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# Play in Place: The Role of Site-Specific Playgrounds in Community Space

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**PLAY IN PLACE: THE ROLE OF SITE-SPECIFIC PLAYGROUNDS IN  
COMMUNITY SPACE**

By  
**ALLISON NKWOCHA**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MILLER  
PROFESSOR COATS**

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## **Introduction: Why Play?**

I think of playgrounds as microcosms of the built urban environment. People relate to built structures, and playgrounds are the first type of built structure I could wrap my mind around and only type of built structure I've ever been able to wrap my whole being around. I watch playgrounds, and I have seen their design suffer over the years as unique pieces have been switched out for generic equipment that better meets the most current safety standards. Playgrounds are an important category of public space, and they need to be protected. The way they are designed matters, and I argue that the factors that influence playground design need to be expanded: safety standards alone are ineffective for the creation of meaningful places. Just as the designs of larger elements of our built environment are influenced by social, environmental, economic, and artistic factors, our playground microcosms should reflect the same range and balance. Public space in cities is limited and it needs to be used efficiently. Public spaces have the potential to become public places that are meaningful and well-used, but they have to be designed as such. This thesis is an argument for informed design processes that result in unique and useful public spaces. I use playgrounds as my public space of choice in this paper, but the same basic arguments can be applied in a defense of any public space.

In my first chapter, I provide a land-centric history of the growth and development of the Los Angeles region, which is especially deficient in public green space. I argue that transportation technology and infrastructure was the great shaping force of the urban environment during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I spend a large amount of the chapter discussing the Olmsted-Bartholomew "Parks, Playgrounds, and

Beaches for the Los Angeles Region” report that was never implemented. I justify so much time spent on the analysis of an alternate vision for Los Angeles in the same way that I justify the value of make-believe play—studying and imagining what could have been and even what is not possible can help us come up with creative and informed ideas on what is. Los Angeles needs something it does not have.

In my second chapter, I discuss the design communication of American playgrounds since their beginnings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I also analyze the parallel between Progressive Era playground supervision and the present-day safety standard obsession that has created an equally rigid playscape. The third chapter is a case study of the ongoing preservation treatment of La Laguna playground in San Gabriel, CA and a discussion of the value of site-specificity. The playground was saved from demolition by a quickly formed nonprofit organization, and is an impressive example of what can be done with a playground when its community gets involved.

Aldo van Eyck, a Dutch architect and designer of more than 700 post-WWII playgrounds, said that “Architecture can do no more, nor should it ever do less, than accommodate people well; assist their homecoming.”<sup>1</sup> I believe that playgrounds can do the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Aldo van Eyck, “Commencement Address,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 1981: 4.

# 1. Lay of the Land: Developing the Los Angeles Region

## Deconstruction of the Pueblo, Construction of the City

Los Angeles is a place of movement—movement through the outdoors, movement between the outdoors and the indoors, and movement from one part of the region to another. The region’s development and growth patterns have followed this function since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> In this examination of the development and various planning processes of the past that have resulted in the current form of the greater Los Angeles area, I treat design choices that promoted and made use of transportation as the great shaping force of the urban landscape. Movement to the area began with the Spanish missionaries, who traveled from Mexico and established missions along their northward route. The Camino Real served to connect these missions, which eventually stretched from San Diego to Point Reyes in the San Francisco Bay area. Native American groups were already established along the California coast, but the state was officially “founded in the late eighteenth century when Spain decided to defend its empire and propagate Catholicism by colonizing California.”<sup>2</sup> With these goals as guidelines for action, the Spaniards settled the local Native Americans into the missions for religious conversion and to provide labor. Presidios were built along the coast to defend the missions, and pueblos were subsequently established to provide for the Presidios agriculturally. To fill these new establishments, “the government was obliged to recruit pobladores (colonists) from

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<sup>1</sup> Reyner Banham proposes this idea and employs movement as the guiding concept throughout his seminal architectural history of Los Angeles, *Los Angeles: An Architecture of Four Ecologies*, in which he states that “the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement” (5).

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 5.



among the Mexican people,” who were offered incentives that included land, monetary and supply subsidies, and some tax exemptions.<sup>3</sup>

The pueblo that would become Los Angeles was founded in 1781 as el pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de la Los Angeles. Physically isolated from any seaport, nearby towns, cities, or establishments aside from the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel, the pueblo provided for itself: “...the settlers exploited the village’s fertile soil, ample water, and warm weather so effectively that Los Angeles prospered beyond expectations, attracted more colonists, and, with about one thousand inhabitants, ranked first in size among California’s settlements in the 1830’s.”<sup>4</sup> Though the pueblo was successful and its inhabitants lived comfortably, their agricultural practices did not change or develop over time. Still, the pueblo continued to grow in size “As they planted additional acreage and established new households” so that “Los Angeles prospered and expanded” by “the accumulation, not the alteration, of its productive units.”<sup>5</sup> Though the small-scale spread of the pueblo was a product of the ease with which pobladores could accumulate land and add on to their ranchos rather than one of transportation developments, it is worth noting this basic similarity in growth pattern shared by the earliest manifestations of town planning efforts in the Los Angeles area and its current sprawling urban form.

Change came with the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, at the beginning of which California was ceded by the Mexican government to the United States government. Whereas the large and inefficient ranchos had previously worked

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<sup>3</sup> Folgelson 6.

<sup>4</sup> Folgelson 7. The mission is in the city of San Gabriel, CA and still fully functioning. San Gabriel, which is about 10 miles from downtown Los Angeles, is discussed in the case study presented in the third chapter of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Folgelson 10.

without problem in the isolated pueblo, they were considered “grossly inefficient” when compared to typical American agricultural operations.<sup>6</sup> Newly imposed property taxes posed an economic obstacle for the rancheros, as did the newfound need for land ownership-proving documentation. The rancheros had previously been practicing relatively small-scale and self-sufficient agriculture, but the huge demand for cattle caused by the 1848 gold rush in northern California provided an opportunity for the rancheros to shift to market agriculture. For a while, the rancheros were extremely prosperous, but soon cattle prices fell dramatically as the gold rush passed its peak and the rancheros were hit hard economically—“Few Californians survived this crisis with their ranchos intact... Instead of fortifying their position during the boom of the early 1850’s, they expanded their holdings and squandered their profits,” leaving most extremely vulnerable to the whims of the market.<sup>7</sup>

No longer affordable to the hard-up rancheros, many of their ranchos began to be sold to “American ranchers and moneylenders.”<sup>8</sup> The shift from traditional ranchos to American ranches is a significant one in the history of the relationship between people and land in the Los Angeles area, and is noted by Robert M. Fogelson in his fundamental account of the region’s post-ceding early history, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930*: “The inability of the ranchers to pay such trifling sums revealed that California’s rancho civilization was indeed incompatible with America’s competitive economy.”<sup>9</sup> The ranchos became farms and ranches, with the primary difference being the scale of production—the former had produced only for

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<sup>6</sup> Fogelson 12.

<sup>7</sup> Fogelson 16.

<sup>8</sup> Fogelson 16.

