

Parks are widely known as venues for “fun and games,” but this is not the only role they play in metropolitan environments. Parks significantly define layout, real estate value, traffic flow, public events and the civic cultures of the surrounding communities. With open spaces, cities and neighborhoods take on structure, beauty, breathing room, and value (American Planning Association, 2009). A few of the many types of parks include neighborhood parks, community parks, recreational parks, city-wide parks, natural parks, and pocket parks.

Pocket parks are urban open spaces on a small scale. These mini-parks provide a safe and inviting environment for surrounding community members. They also meet a variety of needs and functions including: small event space, play areas for children, spaces for relaxing or meeting friends, taking lunch breaks, etc. The benefits of these unique urban spaces often include one or several of the following ideas:

- Benefit the overall ecology of the surrounding environment
- Help protect and conserve local wildlife, landscape, and heritage
- Reduce pollution, traffic, and consumption of resources such as oil.
- Empower local residents to make decisions that affect their community
- Make communities safer and more sociable
- Improve fitness and health
- Regenerate run-down areas

- Reinforce relationships between local authorities and communities
(Blake, n.d.)

It is important to note that pocket parks *are not intended* to service an entire city in the same way as a neighborhood or city park. Each should be created with the specific interests and needs of the contiguous community—that is, the nearby individuals and families for whose use it was originally intended (Olmos, 2008).

Pocket parks occupy a wide variety of different urban spaces. The parks are mostly developed on vacant or irregular pieces of land. They vary in appearance and character; it is the responsibility of the community to decide the park’s designs and uses. Some elements, however, are essential to the preservation of every pocket park. Parks should be visible from the street to discourage illegal activity; trash cans should be provided and emptied frequently, along with regular maintenance (Livable Streets Initiative, 2008).

Though pocket parks vary according to specific purposes and locations there are numerous characteristics that the majority have in common. Pocket parks usually occupy one to four house lots, and aim to service a quarter-mile radius; users should not have to walk more than 5 to 10 minutes to reach their destination. Parking may or may not be provided, they should be accessible by both foot and bike, and they should not require the use of a car. Parks should also serve a resident population of approximately 500-1000 persons, and should strive to accommodate as many different users

as possible, prioritizing the surrounding neighborhood's needs. Keeping this in mind, parks may have one or several of the following features:

- Flowers or trees
- Seating for adults
- Play space and/or equipment for children
- Gazebos or similar shade structures
- Picnic tables
- Minimal signage and security lighting (Olmos, 2008)

Playscapes and community gardens are two of the more popular types of pocket parks found in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Playscapes cater specifically to the developmental and recreational needs of all young children, including those with disabilities. A variety of texture, color signals, and accessible paths help children enjoy the landscape, and maintain attractiveness for adults as well (Planet Earth Playscapes, 2009). Age-appropriate equipment is one fundamental component necessary for playscapes. Young children between the ages of 2 and 5 are at a very different developmental stage than children aged 5 to 12. Playgrounds should designate separate play areas and structures for each age group. Along with meeting children's different developmental, cognitive and sensory abilities, it is also imperative that the layout and equipment of a pocket park be both accessible and functional for children with a wide variety of disabilities. The Reverchon Park, which opened in February of 2002 in the Dallas area, is an example of a Texas park with a playground designed specifically to include children with disabilities (Boundless Playgrounds, 2009).

Community gardens are a popular choice when creating a pocket park designed for neighborhood interaction of all ages. Unlike playscapes, they typically do not include play structures; instead they provide the land, resources, and informational support necessary to grow food for local sale and consumption. Community gardens have a variety of purposes for the people it serves. They unite residents of all ages in fun and productive outdoor activities and facilitate the growth of community solidarity and neighborhood revitalization.

Therapy gardens provide "horticultural therapy" for individuals with special needs while both school and neighborhood gardens offer sustainable environmental education for youth and adults. Profits derived from the sale of community-grown fruits and vegetables provide a source of supplemental financial aid for low-income community members and families. Most funding for community gardens comes from private charitable foundations, private individuals, and community organization memberships (Urban Harvest, 2009).

