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# Beyond Nomenclature: Urban Parks for Cultural Diversity

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Park planning and design should respond to social circumstance and place. Unfortunately, park designs too often are driven by a park nomenclature that does not represent community needs.

Where did this current restrictive language come from? One source has clearly been public bureaucracies. City and county parks departments understand playfields, playgrounds, and open areas composed of grass and trees. Such park types offer the security of clear, definable landscapes and programs. But such archetypes rarely deliver the truly joyful, inclusive and multifunctional spaces communities need or desire. And in their own participation in park planning, communities are often corralled by established conceptual language in ways that impede their ability to think creatively about the kinds of spaces that might better suit them.

Interestingly, such standardization has little to do with the great diversity of public spaces in the American tradition. Elements of the park, plaza, square, garden and street are commingled in the American landscape in ways that are rarely governed by any particular structure or set of rules. The current standardization of parks also runs counter to the historic role of the American park as a setting for ethnic

and cultural diversity. Simply reproducing standard physical qualities and programmatic concerns does little to further the development of a diverse public realm.

At the same time, it is a paradox that no matter how small or physically complex, parks are considered acceptable ways to provide recreational infrastructure, solve social and cultural issues, and promote environmental equity. And yet their formal and physical qualities, and their ability to shape cities and neighborhoods, are rarely considered — if they are considered at all.

Our response has been to try to open a dialogue of actual needs and desires with residents of urban neighborhoods. The intent is to break through the standard nomenclature around the topic of parks to create more complicated, representative spaces that are particular to a place, its situation, and history. In our designs we have tried to develop a more critical understanding of place and the social forces that act on the public landscape. The result is often what we call “hybrid landscapes,” since they are often formed as collages of familiar, physical components derived from various landscapes. We have provisionally called the three designs on these pages the “yard-park,” the “garden-park,” and the “plaza-park.”



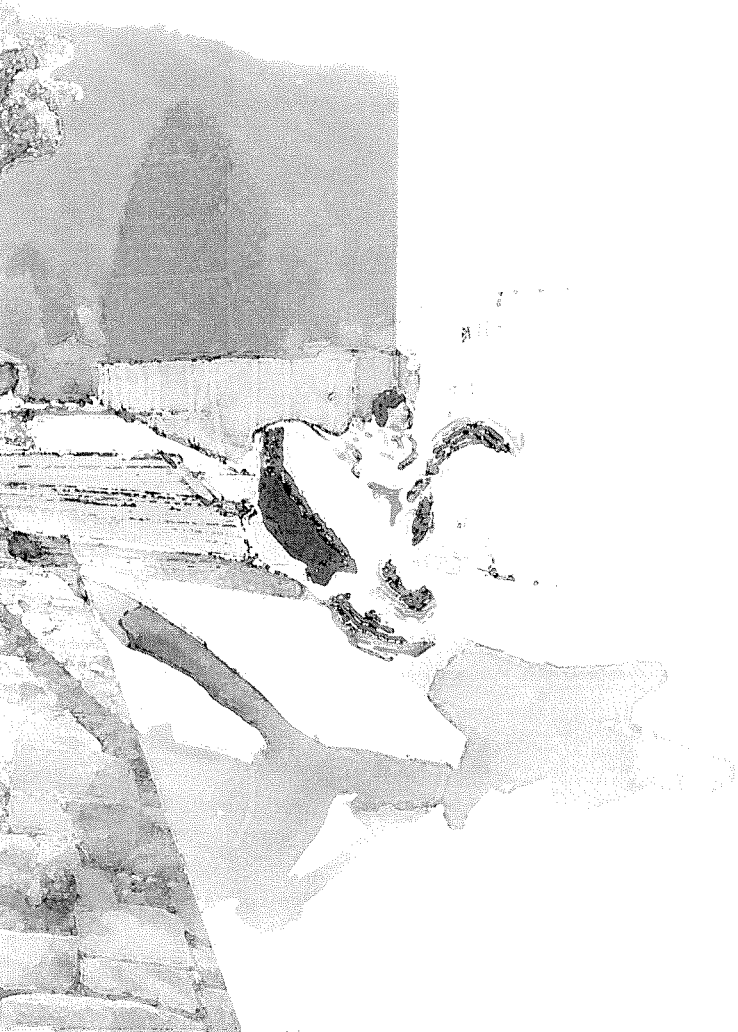
## Garden-Park: Jackson, Wyoming

The motivation for this park was the construction of a new Jackson Center for the Arts on an adjacent high school site. In the course of our analysis, we found that a number of parks within walking distance duplicated the use and service of the existing park on the site, and all were under-utilized. We reviewed various scenarios that addressed a need for new outdoor performance areas and leisure and garden space, and we proposed a program to allow shared use of the park by the Center and nearby residents.