<sup>9</sup> Fogelson 17.

household/community consumption, but the latter “produced for the future demands of distant markets and depended upon outsiders for essential goods.”<sup>10</sup> Trade had expanded, and ranching started to become commercial. Another essential difference was the subdivision of land—ranchos reached such great sizes because great value was seen in having increasingly larger holdings of land, regardless of how efficiently it was being used for production. Now, ranch owners were subdividing their land and selling the smaller plots to the steady stream of immigrants coming to the area after 1865. Lands that had been communal in the pueblo became public park space in the new city, the most notable being the Plaza, which was “designated a city park in 1865.”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Growing Need for Transportation**

The style of work that came with American ranching and farming practices allowed for a new type of town organization by creating a greater need for new transportation options. The “trades, crafts, professions, and industries [of the new Los Angeles residents] facilitated contact between the countryside and town, encouraged a crude interdependence within the urban economy, and fostered the separation of business activities and family households.”<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, with a new reliance upon distant markets, the slow moving Camino Real (which spanned from San Diego to San Francisco) was insufficient for supporting the long distance movement of goods and traders. The region’s first railway, just over 20 miles long, began operating in 1869, connecting the downtown Los Angeles business area with the-soon-to-be-

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<sup>10</sup> Folgelson 18.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Culver, “America’s Playground: Recreation and Race,” *A Companion to Los Angeles*, ed. William Deverell and Greg Hise (Singapore: Blackwell Publishing, 2010) 424. Culver distinguishes the Plaza as the city’s “first public space.”

<sup>12</sup> Folgelson 21.

established port at Wilmington/San Pedro. This line was used to successfully negotiate a deal with Southern Pacific, and Los Angeles was connected to the transcontinental railroad in 1876.<sup>13</sup> In his movement-centric history of Los Angeles' development, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Reyner Banham emphasizes the weight of this deal and labels it “the most important single event in the history of the area after the foundation of the pueblo in 1781, and considerably more consequential than anything since.”<sup>14</sup> The Santa Fe Railroad also connected to Los Angeles beginning in 1885, and “the population in Los Angeles grew from 11,000 to 1.2 million in 1930, making it the fifth largest city in the United States.”<sup>15</sup>

With these major railroad connections that made Los Angeles less physically isolated from the rest of the continent, trade was able to flourish. Five more city lines were also built, “radiating from the pueblo towards San Fernando, San Bernardino, Anaheim, Wilmington, and Santa Monica,” and Banham argues that these lines were significant enough to not only “constitute the bones of the skeleton on which Great Los Angeles was to be built” (each of these original lines has now been replaced by a freeway) but also to bring “the flesh” to the city by allowing for efficient movement into and through it.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the distance between business and residence was allowed to increase, which enabled the beginning of the commuter lifestyle so common to the Los Angeles area. This commuter lifestyle was further enabled by the establishment of street-car lines. In 1887, the first electric street railway began operating along the Pico Street Line “and the definitive age of the development of Los

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<sup>13</sup> Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: An Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 58-59.

<sup>14</sup> Banham 59.

<sup>15</sup> Culver, *A Companion* 422.

<sup>16</sup> Banham 59.

Angeles had begun.”<sup>17</sup> The electric street car lines served to better connect people to the land, as they ensured that the increasing distance between residence and business did not compromise one’s ability to transport across it; Los Angeles was able to expand outward. Though the rail transport was what made this development possible, so much development was actually a contributing factor to the decline of rail transport. The development that resulted from this level of access was actually a contributing factor to the decline of rail transport. This mode of transportation became less convenient with “subdivision and building... [which] produced more intersections and grade crossings where trains could be held up and schedules disrupted, so that the service began to deteriorate.”<sup>18</sup> Though the electric street railways were overtaken by the more convenient personal automobile by 1961, their impact on the physical development pattern of Los Angeles still remains; the 1,164 miles of Pacific Electric Railroad (which had a monopoly on electric street railways) track that went through “fifty-odd communities” still “pretty well defines Greater Los Angeles as it is today.”<sup>19</sup>

Banham cites the 1927 establishment of the Miracle Mile stretch of Wilshire Boulevard as the first real sign of Los Angeles’ conversion to an automobile city. This popular shopping area was auto-friendly; its shops were designed to have parking lots and according entrances in back, which made these facilities easily and conveniently accessible to customers with cars.<sup>20</sup> Though “the Arroyo Seco Parkway was the only

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<sup>17</sup> Banham 61.

<sup>18</sup> Banham 65.

<sup>19</sup> Banham 64.

<sup>20</sup> Banham 69.

section of the freeway system completed before the Second World War,<sup>21</sup> the other Los Angeles was organized around and into urban spread, or sprawl, because its various transportation infrastructures allowed for it to develop and flourish into an “urban form that produced polycentric nodes scattered throughout the region.”<sup>22</sup> Space between home and work became increasingly possible, and mostly so with the personal automobile and the public infrastructure that promoted its use.<sup>23</sup> Though the Los Angeles highway systems we know today were not completed until the 1970s, state legislation for freeway construction was passed as early as 1939.<sup>24</sup> As is discussed in the following section, car use was shaping Los Angeles long before the major freeways were built.

### **The Chance for a Better City**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Los Angeles was made attractive as an oasis destination where health could be restored through fresh air and contact with nature everywhere between the ocean and the mountains. However, the availability and accessibility of open public spaces that made the city so desirable became threatened as the city increased in popularity as a destination for tourists and new residents. Though a step down on the size scale from the large mountain camps and reservation areas outside of the downtown and residential areas, the city did have a number of public parks (its Department of Parks was created in 1889)—land that had previously been communal in the pueblo was converted to parkland, and land was also

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<sup>21</sup> Banham70.

<sup>22</sup> David Sloane, “Landscapes of Health and Rejuvenation,” *A Companion to Los Angeles*, ed. William Deverell and Greg Hise (Singapore: Blackwell Publishing, 2010) 451.

<sup>23</sup> This is one of Banham’s primary arguments in *Los Angeles: An Architecture of Four Ecologies*, mostly developed throughout his fourth chapter, “The Transportation Palimpsest.” Though the “California legislation that made the freeways possible” was passed as early as 1939, most freeways we see now in the region were not built until after World War II (70).

<sup>24</sup> Banham 70.

obtained through donation.<sup>25</sup> Echo Park was donated in 1891, Griffith Park in 1896, and Lafayette Park in 1899. At 3,500 acres, Griffith Park (donated by Griffith J. Griffith) was “the largest urban park in the United States” during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> In the years that followed, the land for Elysian, Pershing Square, Lincoln, MacArthur, Echo Lake, and Hollenbeck Parks was also acquired and developed.<sup>27</sup> Even so, “Los Angeles County had far fewer acres devoted to playgrounds and parks relative to other metropolitan areas and the ratio of recreation space to residents fell well below national standards.”<sup>28</sup> As commerce and the city population continued to increase, undeveloped land became increasingly scarce and, thus, less available for park space. Members of the city’s Chamber of Commerce were committed to addressing this problem before it was irreversibly exacerbated by “additional land [that] was developed for residences, business, and industry.”<sup>29</sup>

In response to these concerns, the Olmsted Brothers landscape architectural firm and the Bartholomew and Associates city planning firm formally presented their joint report, *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*, to the Los Angeles Citizens’ Committee in 1930. As the authors acknowledged in the report’s introduction, “the Region is losing some of its most valued charms, for lack of a methodical plan for preserving them.”<sup>30</sup> With a sense of urgency and distinct emphasis on the need for timeliness, the Olmsted-Bartholomew report presented the methodical

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<sup>25</sup> City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation & Parks, “History,” *City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation & Parks* 2012, 25 Oct. 2012 <<http://www.laparks.org/dos/dept/history.htm>>.

<sup>26</sup> Culver, *The Frontier* 61.

