distrust of open spaces and were least likely to use parks. Recognizing why this user group feels unsafe and planning for the opposite to be true is vital for successful parks in low-income neighborhoods. Women and children contribute to a park’s sense of safety and enjoyment. The same user group in Seattle pointed out that their neighborhoods were often void of safe, pleasant, outdoor space options. Tuttle (1996) went on to say “many low-income people leave their
neighborhood and use spaces in high-income neighborhoods when possible. The reverse never happens” (p. 89). This discrepancy is an equity issue of access and should be considered when looking at park deficiencies in a community.

3.6 Park Typologies in Relation to Housing Densities & Income Levels

The housing density and income level of the residents surrounding a park may also affect its use and thus should inform the urban park planning.

Medium Density, Low/Medium Income Level
Medium density housing includes attached units such as duplexes and townhouses, while low to medium income level residents range from single parents, young professionals, to the elderly and is a mix of ethnic groups. Parks in this type of urban neighborhood and area are available to multiple ethnic and demographic users and should allow for a variety of uses. Open design planning allows the park to remain flexible over time with shifting populations. As these urban core parks are usually the principal outdoor open space and provide significant value for social interaction as well as the natural amenity. Because these park users typically arrive by foot or public transportation, they enter at a determined point and often become a central gathering place for particular groups who often have no other place to socialize. This may create controversy between user groups more likely to occur than in an area with a more homogenous population. Planning this
type of park must include determining major user groups and their needs. Numerous access points encourage use of the park and discourage conflict of user groups. It is important to provide a large, ambiguous space such as a lawn or turf to accommodate needs of a rapidly changing city neighborhood population. The park should be highly visible with a strong image to encourage passerby’s casual use, with clear signage as city neighborhoods often have transient populations.

Mission Dolores Park, San Francisco (see Image 1) has a ball field that can be used for several different activities and sports, benches lining a path for people watching, easy accessibility from perimeter, and is large enough at 14 acres to attract a large number of diverse users.

Medium Density, Medium/High Income Level

This demographic typically includes wealthier young families, middle-aged and elderly couples, and elderly individuals. The activities in these urban parks center around family gatherings, active sports, and places to sit and stroll.

Golden Gate Heights Park in San Francisco (see Image 2) is a good example of this type of park. The natural woodsly quality is a positive in this park, the tennis courts are popular and well used, benches are provided in a children’s play area for adult supervision, and although in disrepair, there is a large meadow for informal sports.
**High Density, Low/Medium Income Level**

This type of park should focus on size and safety. Because they are located in highly dense urban areas, such parks are small and heavily used. When there is no room for courts and playing fields, there are usually places for children to play, benches, paths for talking, people watching and walking. Urban parks in high-density neighborhoods are important to families with young children and the elderly, as they are the least mobile users. It is important to have natural scenery since these parks are a welcome distance from hard surfaces and noisy streets. Water features can help to mask the urban noise.

Ellenberger Park in Irvington, Indianapolis (see Image 3) is a strong example of this type of park. Successful features include large entrances allowing views of the park, a lower-level seating area for elderly people with protection from wind and sun, safe walking paths, and good park management.

4.1 Planning

Ensuring that the park serves the diverse and complex makeup of the community requires a deliberate needs assessment as part of the planning process (Reviere, Berkowitz, Carter & Ferguson, 1996). A needs assessment goes beyond the standard X number of park acres per 1,000 residents to look at specific preferences, needs, and capabilities of the park. The results of the assessment mold a future vision for the park, goals and objectives for a plan of action, and ultimately the approval and adoption of the plan. The park planning process is an involved process, but one that can generate neighborhood and community parks enjoyed by the intended users.
4.11 Needs Assessment

A park needs assessment should evaluate the following factors:

• the residents’ level of satisfaction with existing facilities, programs and services;
• the community needs, priorities and preferences for park facilities and programs;
• the residents’ willingness and preferences for funding needed changes.

Collecting and using this data allows planners and decision makers to more holistically understand policy, program, design, staffing and management needs.

The process for assessing current park conditions and proposals for improvement has three steps: analyze existing conditions, decide which techniques to use, and build consensus around the findings. Determining what changes or improvements to a park is fractured without understanding the current system. Data collection, mapping, analysis of demographics, and park visits are components of the existing conditions step. The community’s comprehensive plan and current land-use maps provide a starting point for current conditions of the parks. Existing and projected demographic data paints a picture of the current and future park users and helps to dictate necessary changes. Mapping the parks in a larger context of the community illustrates connectivity and accessibility issues for the residents. Alice Carter Place Park in Midtown Indianapolis sits at a heavy traffic intersection but directly across the street from the canal and towpath. Planning for park improvements required understanding the connectivity issues for neighborhood residents.
and future citywide users. Mapping the park in the context of the intersection and the
Midtown district garnered city support to improve sidewalks leading to the park and build
medians for safer pedestrian crossing to the canal.