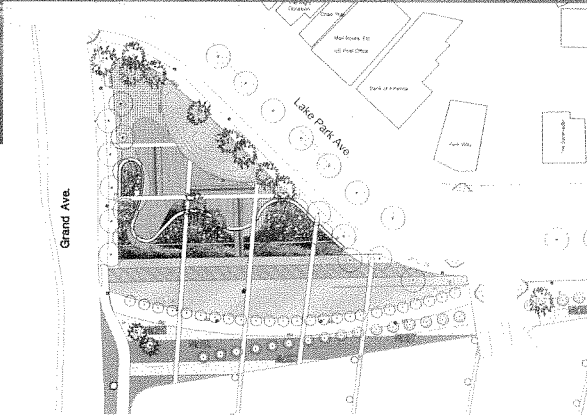
Within this proposed hybrid space, a variety of geologic materials will create textured surfaces to accommodate performances and community events. Cobble rock will be reused from the existing park as seeded paving and undulating planting beds that will also reinforce the site's

edges and entry. Meanwhile, local stone will be used for smoothly paved plinths to provide areas for performance and for gathering at a fire circle. Crushed granite will define circulation routes and reinforce previous desire lines. And to create spatial effects, a series of walls will rise from the ground to become long benches, while in other places gabion baskets will be used to define spaces for intimate or large-scale gathering.

Proposed plantings will be local flora, including cottonwoods and aspens, arranged to create bosques along the street and in the park's interior. Low plants will alternate with rock in the gabion boxes and at ground level. Lawn will be retained in the center of the park, providing areas for sitting, pick-up soccer matches, and other leisure activities.



Left: New park in Jackson, Wyoming, combines use by nearby residents with performances of the Center for the Arts.



## Plaza-Park, Oakland, California

This one-acre parcel has a long and complicated history. Originally, it was part of a tidal wetland. Then, as the city developed, it was filled and evolved into a park, squeezed between city streets and an elevated freeway. At one point, a fountain was built at its center, leading to its name, “Splash Pad.” But the fountain quickly fell into disrepair and ceased to attract use.

The community process for redesign suggested two principal scenarios: a plaza, featuring an open paved space with a new fountain at its center and a large digital screen to project community messages and images along the adjoining freeway; and a “riparian” park that would restore some of the site’s former natural qualities.

The hybrid design blends these two strategies. It proposes that a pathway system connect to existing parking beneath the freeway, and that a street which once provided

through-circulation for cars will be dedicated to pedestrians and host a Saturday-morning farmer’s market. Meanwhile, an area at the park’s center will be planted with wetland species; a community garden will also capitalize on the site’s high water table; and lawns at opposite ends of the space will afford places of relief from the street and freeway. To recall the park’s name and history of use, a paved area tracing the form of the old Splash Pad fountain will connect the main streetcorner to the park’s center, and a seat wall will make the form of the old fountain visible. Finally, the design proposes that the wall culminate in a new fountain composed of small weep holes dripping into a pool, around which are set stainless steel panels bearing the names of local business and residents who contribute to building the new fountain.

Above: Site of existing Splash Pad Park, Oakland, Calif.

Below: Plan for new plaza-park on the site.



### Yard-Park: Oakland, California

The site of this design is a deteriorated mini-park, known officially as Bertha Port Park, originally developed out of three residential lots at the end of a narrow block. The redesign largely revolved around the desire of a nearby Head Start program for outdoor play space for its 45 children. But the design also had to allow for more flexible neighborhood use around the park edges.

Through a collaborative process involving city officials, the designer, and the community, new scenarios were built up around such notions as a garden, a wood, and a “yard.” The final hybrid design is based around a number of multifunctional landscape features that offer the potential for overlapping use. Three primary spaces were created which utilize changes in physical material, site objects, and earth forms.

The design proposes that site objects include a 3-foot-wide, 40-foot long seat wall cast from black integral-color concrete. Along its length, the wall serves simultaneously as an edge to a planted street promenade, a water feature (a hydrant feeds a runnel along the its base), and a chalkboard (which the water can be used to clean). Low steel fencing and a planting of giant bamboo create an edge to the interior children’s play “yard,” while three grassy landforms overlap into it, creating a contrasting sense of overall spatial complexity. The third space is a lawn, defined at one edge by seasonal planting, and at the other by a barbecue drum patterned on homemade front-yard barbecue pits, which provides both a sculptural form and a focus for community gathering.

Top: Site of existing Bertha Port Park, Oakland, Calif.

Bottom left: Photograph of model of new yard-park design.