<sup>27</sup> “History,” 25 Oct. 2012 <<http://www.laparks.org/dos/dept/history.htm>>.

<sup>28</sup> Greg Hise and William Deverell, *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 3.

<sup>29</sup> Hise 3.

<sup>30</sup> Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew and Associates, “Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region,” *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region*, William Deverell and Greg Hise (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 83.

plan that the region needed to preserve its best features and increase their recreational accessibility and usefulness. In 178 pages, a detailed and site-specific proposal is made with the objective of providing an increase in both the amount and the quality of different types of accessible public land in the 1500 mi<sup>2</sup> region that spanned from “Antelope Valley in the north to the harbor in Long Beach, from... Malibu out to Riverside County.”<sup>31</sup> Banham’s classification of the infrastructure and planning decisions guided by the promotion of movement and mobility as the great shaping force of the Los Angeles region is completely accurate here—an essential factor of the plan was the 440 mile network of recommended “pleasureway parks” or “parkways.” As the names indicate, these are spaces of pleasurable, park-like connection that would be used to create a convenient route of transport between other regional recreation spaces. Furthermore, they would literally pave (or plant) the way for region-wide automobile use and be a physical realization of the fact “*The recreation of...people is largely dependent on the automobile*” in “*the only great metropolis that has developed almost wholly since the invention of the automobile*” (authors’ emphasis).<sup>32</sup> Recreation access for all was the eventual goal, but car access was already assumed. The system of parkways was intended to cover the region so uniformly, in the authors’ words, “that no home will more than a few miles from some part of it,” which would offer everyone in the region efficient and desirable travel between destinations to the extent that “driving there may be either wholly for the pleasure of such driving or, more generally, it may be over the pleasantest if not

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<sup>31</sup> Hise 1.

<sup>32</sup> Olmsted Brothers 131.



always the shortest route to some other recreational objective.”<sup>33</sup> These other “recreational objective[s]” that the parkways were intended to connect were the region’s beaches, mountains, parks, and playgrounds.

Though they acknowledge the inherent limitations of comparison between one city and another, the authors of the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan reach a clear set of conclusions on the “Park Shortage in the Los Angeles Region” through comparison against other metropolises:

1. There is a serious shortage of park system facilities in this Region, even for the present population.
2. There has been a serious lack of increase of such facilities in comparison with the rapid increase of population.
3. These shortages seem quite unreasonable considering the agreeable climate, the economic prosperity, and the exceptionally favorable social conditions here.
4. They appear not only unreasonable but positively reprehensible, because of the very close and direct influence of agreeable living conditions on the continued health of the people and the prosperity of the community.<sup>34</sup>

These problems are general and apply to all of the park-types being addressed by the plan, and its proposed solutions directly respond to the assessed lack of existing facilities, the need for development of more facilities at a faster rate, and the optimal but urgent conditions that existed in the region at that economic, social, and environmental moment—the authors of “Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region” saw it as the best time to address all of these related problems.

Comprehensive proposals are made for beach and mountain recreation areas, but my further discussion of the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan will be limited to its

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<sup>33</sup> Olmsted Brothers 95.

<sup>34</sup> Olmsted Brothers 86. The metropolises Los Angeles is compared against are Minneapolis, Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, St. Louis, San Francisco, Kansas City, Seattle, and Portland. Out of all of these cities, Los Angeles is listed as having the lowest ratio of park area to city area. This “Table Showing Extent of Parks in Eleven Cities” (measurements exclude school playgrounds and National Forest land) is shown on page 122 of “Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region.”

sections on the smaller-scale public parks, playgrounds, and athletic fields. To be clear on terminology, the word “parks” is frequently used throughout “Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region” to refer to all types of proposed recreation areas; however, in the remainder of this chapter, my own use of and reference to “parks” as they are discussed by the reports’ authors will specifically designate the public green-spaces that are *not* large reservation areas, mountain camps, or beaches. The report establishes a clear set of ideals in its recommendations for local park development, iterating accessibility for and applicability to the most people possible. Accessibility refers to park location. One-half mile or less is cited as a reasonable use-radius for a local park and accordingly, an area of about one square mile constitutes a neighborhood unit (though they admit that neighborhoods were often larger and that auto transport was common, which meant that the access-radius of local park facilities could increase as well). With these numbers in mind, plans for park facilities that would be joined with local schools were favored because the schools were generally already centrally located within neighborhoods and likely had some amount of existing field space and play equipment. This type of park could be larger, better equipped, and better located to serve the highest number of people.

Large parks centered around elementary schools are similar to the type of central park proposed in the now classic Radburn neighborhood model that was developed in 1929, the year before “Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches” was presented—three or so enclaves, which were units of about 20 houses, were grouped into a block and about four block units were “arranged around the sides of a central parkway in such a manner so as to enclose the open green space.” This entire

conglomerate was called a superblock, and six of these arranged around an elementary school comprised a neighborhood.<sup>35</sup> Another important neighborhood concept, which was also developed in 1929 by Clarence Perry, was more mixed-use in its distribution of local facilities and was decidedly against large parks favoring instead “many small parks and playgrounds scattered throughout the neighbourhood” so that children would more easily be able to walk to these sites (Perry’s use-radius measurement was only 0.25 miles compared to the 0.5 miles use-radius shared by both the Radburn model and the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan).<sup>36</sup> The neighborhood unit began to play a role in urban planning theory starting in the early 1930s; by the end of the decade, “Well-planned neighbourhoods were seen as essential to rational urban development.”<sup>37</sup> “Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches” bases its recommendations for park and playground facilities on the local neighborhood scale—this level of scope, which was attuned to the then-current trends of urban planning theory, suggests the plan’s overall congruence with planning ideals and goals of the time period.

The Olmsted-Bartholomew plan stresses the importance of making parks relevant and useful to people of all ages—parks could be made applicable to a greater range of people through the inclusion of a greater variety of facilities. The type of facilities or features suggested include “sand piles and wading pools for the little tots; playground apparatus and small play areas for boys and girls; tennis courts, local ball fields, playground apparatus, and other facilities for active play; parklike areas for

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<sup>35</sup> Nicholas N. Patricios, “Urban design principles of the original neighbourhood concepts,” *Urban Morphology* 2002: 24.

The Radburn neighborhood model (based off of the plan for Radburn, New Jersey) was developed in 1929 by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. The intended effect was “to design a town for the automobile age” (24).

<sup>36</sup> Patricios 29.

<sup>37</sup> Patricios 26.

quiet and mental refreshment; field house and swimming facilities, also club rooms and other outdoor facilities for community use.”<sup>38</sup> From a present-day perspective, this sounds like a tall order for every neighborhood park—the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan undoubtedly favors fewer large parks over many small parks. The report authors’ argue that large parks could provide “the most efficient and economical way to meet adequately the needs of these children” because they “concentrate most of the possible additional space in one unit for the entire neighborhood, whether that includes one school or many.”<sup>39</sup> Fairmount Park in Riverside, which was designed by the Olmsted brothers and built in 1911, serves as a representation of what might have been the regional norm—its 275 acres include “a bandshell, two tennis courts, playground, picnic facilities, rose gardens, Lake Evans, Brown Lake and Fairmount Lake, fishing, golf course, lawn bowling green, barbecues and a restored historic boathouse with rental pedal boats.”<sup>40</sup> As it remains today, most of the region’s park-playground situation in 1930 was dire. The Olmsted-Bartholomew plan describes the existing facilities as “very inequitably distributed, being almost wholly lacking in large sections of the region while fairly competent in others,” and cites a total cost estimate of \$39 million for the provision of “complete *local* park and playground facilities” for the region’s then population of 1,500,000— \$31.2 million for parkland acquisition and \$7.8 million for its development.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Olmsted Brothers 145.