The maps showing park service areas, jurisdiction boundaries and infrastructure all affect
how the park planning will progress. What each neighborhood and community park
should include requires an understanding of the user demographics and lifestyles. A
smaller neighborhood park surrounded by single-family homes may best suit the
residents with a playground, green lawn and quiet seating. In contrast a park near retail
and office buildings may better serve users with a water feature and plentiful seating for
the socializing lunch crowd. Understanding the demographics and lifestyles of the users
is imperative for effective park planning. Park visits are a critical component of the needs
assessment. Physically visiting the park allows time for observing existing conditions
and informal interviews with park users and staff. An equally as important outcome of
the needs assessment is engaging the public in a dialogue about the community values,
desires and long-range plans (Barth, 2008, p. 56). Throughout the entire process the
input of the essential park users, the public, is vital to planning for a successful urban
park.
4.12 Public Participation

The needs of each community are unique and the assessment identifies the gap between what currently exists and what is needed or preferred. The active participation of neighborhood associations, interest groups and future park users will make the park a better place. Triangulation is an effective tool for considering multiple vantage points when involving the public (Barth, 2008, p. 41). The tool helps to differentiate between community needs and community priorities. If a dominant interest group rallies for more soccer or baseball fields yet the community park lacks safety measures or comfortable seating, triangulation helps to recognize both sides and accurately prescribe the community park needs. Collecting anecdotal, quantitative, and qualitative data makes up the basis for triangulation. Anecdotal techniques, while the least scientific, offer an honest assessment of the park. Visits to the park, conversations with staff and visitors, and general observations trigger areas of focus. Focus groups, workshops and advisory groups will identify community emotions, concerns and desires specific to that user group with candid expression. Quantitative data, often most trusted for its numerical evidence, supports ideas and preferences collected anecdotally and qualitatively. Measuring park acreage, user numbers, and facility level of service are typical quantitative data items. Surveying community members on priorities and preferences for park planning is an important tool, as well as comparing the community resources against those communities of similar size and funding capability. While involving the public may slow down the development process, the final result is richer. Residents and park
users feel a sense of ownership when they have been active participants during the planning and development stages. This ownership and commitment to maintaining the space sustains a cleaner, safer, and actively used space. At Chicago’s Elliott Donnelley Youth Center Park, children decided where the playground equipment would best be placed during the design charrette. Involving this demographic of user instilled a sense of ownership and investment in the park and its success. Public participation also enhances local support and political support for funding, development, and ultimately maintenance. Sarkissian and Perlgut (1986) defend that public participation is vital because, “1) it is ethical, that is, in a democratic society, people whose lives and environments are directly affected should be consulted and involved, and 2) it is pragmatic because people must support programs and policies in order to mobilize their participation” (p. 11).

Low et al., (2005) found that “parks that originally served relatively homogeneous white middle-class or working-class neighborhoods must now provide recreation, educational and social programs, and relaxation for an increasingly multicultural and multiclass population” (p. 11). Local groups and individuals now more than ever before have the opportunity to speak up and participate in the needs and desires for their neighborhood parks. Cultural histories can be a part of these spaces and lend themselves to an atmosphere of inclusion and learning. Low et al., (2005) have argued that “by empowering communities to claim park resources as its (sic) own and engage in decision making processes that allocate funds for maintenance, programming” (p. 11); city and park leaders create well maintained, frequently used, and safe places for the community.
Allowing residents to participate in the process also describes the cultural heritage of the area, thus better matching what the park provides with the values and needs of users.

### 4.13 Vision Formulation

After a consensus of the needs assessment findings has been reached by park stakeholders, community members, and the planning staff; common themes, issues and priorities for the park planning drive the next steps. This unified plan for future improvements and changes is the vision. The visioning process provides a foundation for a focused action plan. Often the visioning process results in a guiding statement that helps orient the process toward the specific goals to be achieved (Lewis, 2008, p. 61).

### 4.14: Strategy Development & Adoption

The next step is the development of the goals, objectives, and subsequent actions steps necessary to achieve the desired outcome. This detailed plan of action differs for each community but includes goals for the future of the park and outlines steps for achieving these goals. Lewis (2008) wrote that the plan of action “ensures that information gathering, public involvement, and plan vision are translated into tangible, achievable
outcomes” (p. 61). The action steps following the defined goals or guiding principles are the steps defined as necessary to achieve the greater vision. Plans will differ from community to community and may include lead organizations and short- and long-term capital recommendations for each step. Regardless of how the planning process defines the strategy for implementation; the goal of improving the park per data and the community’s input remains priority. To ensure that the plan is a binding document for staff and decision makers, the park department and governing body must adopt the park plan. This adoption also ensures consistency of the parks’ improvements with other planning efforts that will inevitably affect the public park space.

4.2 Management

Management of a park space includes the paid staff, volunteer personnel organization, and a management program that facilitates a clean, safe environment for park patrons.

According to the National Mall Plan for Best Management Practices Used at Urban Parks (2007), staffing is best organized by specialty of responsibility and in complement to park managements’ needs and desires. Park managers should actively engage with day-to-day operations in order to develop a culture of active management. A smaller community park may not require the larger full-time staff that a downtown urban park needs for ground maintenance, landscaping and security. While the city park department may
maintain the basic grounds, a neighborhood may form a park group responsible for scheduled clean-ups or safety watches. Staff for park management or programming should have both (1) management experience, (2) enthusiasm for the park, and the (3) ability to interact with the public. Developing a system for public park users to voice concerns or complaints about the park should be in place. This will ensure that issues are heard by management and dealt with accordingly to ensure continued park visitation. In addition, collecting positive reaction to park management, programs and improvements reinforces and improves the successful nature of the community park.

Incentivizing community youth and volunteers to organize clean-ups, crime watches and maintenance foster the sense of park ownership in the community while accomplishing necessary management tasks. Piedmont Park in Atlanta, Georgia attracts over 2,000 annual volunteers during the Saturday Cleaning Green activity to clean the community park (National Park Service, 2007, p. 27). Ensuring that these volunteers are well trained and understand the rules and expectations of the specific park is necessary for sustainable management success.