Designing, planning, and maintaining pocket parks

Ideally, pocket parks are closely tied to the communities they serve. The design of the park should reflect the specific interests and needs of its intended users: the residents of the local community. In order to understand the unique political and social complexities of the neighborhood, park organizers should solicit and incorporate the ideas and volunteer efforts of community members, including children. Most community members tend to value and respect their neighborhoods more when they are included in the design and process of creating community spaces (Blake, n.d.). Community members should also plan for regularly scheduled maintenance of the park. Each community should gather and select members to frequently check on the maintenance, look, and feel of the park (Olmos, 2008).

Pocket park ownership varies widely across communities. Some parks are both owned and maintained by the city, whereas others are owned and maintained by a charitable foundation. Still other parks are held by public-private partnerships. Notwithstanding specific acquisition arrangements, the Project for Public Spaces recommends that every pocket park should establish a management group within the community that is responsible for overseeing both its construction and ongoing maintenance. The creation and implementation of a written constitution and management plan are important to ensure park sustainability. However, in order for a pocket park to be truly successful, it is imperative to involve community interest, support, and participation in the planning and

maintenance process (Project for Public Spaces, 2009b).

Neighborhood residents can actively engage in pocket park projects in a variety of ways. One of the most popular avenues for community participation is involvement in park conservancies or stewardship groups. The active investment facilitated by these groups fosters a sense of ownership in community members, which, in turn, creates a strong incentive for them to protect and preserve their park (Project for Public Spaces, 2009b). It is also important to implement the ideas and experience of block or neighborhood associations, city council members, and local artists, and businesses.

To assure maximum safety and security, pocket parks should be designed so that they comply with the following criteria:

- Active, frequent use
- Regular maintenance
- Heavy pedestrian traffic
- Opportunities for recreational activities
- Community groups and stewardship initiatives

(Project for Public Spaces, 2009a)

Similarly, pocket park owners and organizers should keep certain objectives in mind when addressing park maintenance. On-going upkeep is necessary to prevent natural damage and keep park equipment safe, working, and up-to-date. Budgeting priorities should therefore secure long-term funding for future repairs, maintenance, and liability insurance costs (Keep Indianapolis Beautiful Inc., 2009).

Funding pocket parks

There are many possible funding sources for the development of pocket parks. The Trust for Public Land is a national, non-profit, land conservation organization that offers assistance with private and public funding for parks (Trust for Public Land, 2009). State initiatives, such as the Texas Recreation and Parks Account (TRPA) which is funded through portions of Texas sales tax received on select sporting items, administer grant programs according to park function and size (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 2009). At the local level, public-private ventures, individual

contributions, and philanthropic support are often solicited to underwrite start-up and equipment costs.

Some parks are financed almost entirely with private funds, as is the case with Paley Park in Manhattan, New York. Built on high-rent commercial land, the construction of this park (1967) relied on the investments of former CBS Chairman, William Paley (Blake, n.d.). In general, however, pocket parks are typically financed by a combination of various funding sources. For example, capital support for the acquisition, design, and development of the 6th Avenue NW Pocket Park in Seattle, Washington consisted of joint contributions from The Pro Parks Levy, the Neighborhood Matching Fund, and the community. These organizations also continue to contribute towards enhancement of park improvements including: a large lawn area, landscaping, paths, neighborhood gathering areas and interactive features for children's play (City of Seattle, 2009).

Pocket park projects in San Antonio

Several pocket park projects have been established in the San Antonio area. Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas (formerly known as Bexar Land Trust) is a local non-profit organization that has designed its community gardens program to improve the health of the city's citizens and environment, beautify neighborhoods, and strengthen communities (Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas, 2008a). The program currently has 19 community gardens in the San Antonio area. The Pittman-Sullivan Neighborhood Garden, located on the city's east side, plans on creating a lush greenscape full of edibles and native plants. On the grounds of the Texas Diabetes Institute at 701 S. Zarzamora is a Diabetes Education Garden which boasts a variety of edibles in the form of fruits and vegetables (Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas, 2008b).

The San Antonio River Improvement Project (SARIP), which began in 1998, incorporates plans for several pocket parks along the 13 miles of the San Antonio River that will be restored and/or enhanced including: a pocket park south of South Alamo Street on the east bank of the river; a pocket park at the

intersection of Crofton and Constance Streets on the east bank of the river; and a pocket park at Camden and Newell Streets (SARIP, n.d.).

Pocket parks are successful because they are able to respond to the needs of local communities but their success requires careful planning, local empowerment and significant local support. The benefits of these parks go far beyond their communities, and ultimately encompass the well-being of the city and region in which they are located.

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