<sup>39</sup> Olmsted Brothers 146.

<sup>40</sup> “Park Facilities,” 25 Oct. 2012 <[http://www.riversideca.gov/park\\_rec/facilities.asp](http://www.riversideca.gov/park_rec/facilities.asp)>.

<sup>41</sup> Olmsted Brothers 140, 150. The region was certainly lacking in public park land: “The total park area in the Los Angeles Region is 9,668 acres, or about 15 square miles. That is to say, in a region of 960,000 acres, or 1500 square miles, there are only 15 square miles of park lands. This is only about *one percent* of the total area” (122).

The most fascinating element of the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan is that it was never actualized, despite its thoroughness and accuracy in addressing problems that still characterize the Los Angeles region today. The rationale behind the report presented to the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce in 1930 was completely logical: Los Angeles needed to increase its rates of tourism while preserving its best attributes that would ensure successful rates of tourism and commerce in the future. The development patterns the region had followed through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century would prove unsustainable in the future primarily because they were degrading the amount and quality of space available for public use. Though the estimated cost for all recommendations made in the report was \$224 million (which was considered viable when compared to what Paris had spent on city beautification in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—\$400 million over 40 years), the report repeatedly emphasizes the eventual profit that would occur from this level of investment in the region.<sup>42</sup> The profit was an obvious bonus, but the language of the report also stresses that such drastic planning measures were absolutely necessary for Los Angeles even to maintain its current levels of tourism; for the city “To continue to attract such tourists or to increase the volume until it reaches an economic value comparable, for instance, with that of Paris, parks and pleasureways on about the scale here proposed are essential.”<sup>43</sup>

Los Angeles had and missed the opportunity to change the course along which its planning, growth, and development would occur in the future. What exists today as an expansively sprawling, smoggy, urban landscape with a park deficiency could have been a sprawling, region-wide network of public green spaces that wove through and

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<sup>42</sup> Olmsted Brothers 129.

<sup>43</sup> Olmsted Brothers 131.

connected smaller urban centers—what exactly happened? In the most comprehensive text analyzing “Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region,” *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region*, Greg Hise and William Deverell propose that the plan’s failure was due to the deliberate choice made by the Chamber of Commerce “and its allies” to keep the plan from being released to the public.<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Culver cites “fears about taxes, the cost of implementation, and worries about the Depression” as the more specific financial reasons for the plan’s suppression in his book on the region, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America*.

Though it was never materially realized, the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan is still notable for its defense of public space and public well-being. It critically points out that the 1500 mi<sup>2</sup> region had only 15 mi<sup>2</sup> designated for public park areas, but offered 10 mi<sup>2</sup> of privately owned “golf clubs and country clubs” spread across 42 different facilities that were only accessible to the wealthy.<sup>45</sup> The call for more parkland could certainly have been made without such consideration for people of lower socioeconomic standing and such emphasis on the value of *public* land within every community, but the report takes the time to assert social values as it construes this ratio of public space to private space as problematically small. Lawrence Culver states that the “report skillfully merged the aesthetic concerns of the City Beautiful movement with the social concerns of the playground movement.”<sup>46</sup> I provide a more in-depth discussion of the playground movement (including its controversial aspects) in the following chapter, but it was most fundamentally concerned with the increased

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<sup>44</sup> Hise 7.

<sup>45</sup> Olmsted Brothers 122.

<sup>46</sup> Culver, *The Frontier* 62.

provision of recreation space to improve the well-being of people and, more generally, make the city a better place. While the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan did discuss the benefits that were sure to follow greater investment in regional recreation facilities through the lens of economic and aesthetic gain, it is irrefutably imbued with undertones of social responsibility. This sense of social responsibility is most clear in the plan's focus on the needs of low-income families, which were considered to be completely bound to the needs of the entire community:

Those of lower incomes... generally live in small-lot, single-family home districts, and have more children and less leisure time in which to go to distant parks and recreational areas. These families comprise 65 per cent of the population, and they should be given first consideration, not only for their own good but for the welfare of the community.<sup>47</sup>

The basic ideals conveyed through the plan are important ones that should remain a priority in city planning and urban planning decisions today—relevant and accessible recreation space should be considered a basic right, not a privilege, and should be provided as such by the local government. Moreover, just the provision of accessible public space is not enough; these spaces need to be useful, worth travelling to, and appropriately equipped with well-maintained facilities that ensure their ability to serve the intended user groups as effectively as possible. When it comes to public spaces, every person needs to be accounted for in some user group. A near-prophetic question is posed to the people of the region at the close of the section entitled “Conditions Affecting the Need for Park and Recreation Facilities” in the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan: “The big question is whether the people are socially and politically so slow, in comparison with the amazing rapidity of urban growth here, that they will dumbly let the procession go by and pay a heavy penalty in later years for their

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<sup>47</sup> Olmsted Brothers 110.

slowness and timidity today.”<sup>48</sup> In 1930, the answer proved to be yes. If we look at the region’s park-deficient landscape ask this “big question” today, it is harder to come up with an answer. What is clear, however, is that there are no isolated points along the development timeline of an area: this current form, in all of its positive and negative attributes, is the product of a series of past regional planning, growth, and development choices and prioritizations. To avoid the full weight of the “penalty” ominously predicted in the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan (or, for that matter, any other detrimental social, environmental, economic, or political effects), it is essential that our current and future growth practices and patterns reflect the prioritization of sustainable design choices informed by the consideration of long-term quality of life and quality of space.

### **The Reality of Establishing Recreation Space**

Beyond the immediate financial apprehensions that stopped “Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region” from coming to fruition or even being released to the public, the loss of land sales that would have ensued had the report been implemented would have appeared unattractive to Chamber of Commerce members. Though the Olmsted-Bartholomew recommendations were at least partially aimed toward increasing the level of regional tourism, it inherently threatened the number of potential new residents that would be able to buy land and settle in the area. If so much land were set aside for public parks and recreation areas, there would be far less land to subdivide and sell to the growing population. Land that was subdivided and sold could certainly include open green space, but it would most likely exist in the form of private backyards. In the “first truly suburban metropolis,” the amount of

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<sup>48</sup> Olmsted Brothers 126.



available land that allowed for low-density development meant that public land was not the only place open space could be found: “Los Angeles seemed to offer a radically new relationship between city and country. Instead of bringing nature into the city in the form of parks or playgrounds, in L.A.... the solution was to take the city itself out into the country—to provide private backyards instead of public parks.”<sup>49</sup> It a trade-off indeed—the promise of available land in a pleasant climate was part of what made the Los Angeles lifestyle attractive to prospective residents. The dream being used to promote Los Angeles to prospective residents would be compromised if much of the potentially private land was tied up in large public spaces, yet if the dream being used to attract tourists would be compromised if visitors found that there really wasn’t much accessible recreation space outside of private residential properties. The fact that the recommendations made in “Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches” not implemented indicates that attracting potential residents was prioritized over attracting tourists.

“Speculative Land Subdivision” is specifically addressed as one of the “Conditions Affecting the Need for Park and Recreation Facilities” in the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan. The danger of subdivision in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that it often did not happen in tandem with strict zoning regulations. Subdividers were in a unique and consequential position of power: though they inflicted control over the way neighborhoods were being created and shaped, their economic motives meant that they could not always be expected to understand or implement neighborhood planning ideals as they applied to subdivided areas. The authors of the

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<sup>49</sup> Culver, *The Frontier* 56, 55. Historian Robert Fishman called Los Angeles the first truly suburban metropolis.