A priority of successful park management is that of cleanliness. High standards of maintenance demonstrate respect to the users and will elicit respectful treatment of the space in return. Park management that creates a safe and clean place will benefit from increased and appropriate behavior of use.
Integrating park histories, cultures, and uses lead to different styles and issues with management. Low et al., (2005) wrote that in New York City, “the laissez-faire management at Pelham Bay Park is reflected in the present management’s willingness to allow user groups to at least temporarily appropriate spaces and facilities for unofficial uses” (p. 34). This is one example of how the stated park purpose is varied by the users themselves. Landscaped lawns for walking may be spotted with picnickers. And while in some parks, this may seem a disruption to conserving the park’s landscape value; it is an unexpected life and important role in the social and cultural life of parks and in management issues” (Thompson & Travlou, 2007, p. 35). Park management and planning staff must provide quick and efficient maintenance to stop the establishment and cycle of abuse, neglect and misuse. Organizing a mural painting may help to discourage offensive graffiti while encouraging community investment in the park area. As safety is a central influence of park use, management’s arrangement of regular police patrols by officers familiar with the park and the neighborhood to help increase the perception of safety and encourage park use.

4.3: Elements of Design

A park’s design and function must align with the needs of the people using the space. Olmstead’s parks have required little alteration since their initial inception because he
designed them for use by a variety of users. There is an inherent conflict between maintaining the natural elements of the park, the trees and grass, and accommodating the potentially large number of users who visit successful parks. The park’s design, including seating patterns, walking paths, green space, recreation facilities and amenities, will be affected by which of these two forms of human contact are perceived as most important for that user group demographic. For example, an urban park in a business district may have a longer walking path and seating for lunchtime users escaping the office compared to an urban residential park with a larger open green lawn for active recreational games and gatherings.

4.31 Overall Park Layout

Observations made over time as to what people typically do in a park setting suggest that both overt and covert socializing are attractive reasons for visiting the park. All parks should offer space for this opportunity as user demographics across the spectrum utilize the park for human observation or interaction.

If a focus of the park design is to encourage people to come to the park to meet others, providing an open layout facilitates scanning of the park for friends or family. Benches

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3 Covert socializing is used to describe action in the park when park goers go to the public space to watch others without intention of conversing or meeting them (Munekiyo & Chapple, 2008).
and seating attached to facilities of sport or gathering allow users to understand why another individual is in the same area and creates social potential. A walking path should lead people by areas of gathering and not terminate at a point that is predicted for the user-this decreases autonomy and feelings of comfort by controlling the space.

Relaxation and covert socializing, which include people watching, walking the park or solitary enjoyment of the space are also motivations for park use. For users arriving by public transit, entrances to the park should be near the stop for ease of entrance. This placement has more activity and people, thus increasing feelings of security for those users less likely to engage in group socializing. If the area of the park has lots of elderly people living alone or in couples, providing places for them to meet together, play board games, and comfortably get exercise all help facilitate use. Elderly people, while many go to parks to meet people, also highlight the natural setting and peaceful outdoor space as main reasons for utilizing an urban park-thus it is necessary to provide green landscaping and natural amenities for this user group.

Community ownership and pride in a park is key to respectful and frequent use. Designing the layout of the park to permit regular groups of users to lay claim to a certain area also encourages use. A particular seating area, group of tables, entrance or portion of lawn allows that user group, no matter the demographic, to feel welcome and lay claim to that urban area. This helps maintain a sense of group cohesion, identity and predictability: all comfortable senses that encourage frequent and consistent park use. A 1975 study looked at Portsmouth Square in Chinatown, San Francisco and showed how
different user groups used the same space during different activity and time periods (Marcus & Francis, 1998). For instance, local residents used the park intensively for conversation and organized games; tourists use it for passing through; and elderly users for quiet relaxation and socializing during the workday.

4.32: Seating

Enjoying the outdoor space involves walking, running, playing and sitting. Determining the amount and type of seating is reliant upon the motivation for the park. A regular lunch or weekend group looking for places to socialize and eat begs more available seating than does an intricately landscaped walking and reflection park.

Whyte’s research found a strong correlation between the amount of seating in the space and the number of people using the area. The more seating provided, the more people tended to use the space. Overt socializing, coming to the park with others and to meet others, is a motivation for some park users. If the park is planned for this reason, the provided seating should support this social interaction. Benches at a 90-degree angle or less encourage contact between people and force people to confront or interact with one another. Benches back to back or with distance between them discourage interaction and allow users to choose seating furthest away from contact with another user. Movable seats are excellent for self-structured social environments. The ability to move a seat and
arrange it how a user desires provides autonomy and control over the park area that gives
the user the power. Control over the user’s comfort is an attractive feature for successful
park use.

Furthermore, Whyte (1980) wrote “sitting should be physically comfortable-benches with
backrests, well-contoured chairs. It’s more important, however, that it be socially
comfortable” (p. 28). Socially comfortable means that the user has a choice of where to
locate. Whether this is in the shade, under a tree, in the sun, on the lawn, in a group,
alone, in the back, front or sides of the space. Designing the space initially or in the case
of limited space of funding, it is important to maximize the available space of inherent
site features. Whyte (1980) explains “this means making ledges so they are sittable, or
making other flat surfaces do double duty as table tops or seats” (p. 28). Ledges that are
high, bulky or with railings and flat surfaces with excessive ornamentation are simpler in
design yet provide the greatest comfort for the users.

Tables and chairs promote socializing, resting, eating, reading or studying outdoors.
Table number and grouping will influence the atmosphere: either tranquil with a smaller
number in a safe, private part of the park, or high energy and larger gatherings with larger
groupings of tables and chairs. The Chautauqua Institution Bestor Plaza in Upstate New
York provides the variety of seating that encourages activity while also allowing passive
viewing or relaxation. The movable benches allow for the option of moving in and out of
the public space for those users who want to be in the center of the activity, yet control
their degree of interaction. Semi-private enclosures (see Image 4) with benches and a
large fountain ledge provide seating space either in the central sightline or in a space providing privacy of conversation and action if desired.

This public plaza with its constant activity exemplifies the appropriate meeting of personal space in the public general space.

Seating should also vary in location and variety. Seating close to the park perimeter is important for users who have limited time or mobility. For urban parks, benches are best to be ‘generously sized’ and armrests and backrests are simplest design but work best.
Whyte suggests positioning a variety of benches and chairs and watching for the use pattern and preferences of people in the park. Chairs also allow for choice of location and interaction: to move into the sun, out of it, to make room for groups, move away from them. Whyte (1980) states that, “the possibility of choice is as important as the exercise of it” (p. 34). If someone knows that they have the opportunity to move around, they tend to be more comfortable staying put. Whyte (1980) argued, “fixed individual seats are not good. They are a design conceit” (p. 35). While grouped together or brightly colored, these immobile chairs may be decorative elements, but will not help to bring more users to the park. “Fixed seats are awkward in open spaces because there’s so much space around them” (Whyte, 1980, p. 35). There is a sense that you are sitting in the middle of everyone and no escape to change location. Social distance is ever changing and is situational. Not having the ability to alter distances or group numbers is a deterrent from using a public park. A notable example of the success of moveable seating is Bryant Park in New York City. Over 3,000 moveable green chairs are spread throughout the urban park, and park officials report that only a few of the popular seating are stolen each year (PPS, “Moveable Seating”).

4.33: Natural Elements

A natural setting is frequently cited as a priority for park users. The natural elements of trees, shrubbery, flowers, and grass are visual and physical relief from the urban core and
provide a tangible link to the natural world. Words such as greenery, nature, relaxing, comfortable, tranquil, peaceful, and calm top the list for the classification of park quality preference. If this is the community preference and motivation for a park, creating a rich and varied aesthetic environment to maximize the desired feeling of contact with nature should be a planning and design priority. A survey study in East Midlands, UK cited by Thompson and Travlou (2007), found that the two main qualities users liked about the community parks were the physical green, natural environment and “freedom from rubbish” (p. 26). Thompson and Travlou (2007) found that respondents in the surveys and focus groups made it clear, “that green spaces were places where they felt peaceful and where they had a sense of freedom and affiliation with nature” (p. 25). Plants of varied colors, textures and shapes that attract birds, butterflies enhance the aesthetic value of the park. Moving water features are good for all demographics of user groups-play for children and relaxing for others.

Access to sun is a simple and positive attribute that draws users to a park. The enjoyment of sitting beneath trees is enhanced when there is sun to be shaded from. Parks that also provide protection from the wind with trees, surrounded by other structures, or with plantings work well to bring users year-round.

According to Whyte (1988), “trees provide a sense of comfort and enclosure. Trees ought to be related to sitting spaces” (p. 46). Well-liked places are those that according to Whyte (1988) “afford a good look at the passing scene, and the pleasure of being comfortably under a tree while doing so” (p. 46). Including nooks for sitting, resting,
leaning, or talking and people feel protected when they are an integral part of the park. Trees planted close together create a canopy of sun and shade. In contrast, plantings that have thin rims with no seating or green areas roped off are uninviting for users. Trees define space, and as they grow larger change the feeling of the park. Shade versus sun, and the canopy created by trees define a sense of enclosure and a room outside.

Urban parks may also serve as walking pathways for a community. Meandering pathways for walking or children running serve a variety of park goers. User groups who wish to take extended strolls may appreciate alternating scenery and settings of enclosure and then openness. Places to sit and rest along the path are attractive to all user groups, as well as planning the path to wander around a body or feature of water.

Water features are a nice visual in parks and create sound that is relaxing as well as drowning out the sounds of cars and external noise. Portland’s Paley Park fountain noise level is higher than the level of the streetcars when inside the park.\textsuperscript{4} The noise of water helps to drown out the rumbling of vehicles and city noise to create a sense of enclosure and privacy in the center of the urban core. When water is accessible to the park users it becomes an enjoyable focal point. Whyte highlights that one of the best things about water is the look and feel of it (Whyte, 1980, p. 48). Water invites interaction by touching, putting fingers and toes in the water, splashing around, running and wading.

\textsuperscript{4} Whyte (1980) wrote, “the noise level is about 75 decibels close by, measurably higher than the level out on the street” (p. 48).
through it and even swimming when possible. Water features that invite interaction encourage future visitation and help to make the public park an enjoyable place.

4.34: Designing for Specific Users

Children

If children are a focus group for the park design, seating for parents near play equipment is essential for safety and oversight of activity. Safety of space is an important factor for community members bringing children to an area. Safety measures concern the placement of greenery; which should be far enough away to dissuade unsafe or violent behavior but close enough for aesthetic enhancement. Play equipment should be away from cars and should be able to withstand the infrequent adult use when parents join their children in the activity. Providing water for refreshment and play is an element to consider when children are a key user group.