Olmsted-Bartholomew plan lament this lack of long-term planning in their argument for the necessity of setting aside designated recreation and park areas:

In the Los Angeles market, those who first buy lots from subdividers are largely intent on speculative resale—to anybody for any use... They do not appreciate the value of residential neighborhoods permanently satisfactory to live in because of having adequate local recreation grounds... subdividers cannot be expected to go very far in voluntarily setting apart local parks and recreation grounds. Can they be made to realize that in the long run such parks will make the remaining lots more valuable than the whole tract would be without them?<sup>50</sup>

As a practice, subdivision was considered a threat to public open space not only because of the lack of associated zoning regulations, but also because of the speed and regularity with which it occurred in the Los Angeles region.<sup>51</sup> This region was not completely devoid of zoning practices—ordinances separating residential and industrial districts had been passed as early as 1904.<sup>52</sup> However, these early ordinances were insufficient in ensuring that adequate park space would be preserved region-wide, as can be deduced by the urgent tone with which the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan warns against trusting subdividers to value and preserve public open space.

Even in the early practice of urban planning in the United States, it was widely accepted that playground sites served to increase real estate values in the neighborhood areas surrounding them.<sup>53</sup> “Neighborhood” is the key term here, however, and why zoning regulations were essential. As Ocean Howell establishes in

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<sup>50</sup> Olmsted Brothers 121.

<sup>51</sup> Olmsted Brothers 121. The Olmsted-Bartholomew plan authors state that “There are few places in the world where land subdivision has been so constant and widespread as here,” their project made more urgent by the fact that “This takes place with only slight and very infrequent regard for the ultimate need for public open spaces by the increasing numbers who will occupy the subdivisions.”

<sup>52</sup> Culver, *A Companion* 424.

<sup>53</sup> Ocean Howell, “Play Pays: Urban Land Politics and Playgrounds in the United States, 1900-1930,” *Journal of Urban History* 2008: 975.

“Play Pays: Urban Land Politics and Playgrounds,” playgrounds could provide a sense of permanence and stability for neighborhood areas; they were seen as useful and desirable spaces within subdivided areas that were specifically zoned as residential, and thus made worthy real estate investments. However,

Without strong zoning laws, real estate professionals could not guarantee that playground land would not later be put to another, less desirable use; nor could they guarantee that industry would not invade the surrounding neighborhood, in both instances, making their investment significantly more risky. In other words, real estate professionals were interested in playgrounds because they augmented and stabilized land values, but they relied on the activities of city planners to ensure that they could reap the benefits of their enterprising beneficence.<sup>54</sup>

Zoning can be thought of as the base piece in a fragile tower of blocks—if the city planners did not set zoning regulations in stone, playground space would not be considered worth the investment and thus would not be set aside within residential areas, which would then make these neighborhoods seem less desirable, less fixed, and less worth protecting from industrial sites. This balancing act of zoning, playground space, and neighborhood quality gets at the “The value of residential neighborhoods permanently satisfactory to live in” discussed throughout the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan.<sup>55</sup> With the ability to ensure that land designated for park space was in the proper zone-type that would ensure its preservation, both real estate professionals and city planners played a hand in creating these “permanently satisfactory,” or in other words, sustainable neighborhoods; they had the power to design neighborhoods to last over long periods of time without sacrificing the level of quality associated with a guaranteed quantity of park space. The assurance of relevancy was key—definite zoning could guarantee that playgrounds and parks would be relevant uses for pieces

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<sup>54</sup> Howell 976-977.

<sup>55</sup> Olmsted Brothers 121. See block quote on page 12 of this paper.

of land within neighborhoods and that these established sites would not then be converted for different, less desirable uses that were relevant to a different zone-type.

## 2. The Structure and Construction of Safety, Then and Now

The Playground Association of America (PAA) provided an official definition of a playground in 1909: “a piece of land in charge of a play director.”<sup>1</sup> The play director was a living safety feature on playgrounds of the past. Today, most American playgrounds are not defined by the presence of safety leaders—instead, they are defined and shaped by the physical safety features that have come to dominate playground design standards. In this chapter, I discuss safety as the factor that links present-day playgrounds to their earliest manifestations. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the safety “goal” was to influence the social behaviors of the children on the playground; since the 1980s, the “goal” has been to mitigate liability and lawsuits. Just as these safety-based objectives have developed over the years, so has their expression—it has literally become more built-in over time. Whereas playground “success” used to be determined by the presence of the right person, today it is determined by the presence of the most safety-conscious (or, liability-conscious) equipment. I argue that this is not a positive course for the evolution of playground design to take, and that our playground design choices should be informed by and used to express different values such as creative and unique play experience, art appreciation, connection with nature space, and public spaces that are useful and attractive to a variety of users. Safety is very important on playgrounds, but it should not have to translate into mass produced equipment that is as boring design-wise as it is for play (see Figure 2.1).

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<sup>1</sup> Ocean Howell, “Play Pays: Urban Land Politics and Playgrounds in the United States, 1900-1930,” *Journal of Urban History* 2008: 962.

This chapter is an analysis of the evolution of playground design, which I have divided into three distinct “eras”: 1) the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Progressive Era ideals had the greatest influence on playground design; 2) the period between the 1930s and the late 1970s, in which Modernism and new theories of play were the great influencers; and 3) the time between the 1981 publishing of the first U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission Handbook for Public Playground Safety and the present, in which safety features have come to dominate playground design. My goal in this analysis is to establish design communication as a factor that can either enhance a public space or detract from it.

### **Progressive Play**

The first American public playgrounds were built in the 1880s, and were common in major cities by 1900.<sup>2</sup> Early playgrounds were basic in form, “chiefly identified with individual neighborhoods and their small parks” and “defined by a sand pit and the ‘gymnasium,’” but were still considered valuable sites because they helped take children’s play off the streets and into a more controlled space.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that it had less park space than other cities, Los Angeles founded its Board of Playground Commissioners as well as the country’s first Playground Department in 1904.<sup>4</sup> The Playground Department prioritized the implementation of supervised local playgrounds across Los Angeles with its stated goal of “the prevention and control of juvenile delinquency and to provide wholesome and constructive play and recreation

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<sup>2</sup> Susan G. Solomon, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005) 8.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon 8.

<sup>4</sup> “History,” 25 Oct. 2012 <<http://www.laparks.org/dos/dept/history.htm>>.

for youth, in supervised playgrounds, as an alternative to play in the city streets.”<sup>5</sup> An illustration in the city’s 1930 “Annual Report of the Department of Playground and Recreation” lists and depicts the societal ills that would threaten children who played on the streets—accidents, un-Americanism, delinquency, loneliness, unhappiness, poor health, lack of supervision, and lack of co-operation. Such evils would be avoided if children were instead “Safe Inside the Supervised Playground.”<sup>6</sup> Additionally, playgrounds and adult recreation facilities were seen as places through which the proper organized activities and programs could “teach immigrants to socialize with the larger population.”<sup>7</sup> These efforts to Americanize immigrants were generally concentrated on children, and the kind of group play that could occur on supervised playgrounds was considered to be a highly effective method of Americanization: “play advocates perceived the peer group as a community-controlled institution providing adolescents with values and skills that were not being transmitted by the urban, especially ethnic family.”<sup>8</sup> Recreation was a tool for acculturation and socialization.