Adolescents

Sport courts, especially basketball, are most attractive to teen groups. A community center adjacent to the park is effective at programming and providing equipment for teenage games and recreation. The most ideal location for a park entrance to encourage
teen use is where vehicular and pedestrian traffic passes by, providing the best opportunity to be seen and to see others.

_Elderly_

For many elderly people who have lost a spouse or without family nearby, meeting other people is seen as an extremely important benefit of the local park. Studies done by OPENspace point out those elderly individuals mentioned the enjoyment of fresh air, walking, feeling healthy and enjoying the scenery. The walking paths and access to the park from the sidewalk or street should be well maintained for those elderly less confident on their feet. According to I’DGO (2005), “focus group discussions with older people in urban, suburban and rural areas of Britain show that getting outdoors is associated with a better quality of life, which encompasses concepts of independence, an active social life, good health and good neighbourhood environments.” Attractive gardens and foliage are noted as high preferences for elderly users. In addition, elderly feel safest when paths and sitting areas are well lit and are not surrounded by trees or foliage that may hide criminal activity. Similarly for elderly users, a secluded spot away from the central noise and activity may satisfy the person in need of a calm and silent niche.
Planning and design approaches that lessen crime require a shift of thinking from total concealment of the park from the urban outside to one that creates a comfortable escape with visibility and openness. Areas of concealment, limited escape routes, and dark isolated areas are created when parks have buffers that surround the park and shield it from traffic, noise, and surrounding buildings. Cluster nighttime activities in areas that are safer with higher lighting levels and prevent landscape elements from blocking light. Including clear signage throughout the park, which identifies paths, facilities, exits, telephones and restrooms, enhance the user experience and comfort in the space. Well-lit areas with limited dense vegetation near popular spots decrease crime, as well as providing adequate access to the park to discourage cut fences, paths of convenience, or trampled lawns that are the result of inadequate access.
Chapter 5: Park Observation Survey

Planning, managing and designing for the best-used park may have best intentions in mind. Looking at whether or not the characteristics of the ‘successful’ park yield that intended use is touched on with the survey of three Indianapolis urban parks. Located in high-density residential areas, Max Bahr Park, Military Park, and Brookside Park, are essential green spaces for outdoor use for the area communities. The goal of this survey (Appendix A) was to compare exiting neighborhood parks and their use to the researched findings that determine successful parks. Surveyed on a warm and breezy April afternoon, I documented the appearance, amenities, and use of the three parks.

Setting

The surveyed parks are located within 5 miles of the center of downtown Indianapolis and each is located within a dense residential census tract of populations between 3,500 and 3,950 persons. Max Bahr Park is located three miles east of downtown Indianapolis
in the diverse, low-income neighborhood of Haughville. At 10.11 acres, the neighborhood park serves the dense residential area as well as the adjacent church and school by providing outdoor space for recess and neighborhood sport leagues.

Military Park is centrally located in downtown Indianapolis along the Canal. Covering 14 acres, the park is part of White River State Park and lies adjacent to Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis. Bounded on two sides by predominantly student apartment housing, the park is often a place where students study. Well-kept paths and direct canal access lend the park to walkers and joggers throughout the day, and especially lunchtime walkers out getting exercise.

Brookside Park is located 4 miles east of the center of downtown Indianapolis in a dense residential area. At 108 acres and straddling Pogue’s Run tributary, the park serves the low- and middle-income near-eastside neighborhoods. Included in the park boundaries are a Family Community Center and summer Aquatic Center. On the Sunday of observation, Brookside Park had the greatest overall number of users and with that, the greatest variety of activity. Park users were playing half-court basketball games, standing in crowds socializing, setting up celebrations under the shelters, and engulfing the playground in activity. Individual users were also observed walking dogs, relaxing along the creek, and reading in the shade. Known as one of Indianapolis’ greatest disc-golf courses, a large number of disc-golf games were taking place; moving users throughout the park course.
Evaluation

All three parks were observed on Sunday, April 15 between 2:00pm and 3:00pm and the weather was a sunny and breezy 75 degrees. The metrics used to evaluate the three parks were a combination of quantitative data on number of park users, seating, and recreational spaces; and qualitative data on shade, water, user activity, and the accessibility and visibility of the park in relation to the surrounding area.

Findings

The results of the survey compared the three parks to one another based on several criteria (see Table 2).
Table 2: Park Observation Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Variables</th>
<th>Max Bahr Park</th>
<th>Military Park</th>
<th>Brookside Park</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. Park Users (#)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adolescent Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Female</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. Safety</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Well-lit walking paths</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrian cross-walk at park entrance</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair accessible</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility to/from surrounding area</td>
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<td>Adequate</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. Recreational Space</strong></td>
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<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open lawn</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Field/Court</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. Seating</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benches</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chairs</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movable</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V. Shade</strong></td>
<td>Lightly Shaded</td>
<td>Lightly Shaded</td>
<td>Densley Shaded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VI. Water</strong></td>
<td>No Water</td>
<td>Large, Moving</td>
<td>Small, Moving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VII. Park Usage</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitary Active Use</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Walking, jogging</td>
<td>Walking on trail, jogging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitary Casual/Passive Use</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Reading, sitting</td>
<td>Reading, sitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Active Use</td>
<td>Frisbee game, football catch, four-square</td>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>Basketball game, disc-golf, playground activity, walking, walking dogs, cookout, party celebration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Casual/Passive Use</td>
<td>Family conversation at playground</td>
<td>Studying, smoking, talking</td>
<td>Picnic, sitting, talking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Max Bahr Park is surrounded to the north, east and west by dense residential single-family homes. To the east is also a church with adjoining school that uses the park for recess and organized community sport leagues. To the south, however, the park is divided from the neighborhood with a relatively dense wooded-area and abandoned school. A
chain link fence completely surrounds the park except for the northeast entrance, hindering accessibility to and from the space (see Image 5). The visibility to and from the park and surrounding areas is adequate except for the southern edge due to the wooded area and abandoned building. The park lacks adequate lighting and walking paths, yet the park did not show signs of misuse including graffiti or evidence of drugs and alcohol. Max Bahr Park has ample recreational space including a playground, a blacktop surface with 4-Square and Hopscotch, baseball and soccer athletic fields, and an expansive open lawn (see Image 6). There were no basketball courts. The park was lightly shaded with mature trees and did not have a water feature including a drinking fountain. A single shelter with picnic tables showing signs of frequent use and a bench near the playground provided seating: none of which was movable. Park usage was entirely group passive and active including Frisbee games, football catch, socializing, and conversation at the playground. The athletic fields were not being used on the day of observation, yet a neighborhood sport league organizer told me that frequently children from the neighborhood use the fields for informal games. A summertime baseball and football league will use the park for practice and games.
Military Park is bordered to the north and west by the Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis campus, to the east by predominantly student apartments, and to the south by the Canal. Designated entrances to the park are located on the northeast corner with a signaled crosswalk, and to the southwest and south along the Canal. Without a fence or dense tree line, users can enter the park freely anywhere along the edge: providing adequate accessibility and visibility (see Image 7). Park lighting was even spaced along the walking paths and at the shelter, and there were no signs of graffiti, broken structures or drug use. Military Park provides well-maintained walking or jogging trails and an open lawn but does not have a playground or athletic court. Benches along the path and inside of the shelter were not movable, yet provided a lightly shaded area for casual park use (see Image 8). Park usage was both active and passive amongst the user groups. Walkers and joggers made up the active use, while students studying and several users reading or simply sitting accounted for the passive or casual use.
Image 7: Military Park. Lauren Day.

Image 8: Military Park. Lauren Day.
Brookside Park is bordered to the north, south, east and west by dense residential neighborhoods, the majority of which are households with children. Two designated vehicle entrances to the park have stone gateway signage, while pedestrian users may enter anywhere along the border due to a lack of fence or obstruction. The dense neighborhood coupled with the park sitting at a lower elevation allows for ample visibility to and from the green space. As lighting seemed sparse, I returned after dark to survey how well the park was lit. The light fixtures along the park edges were spaced too far apart to create a safe, well-lit boundary, and the playground and shelter areas lacked any adequate lighting. The winding walking paths had lighting in some parts, while other stretches were completely dark with broken light fixtures. The Disc Golf Course had no lighting. Brookside Park showed signs of misuse including graffiti, broken seating structures, and evidence of drug and alcohol use, possibly a result of the poor lighting after dark greatly inhibiting visibility in to and out of the park. Ample recreational space includes two large playgrounds, several open lawns for active use, a Disc Golf Course, and basketball and tennis courts (see Image 9). Seating at shelters, along athletic courts and near the playground were stationary. Large areas of this park are densely shaded especially along the Pogue’s Run tributary, which moves throughout the park (see Image 10). Park users were diverse in age, demographic and activity. Solitary and group passive or casual use included reading, sitting, and talking. Active solitary and group use included jogging, walking, hiking, playing basketball, disc golf, Frisbee, having a picnic, playground, and general group games.

Discussion

Max Bahr and Brookside Parks are both located in high-density areas with low- to medium-income residents. Both park layouts support the research, which suggests parks located in this type of neighborhood should provide space for a variety of uses including a playground and natural scenery. The play areas in both parks were being used on the day of observation, and the plantings and green space provided a welcome change of scenery from the surrounding dense urban neighborhoods with limited outdoor space. In contrast, Military Park is located in a medium density area with higher income levels on average. The park supports research in that it provides places to sit and a shelter for family or group gatherings yet Military Park does not have a play area. In this situation for the user demographic of Military Park, a play area does not match the needs of the young- and middle-aged professionals and students.

When comparing the three parks to PPS measure of park success; several of the characteristics stand true for all three parks. Group use was dominant, varied activities were taking place, and different age groups were utilizing the park space at the same time. However, it was not apparent or observed that a higher proportion of females were using the parks. At Max Bahr and Brookside Park, there were large numbers of children playing which may suggest another indication that parents felt the space was safe.

Whyte’s research reiterated his hypothesis that more seating meant more users. Max Bahr and Military Park both lack an ample number and variety of seating. The benches
in Military Park are scattered and discourage interaction of users. However, the benches are located along the walking path, which provides resting for walkers and joggers and does allow for interaction between the active and casual user in that setting. The dominant user group of Military Park is the student and young professional. Research suggests that movable seating encourages ownership and use of the park space. A general lack of seating and existence of movable seating and tables does not encourage student studying. Max Bahr Park has a heavily used shelter and a few benches along the athletic fields for observation. As the primary use for this park is recess and neighborhood sport leagues; the seating seems appropriate for the specific park user groups. In addition, with a high number of children users, the seating near the playground for supervision is appropriate and well designed.