These socialization goals were certainly not specific to Los Angeles.

Architectural historian and author of *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*, the most authoritative and current account of playground history and design theories, Susan G. Solomon marks “the institutionalization of the play movement and

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<sup>5</sup> “History,” 25 Oct. 2012 <<http://www.laparks.org/dos/dept/history.htm>>. The first playground established by the Playground Department was Violet Street in 1905.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 65. The original illustration is on page 33 the “Annual Report of the Department of Playground and Recreation, City of Los Angeles, 1930,” which belongs to the Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation and is housed in the Special Collections of Young Research Library at University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>7</sup> Culver, *The Frontier* 63.

<sup>8</sup> Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) 7.

the recognition that the public realm was taking responsibility for the activity of children” by the foundation of the Playground Association of America in 1906.<sup>9</sup> In the two decades following, the number of playgrounds would grow to a reported 12,159 between 872 cities across the country.<sup>10</sup> The playground movement, which refers to the period that began in the late 1880s and had produced a huge boom in playground development across the United States, was very much informed by Progressive Era social ideals. The Progressive Era had also started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the playground made for a convenient venue in which the Progressive aim to reform cities through the improvement of living conditions, which would in turn improve the people as citizens, could be administered to children; in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, playgrounds were designed as sites where children could be kept safe from the negative influence of the streets, and instead be shaped by playground supervisors through controlled activities and games. The goal, of course, was to train the children to become better adults more suited to a reformed American society. “Public Recreation and Social Morality” and “Play as Training in Citizenship” were two of the speeches given at the PAA’s first annual Play Congress in 1907.<sup>11</sup> Professor of history Dominick Cavallo highlights the intensity of the Progressive Era attempts to shape children into “team players” in his book *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920*:

Inviting young people to use organized playgrounds was more than a strategy for removing them from parental supervision or providing them with healthy exercise. Modern biological and psychological theories of child development

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<sup>9</sup> Solomon 8. Solomon notes that the PAA would later become the National Recreation Association and then the National Recreation and Park Association.

<sup>10</sup> Howell 962.

<sup>11</sup> Linnea M. Andersen, “‘The playground of today is the republic of tomorrow’: Social reform and organized recreation in the USA, 1890-1930’s,” *the encyclopedia of informal education*, 2006: Web.



had convinced play advocates that playground experiences were means through which the young developed specific cognitive skills, moral tendencies, and social values. Play organizers argued that a connection existed between the social-training techniques employed on playgrounds, especially during adolescent team games, and the creation of a distinct personality type.<sup>12</sup>

The opposite personality type was considered incompatible with successful societal reform, and it was this “‘asocial individualism’ that was “associated with unregulated capitalism and entrepreneurial aggressiveness,” the evils of American society that Progressive Era reformers sought to correct.<sup>13</sup>

Though official playground supervision had become standard, it remained a controversial aspect of the playground movement. The prescription of constant supervision, which seems incongruent with true play, brought the role of the playground into question: was the playground meant to provide a space for children to be independent, play freely, and enjoy their leisure time as they pleased, or was it meant to be a space for regimented activities that forwarded the educational agenda of Progressive reformers? There appears to have been a divide on the issue. Luther Gulick, the first president of the PAA, calls the playground “our great ethical laboratory” in his 1907 essay “Play and Democracy,” in which he maintains that playgrounds were essential sites for teaching children social lessons.<sup>14</sup> Gulick gives a generous defense of playground supervisors in his 1909 essay “The Doctrine of ‘Hands Off’ in Play” and urges the reader to “‘think of them as sympathetic carriers of splendid traditions, as social leaders. Without them it would be better to have no

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<sup>12</sup> Cavallo 3.

<sup>13</sup> Cavallo 3.

<sup>14</sup> Andersen.

playgrounds at all.”<sup>15</sup> On the other side of the debate, there were arguments for the right of children to play without direction on playgrounds. Superintendent of the Pittsburgh Playground Association George E. Johnson discusses this in his 1909 essay “Why Teach A Child To Play,” in which he states that in a 1908 Congress session “an appropriation for playgrounds was defeated on the grounds that supervised play was unnatural, that you could not teach children to play.”<sup>16</sup> The members of Congress that defeated this appropriation were not the only ones who felt this way—Theodore Roosevelt, a member of PAA and president of the US at the time, was reported by Gulick to have initially opposed the extent to which play was controlled:

He said: “It is a splendid thing to provide in congested districts of American cities spaces where children may play; but let them play freely. Do not interfere with their play. Leave them alone. Do not meddle.” He has since changed his opinion, but in those words he voiced the general public feeling regarding this whole matter of play.”<sup>17</sup>

The PAA and its supporters were staunch advocates for children’s play; their definition and according provision of “play,” however, was intended to produce certain results in children that (it was assumed) would ultimately make them better citizens and community members.

### **Early Legal Action**

The provision of playground supervision in the form of play leaders was one method, albeit with far-reaching ulterior motives, by which children’s safety was taken into account. Playground safety also began to be realized through the regulation of

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted by Ocean Howell in his essay, “Play Pays: Urban Land Politics and Playgrounds in the United States, 1900-1930,” 971. Quote is originally taken from Gulick’s 1909 essay “The Doctrine of ‘Hands Off’ in Play.”

<sup>16</sup> George E. Johnson, “Why Teach a Child to Play?” *Board of Playground Commissioners Fourth Annual Report* 1910: 22.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted by Ocean Howell in his essay, “Play Pays: Urban Land Politics and Playgrounds in the United States, 1900-1930,” 971. The quote is originally found in the same 1909 Gulick essay mentioned above, “The Doctrine of ‘Hands Off’ in Play.”

play structures. In what is potentially the earliest widespread act of equipment regulation, the aforementioned gymnasium structures that were the staple piece in neighborhood playgrounds were removed from all New York City parks in 1912.<sup>18</sup> Soon after, the “swings, sandbox, and seesaw” that were “Placed on a hard surface and enclosed by high fencing” became the standard playground components. Though the physical features had slightly changed, supervision remained a constant, as these sites “were always associated with extensive programming that included paid play leaders and well-orchestrated activities, such as folk dancing and dramatic presentations.”<sup>19</sup>

It is not surprising that playground equipment began to be regulated for safety reasons this early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—lawsuits had already been filed against municipal corporations after children had incurred injuries on public and school playgrounds. In a 1909 tort liability case, *Ching v. Surrey County Council*, “The defendant county council, which had all the rights and duties of a school board, negligently failed to keep a school playground in the condition required by statute. As a result, a school boy was injured” and it was thus “*Held*, that the defendants are liable.”<sup>20</sup> This type of case outcome, which assigns responsibility for the maintenance of school play equipment and the safety of the equipment users to the municipal corporation, is in direct contrast to the results of earlier cases. In an 1870 case, *Cf. Gibson v. Mayor*, the municipal corporation was found not liable for an individual’s playground injuries.<sup>21</sup> This stance was defended with an explanation of how “At common law, a municipal corporation is not liable for damage caused by its

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<sup>18</sup> Solomon 8.

<sup>19</sup> Solomon 8.

<sup>20</sup> “Municipal Corporations—Liability for Torts—Defective Condition of School Playground,” *Harvard Law Review* 1909: 150.

<sup>21</sup> “Municipal Corporations—Liability for Torts—Defective School Playground” 150.

negligence in the exercise of purely governmental functions”—school ground maintenance fell into the “governmental function” category. Further defense is provided with the citation of the argument that municipal corporations did not have the power to spend tax dollars on private claims, and that furthermore, “the public interest would be subverted by the diversion of the public school funds to private claims.” The *Cf. Gibson v. Mayor* case occurred during the decade prior to the acknowledged start of public playground provision in cities, and the defense of the municipal corporation’s non-liability in playground injury situations emphasizes a “no-strings-attached” relationship between the city and the play space.

The results of a third case, *Ramirez v. Cheyenne*, highlight the changes that had occurred in provision and maintenance responsibility as playgrounds became increasingly common in American cities.<sup>22</sup> In 1927, the Supreme Court of Wyoming found the municipal corporation “liable for negligence in the performance of its nondelegable duties, among which is the duty to use reasonable care to make the place safe for children who are there by invitation” after the city’s failure to repair a damaged swing had resulted in a child’s death. The language employed in the review of the case, published in a 1927 issue of *The Virginia Law Register*, alludes to the relative newness of municipal liability in such cases. While Wyoming’s Supreme Court acknowledges that ““The maintenance of free municipal playgrounds is a comparatively new municipal activity,”” it still upholds that ““Cities inviting children to playgrounds where it maintains devices for their use in play must assume at least those duties and liabilities that would be assumed by a charity doing the same

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<sup>22</sup> “Municipal Corporations—Liability for Injury to Child on Free Playground,” *The Virginia Law Register* 1927: 702. This whole paragraph’s discussion is in reference to this article.

thing.”<sup>23</sup> Children’s play space was no longer given only through school districts at their school sites; it had also become expected that cities provide these public spaces. Accordingly, the general expectation of the level of municipality responsibility for the maintenance of the provided public play spaces increased.

### **New Playground Styles and Philosophies of Play**

As early as the 1930s, playground design began to be discussed in the field of landscape architecture through a modernist lens. New design ideals were promoted by landscape architects Garrett Eckbo, Daniel Kiley, and James Rose, who emphasized the value of separate play sites for very young children and children aged 6-15 and “argued for a finer integration of interior and exterior spaces along with the use of contemporary materials.”<sup>24</sup> Despite these early advocates, it was not until after World War II that the role of and standards for the design of American playgrounds began to be more widely discussed. Susan G. Solomon describes how “When scrutiny of playgrounds began actively in America in the early 1950s,” there was a divide between the recreation movement and the art world.<sup>25</sup> Playgrounds were related to both, but their role as physical spaces was perceived differently across the divide. The standpoint of those associated with the recreation movement was not so different than that of Progressive Era reformers. “The recreation leader, rather than the equipment [...] was at the heart of their strategy,” which was informed by McCarthy era social values related to good citizenship.<sup>26</sup> On the other side of the matter, playground proponents with ties to the art world believed that play sites had the potential to “boost

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<sup>23</sup> “Municipal Corporations—Liability for Injury to Child on Free Playground” 702. The “court” is directly quoted in the article.

<sup>24</sup> Solomon 10.

<sup>25</sup> Solomon 23.

<sup>26</sup> Solomon 23.

aesthetic awareness and individual creativity.”<sup>27</sup> As opposed to the playground’s standard swings, slides, seesaws, and sandbox pieces, artists began to create “play sculptures” in the 1950s. These sculptures were meant to create pleasurable play experiences for children that were more open-ended and exploratory than the typical playground experience; the play sculptures were “Designed to improve the aesthetic appearance of the playground and to stimulate children’s imaginations—particularly if the sculpture was abstract and did not suggest usual play activities.”<sup>28</sup>

This period of time in which the modern art world exerted its greatest influence on American playground design is perhaps best captured by the 1954 Modern Museum of Art (MoMA) “Play Sculpture Competition.” which considered not only the design of play equipment, but also the way in which it functioned as part of a city’s public space.<sup>29</sup> Solomon also notes the particular significance of an anonymously authored article, entitled “Play Sculpture,” from a 1954 issue of *Arts and Architecture*, which she directly quotes in her text:

Playgrounds for children are an essential part of modern city planning, and the quality of their play equipment is of vital importance. However, the cement-floored, wire-fenced patches of recreational areas set aside in city parks and schoolyards, and fitted with monotonously identical metal constructions for physical exercise, are cogent proof of how inadequately we have estimated their importance in our communal life.

Before the 1950s, the value of playgrounds had mostly been attributed to the social functions they served as training sites for children; by the mid-1950s, the way in

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<sup>27</sup> Solomon 25.

<sup>28</sup> Aase Eriksen, *Playground Design: Outdoor Environments for Learning and Development* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1985) 33.

<sup>29</sup> Solomon 30.

which playgrounds could function as valuable public space for a city had begun to be realized.<sup>30</sup>

The other major playground design style to emerge from this era was the adventure playground. At a classic adventure playground,

loose materials are provided—usually discarded lumber, tires, pipes, bricks, and other ‘junk’—which children can freely manipulate. The children can alter the playground environment as they wish by building, digging, and demolishing. Under the supervision of a play leader, who shows children how to use the tools and conducts other activities, the children follow their own day-to-day interests, sometimes involving themselves in construction projects that take many weeks.<sup>31</sup>

Adventure playgrounds first appeared in Denmark in 1943 and were popular in Britain by the 1950s.<sup>32</sup> Though the classic adventure playgrounds that were found in Europe did not take on in the United States, theories of play associated with the adventure playgrounds still served as influences for American play designers. Landscape architect Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Britain’s main proponent of adventure playgrounds, discusses her concept of play in her 1968 book *Planning for Play*, which urges for children’s right to free play. She states, “Children of all ages, all over the world, are happiest when they can move things around to their own liking.”<sup>33</sup> A major design ideal embraced by adventure playgrounds was the presence of movable parts, which allowed for children to manipulate and exert control over their environment. With respect to supervision, the role of the play leader on an adventure playground was completely different than the role American play leaders had historically played. It is difficult to envision adventure playgrounds in the United States, and this is mostly

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<sup>30</sup> Solomon 30. Solomon uses this direct quote. The citation information for the original article (quote taken from page 12) is as follows: “Play Sculpture,” *Arts and Architecture* 71 (Aug. 1954): 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> Eriksen 20.

<sup>32</sup> Eriksen 20.

<sup>33</sup> Lady Allen of Hurtwood, *Planning for Play* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1968) 16.

because there had not yet been a time in playground history when play leaders had facilitated free play and risk-taking. Whereas American play leaders had traditionally tried to keep children socially safe, the play leaders on adventure playgrounds sought to keep children physically safe by providing the instruction that would enable them to play independently. Lady Allen posits, “We have to decide whether we are to make playgrounds for children or playgrounds that please the grown-ups.”<sup>34</sup>

Lady Allen of Hurtwood’s play theories and playground designs directly informed those of architect Richard Dattner and landscape architect M. Paul Freidberg, who both began playground design in New York in the mid-1960s.<sup>35</sup> They shared a design ideology “that playgrounds should comprise linked and integrated spaces.”<sup>36</sup> Dattner’s most famous playground is his Central Park *Adventure Playground* (1966). Despite the name, the New York *Adventure Playground* was not like European adventure playgrounds. Rather, his was composed of fixed pieces made of wood, concrete, metal, and brick. These pieces included a tower, a maze, tree houses, a pyramid, a splashing pool, a water channel, wading pools, a table, an amphitheater, climbing poles, a slide, a volcano, a tunnel, concentric mounds that formed a crater, a tree pit, and a tool shed.<sup>37</sup> Like European adventure playgrounds, Dattner’s playground also had a supervisor. He describes the benefits of supervisors in *Design for Play*, stating that “A supervisor often combines the good features of a parent—providing a model and helping children over difficult moments when they undertake more than they can handle—while avoiding excessive concern that is

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<sup>34</sup> Allen 16.