Accessibility encourages users to come to the park from numerous entry points, while visibility impacts a sense of safety as well as helps to facilitate park use when passersby notice activity. Accessibility and visibility at both Brookside and Military Park create a sense of continuity with surrounding uses and offer those inside the park a feeling of safety. Max Bahr Park, with the chain-link fence completely surrounding the park make it difficult to enter from various points and suggest an intentional separation of the park space from the neighborhood. The wooded area to the south and abandoned building at the southwest corner do not offer high visibility of activity happening inside or outside of the park. While the open lawn offers potential for large group activities, with no visibility or lighting, there is a sense the particular park segment to the south is unsafe and there is a substantial distance between the user and the only park entrance or exit.
The single park entrance is directly across the street from the church, and not the denser residential sides. While the intention of the fence may have been to create such a separation to protect the park users from outside threats; the end result is a green space that does not feel connected to the neighborhood or inviting for casual use. A well-kept playground, shelter, and athletic fields offer excellent options for park use and follow research and suggestions for successful parks. However, the park must also feel a part of the neighborhood and as though it is there to encourage ease of use.

Max Bahr does serve as an excellent space for the adjacent school to hold recess, and the neighborhood youth baseball league. The day of observation, the softball league director was registering families and children were playing recess games. In this sense, the park does serve a successful use, as the school has no additional outdoor space for programs, athletic leagues or recess.

Military Park has one official entrance but lacks a fence or landscape barrier anywhere along the perimeter. Coupled with a wide-sidewalk and bus stop to the north and east; users feel no sense of barrier between the street, sidewalk, and the park. The streets to the north and east are busy, and while there are signaled crosswalks, this barrier may discourage use. The tree line along the perimeter provides ample shade but is not too dense to block out visibility to and from the park. The greatest point of accessibility for Military Park is its connection to the Canal. Users, many of whom are coming from a number of entrances along the Canal, can move effortlessly from the promenade along
the water to the Park; enjoying both assets. Walkers and joggers were observed moving between the Canal and Military Park for exercise.

Brookside Park has excellent accessibility and visibility to and from the surrounding residential neighborhood. Drives at either end of the park allow vehicle access and parking that helps to bring users while also restricting the movement of the vehicles throughout the park. Users on foot, however, have a choice of several entrances located throughout the park as well as no structural barriers along the entire perimeter. This ease of entering and exiting the park makes the park space more of a continuation of the users’ front yards and as research suggests, encourages frequent and varied use. I observed more than one example of parents or guardians watching younger children playing in the park from a porch across the narrow residential street: an excellent example of the motivation for neighborhood parks to provide a larger green space for safe play. An ease of accessibility is bolstered by the lack of wide streets with fast-moving traffic.

Brookside Park is surrounded on three sides by two-lane residential roads with traffic calming on-street parking, which makes it safer for those crossing mid-block and more likely users will feel comfortable crossing to and from the park to the sidewalk. In terms of visibility, the park is at a lower elevation than the surrounding dense residential neighborhood and is therefore much easier to take notice of what is happening inside and outside of the park space. This characteristic adds to the sense of safety for users and the surrounding neighborhood as well as drawing activity to the park when passersby observe such diverse and varied use. Groups of Disc Golf players moved throughout the park and did not seem to disrupt the playground or celebrations taking place under the shelters.
Park users seemed to understand and accept the varied use as the purpose of the park. This integration and simultaneous variety of uses is a measure of successful parks according to PPS.

The existence or lack thereof of playground equipment and athletic courts did support the user demographic for all three parks. Max Bahr Park and Brookside Park are located in residential areas with at least 40 percent of the households with children younger than 18 years old. Therefore, providing play equipment, athletic fields, and space to run is an important amenity. Max Bahr Park contains a playground, and baseball and soccer fields. These recreational amenities provide ample space for active recess use by the children from the adjacent school. In addition, speaking with a neighborhood sports league organizer on the day of observation, I learned that in the summertime neighborhood children often use the park for soccer and running games, and families use the playground. On the day of observation, Brookside Park had lots of families on both of the playgrounds, several basketball games taking place on the resurfaced courts, and children playing Frisbee and tag on the open lawns. There is a match between user and provided amenities.

Military Park does not have a play area or athletic court. At a much lower percentage than the other two neighborhoods, only 2.9 percent of households have children younger than 18 years old. Providing places for active children activity is not a priority for this park space. The users observed were young and older adults either engaged in group passive activities or solitary active uses such as jogging, or walking through the park.
Urban parks are vital to livable cities and urban areas, and the interactions shared in these places encourage resident investment in his or her neighborhood. Public urban parks facilitate significant health, economic, social, and cultural benefit. In order to include these green spaces in a city’s plan and for the community to reap the benefits; the place must be a successful one in both initial design and subsequent use. Therefore, it is important for urban planners and designers to understand what characteristics are necessary for an effective successful public urban park space.

A park’s design and function must align with the needs of the people using the space. A successful park starts with a bottom up approach. This approach involves the intended users and potential future user groups in the planning process. Public input is a necessity to create a park space in which the community feels ownership and pride. Just as each community is unique so too must the park planning and design process be to fit the expected and hopeful park user. This community input includes larger influential stakeholders as well. A neighborhood association, adjacent church, or chamber of
-commerce can have influence and decision-making power in the ultimate outcome of a park space. These stakeholders and their commitment to a project’s success will significantly influence the outcome. Taking the time to mitigate conflict of design, approach, or priority of use is important for a successful space.

Accessibility and visibility to and from the park form the initial reaction and sense about the park’s safety and general use. An ease of entering and exiting the park creates continuity between the user’s private space and the public park space. As ownership of the neighborhood park is essential to investment and continued use; this continuity and connection to the park space fosters the sense of possession. Fences or barriers to entering and exiting the park, while potentially serving as a safety measure themselves; in reality create a sense of intentional separation from the surrounding areas. The observed parks that did not have any barrier to entering or exiting saw more informal and frequent movement between the residential neighborhood and the park space. Interestingly, the park observations raise questions about the nexus between visible signs of mistreatment and a general lack of park use. As vandalism, crime, and misuse are realities of urban parks, they are not entirely an indication of a lack of pride in the area. Brookside Park, the neighborhood park with the more frequent signs of misuse also had the highest number of users and variety of activity. This suggests that signs of misuse are possibly ignored when users are motivated to continue to utilize the park space; or that the opposite could be true in that a well-maintained, clean park without visible signs of misuse is not a full-proof predictor of success and frequent use.
Both active and passive uses are attractive reasons for visiting the park. Therefore it is vital that all parks offer space for this opportunity. All three observed parks did provide space for this varied use and therefore saw users engaged in both types of activity.

User activity draws more activity. The energy of Brookside Park and the variety of use fostered more activity and during the 30 minutes of observation, several additional cars and pedestrians joined in conversation or activity. The positive sentiment and pride in the parks are supported by feelings of safety and ownership in the space. At Brookside Park, birthday celebrations and pick-up basketball games become regular events and the park serves a purpose greater than a natural scenery visual change.

A successful park is used by the intended user group. Max Bahr Park is conveniently located for use by the school children for recess and the neighborhood sport leagues. However, on a sunny weekend afternoon, there were few families or elderly users even as the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood document a high percentage of both groups. While the users observed may not reflect the population for reasons necessary to determine, the park does serve as a vital outdoor space for school children who would otherwise have no outdoor recess space. Military Park as an extension of the Canal does serve as a continued walking and jogging trail. With a dense student population, the park has potential to be packed with students relaxing and studying. However the park’s lack of seating and densely shaded open lawns do not provide for an ease of these uses. Brookside Park is the strongest example of how a park’s amenities reflect that of the
intended user: the diverse neighborhood. The urban park provides amenities and design
for families, elderly individuals, single users, and children users. The park is successful
because the amenities match the user demographic.

The survey criteria accounts for important attributes of the park yet also suggests
alterations for future observation. Most important to whether or not the parks were
successful was the observation of user type and his or her activity. Documenting the
number, age range, sex, and type of activity of the park users gave the clearest picture as
to the park’s typical usage. Water features and shade, while important elements of
design, are best understood in terms of importance when observed on multiple occasions
including a warmer, sunny day. Surveying these elements was limited by time
constraints and would be improved with additional intervals of observation. Lighting and
accessibility greatly enhance the park’s success, yet the criteria could be more detailed.
Explanations should include any barriers throughout park, access and proximity to transit
stops, signage, types of lighting, percentage of broken fixtures and in what settings.
Parking and entrances for pedestrians and cars were not included and do affect the
accessibility for park users. These attributes should be included on list of criteria.
Interestingly, the most successful park observed did not have immediate access to a water
feature, had poor lighting, and evidence of misuse. Brookside Park is successful because
of the excellent accessibility and visibility as well as the multitude of available activities.
It is also important to note, that even with provided activities, a park’s use depends on the
community and its desire to benefit from the green space. For continued research,
understanding Brookside Park’s Master Plan as well as collecting significant community input are essential tools for a holistic understanding of the park’s overall success.

Further research and observation is necessary to understand the difference in use patterns among the three parks. Surveying the spaces at regular intervals will help determine patterns of use and suggest reasons for certain activity. Essential to fully understanding the park’s relationship to the community should include user interviews. Questions should touch on reasons for using the park, positive and negative qualities, suggestions for improvement, and overall sentiments.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Park Name:
Address:
Acreage:
Distance (miles) from center of Downtown Indianapolis:
Date of survey observation:
Time:
Weather description:
Relationship to neighborhood:

Park shared use?

I. Park Users [number]
Older Adult Male______ Older Adult Female______
Adult Male ____ Adult Female______
Adolescent Male______ Adolescent Female ______
Child Male _____ Child Female _____

II. Safety

*Overall Park Lighting:* _____ Adequate ______ Inadequate

*Well-lit and visible walking paths:* Y N
Pedestrian Crosswalk at Park Entrance:   Y   N

Wheelchair accessible:   Y   N

Visibility to/from surrounding residential, commercial, vehicles and pedestrians?
   _______ Adequate _______ Inadequate

Visible signs of misuse?
   Graffiti   Y   N
   Broken structures   Y   N
   Evidence of drug use   Y   N

III. Recreational Space [check if present]
   ______ Playground   ______ Open lawn for active use   ______ Athletic Field/Court

IV. Seating  [check if present]
   ___ Benches   ___ Chairs   ___ Ledges

Movable seating?   Y   N

V. Shade
   ______ Densely shaded   ______ Lightly shaded   ______ No shade

VI. Water
   ______ Large   ______ Small   ______ Moving   ______ Fountain   ______ No water

VII. Park Usage  [examples noted]

Solitary Active
Use_______________________________________________________
Solitary Casual/Passive
Use_____________________________________________

Group Active Use________________________________

Group Casual/Passive
Use_____________________________________________