<sup>35</sup> Solomon 53.

<sup>36</sup> Solomon 54.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Dattner, *Design for Play* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1969) 75.



difficult for the parent to control.”<sup>38</sup> Dattner’s philosophy of play highlights its voluntary and free nature, and his *Adventure Playground* was specifically designed to promote this by “incorporating the possibility for children to create their own places within it.”<sup>39</sup> Dattner’s focus on enabling the creation of special and personal space is congruent with Jane Jacob’s argument for the importance of what she calls “intricacy” in parks—simply put, every place in a successful park space feels like a different place than the other places in the park. The park experience, even in a small park, should vary from spot to spot and from one visit to another.<sup>40</sup>

M. Paul Friedberg’s most famous project is the plaza and playground space at the Jacob Riis Houses in New York (1966). In his own words, the “Riis Houses continue the attempt to bring new life to a housing project’s proprietary dead space, creating an environment of such attraction in the neighborhood that it destroys the image of the ‘project’ as turf to be avoided.”<sup>41</sup> By making use of the space between the buildings, Friedberg strove to re-integrate the total place into its surroundings. The smaller spaces that made up the site were a garden, an amphitheater, a plaza, and a playground.<sup>42</sup> Friedberg’s designs represented a definite integration ideology. The open spaces he created were intended to bring together people of all ages.<sup>43</sup> His designs also emphasize integration with the surrounding urban environment and a more inclusive consideration of the recreational opportunities it had to offer. He focus on integration is best captured in his book, *Play and Interplay: A Manifesto for New*

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<sup>38</sup> Dattner 51.

<sup>39</sup> Dattner 65.

<sup>40</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993) 135-136.

<sup>41</sup> M. Paul Friedberg with Ellen Perry Berkeley, *Play and Interplay: A Manifesto for New Design in Urban Recreational Equipment* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970) 172-173.

<sup>42</sup> Friedberg 172-173.

<sup>43</sup> Solomon 55.

*Design in Urban Recreational Equipment*, in his assessment of how design for play relates to urban design: “Recreation is very much a part of the total planning process and should be integrated with education, housing, commerce, and transportation. To exclude recreation from the initial planning is to reduce its impact.”<sup>44</sup> Friedberg’s Riis Houses design communication must be noted—his designs are informed by the concept of social and spatial integration, and they are accordingly able to form a site for the integration of people and function as a site that is integrated into its urban surroundings.

### “Rules” for Play & Fear Based-Design



**Figure 2.1** A typical post-and-platform playground model, found at El Barrio Park in Claremont, CA. The roof over the slide is a sun protection feature, but it and the fake trees also serve as “a design trick to make the ensemble look taller” and more challenging.<sup>45</sup> The highest platform (where the slide begins) is 6.5 feet tall. It is not difficult to find other playgrounds that look quite like this one. Author’s photographs, 2012.

Solomon labels 1966-1968 as the high point for American playground design and attributes this to the period being “the brief time in space when the place of

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<sup>44</sup> Friedberg 17.

<sup>45</sup> Solomon 82.

playgrounds in the realm of art [...] seemed ensured.”<sup>46</sup> Insurance prices began to rise in the 1970s, and so did the number of American safety guidelines and acts.<sup>47</sup> The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) was founded in 1973 and published its first handbook of public playground safety guidelines in 1981.<sup>48</sup> In terms of playground design, not much has changed between the 1980s and today. The CPSC occasionally publishes updated and intensified versions of the standards for public playground safety, and though they are not official regulations, they are still the authoritative rubric against which a playground’s level of safety is determined. Thus, though in most states it is completely legal to design a playground that does not meet the established guidelines, “Unfortunately, a designer can potentially be sued for almost anything.”<sup>49</sup>

Fear of litigation is a most unfortunate basis for a design standard, but the risk posed by noncompliance is great: A 2000 New York Times article cited an \$11 million dollar judgment that was rewarded in a playground-injury case.<sup>50</sup> The designer is not the only party at risk either—municipalities and manufacturers also can be held liable for injuries that occur on playgrounds. From an aesthetic design perspective, litigation looks bad. Today’s typical playground equipment is easily identifiable—the post-and-platform model with metal posts, heavy plastic platforms, and bright primary and secondary colors has become the standard (see Figure 2.1). In addition to their unimpressive and unexciting designs, these playgrounds are less interesting for play.

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<sup>46</sup> Solomon 62.

<sup>47</sup> Solomon 78-79.

<sup>48</sup> Solomon 79.

<sup>49</sup> James L. Sipes, “Playground Safety: Issues of risk, liability, and fun,” *Landscape Architecture* 2000: 42.

<sup>50</sup> Janny Scott, “When Child’s Play is Too Simple: Experts Criticize Safety-Conscious Recreation as Boring,” *New York Times* 2000: n.p.

With simple and limited options, lower heights, and less steep of slides, these playgrounds do not offer an extended series of graduated challenges, nor do they cater to a wide age range. The only real merits of these play structures are that they are CSPC and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant—accordingly, they are less of a liability and more affordable for a city to keep in place. Though formulated in response to European playground safety standards, Professor David J. Ball’s official recommendation for a more informed perception and reception of the standards that have become the primary determinant of play equipment design is completely relevant to the United States’ playground situation:

*The strengths and limitations of Standards need to be more fully appreciated. Standards should not be used as a means of warding off litigation, nor as an excuse for not thinking more widely about the needs of children. While their contents must be carefully noted, they should also be interpreted and applied with intelligence. Standards should not be seen as synonymous with or as an alternative to a properly conducted risk assessment and requisite knowledge of on-going research.<sup>51</sup>*

Safety is not the only standard by which we can design playgrounds.

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<sup>51</sup> David J. Ball, *Playgrounds—risks, benefits, and choices* (Norwich, England: HSE Books, 2002)79.

### 3. Case Study: Preservation of Play at La Laguna de San Gabriel



**Figure 3.1** Most of Benjamin Dominguez’s cement sculptures at La Laguna playground. Not pictured here: Lookout Mountain (see Fig 3.4), the entrance dock, and a third seal. Author’s photos, 2012.

#### **Orientation**

I showed up early for my scheduled interview so I would definitely have time to play. As I quickly walked past the baseball field and toward the playground at Vincent Lugo Park, my expectations were high. The magic of play has never been lost on me, but as I crossed over the dry creek bed project that helped the city earn funding for the park’s renovation, I really hoped that the firsthand La Laguna playground

experience would prove as impressive as its photographs and story. In an analysis of interviews that had been conducted with children, an article I had recently read on playground planning and management stated that “Equipment that was not challenging enough was described as ‘for babies’”<sup>1</sup>—this was exactly what I did not want to feel about La Laguna. Even though I’m certainly not part of even the most widely ranged age group that children’s playgrounds are designed for, I still feel entitled to a sense of excitement upon a playground visit. At the very least, I should be able to feel excited today by the memory of how exciting the same playground would have been when I was much younger.

I was not disappointed at all. La Laguna de San Gabriel, Benjamin Dominguez’s playground of cement sculpture sea creatures in San Gabriel, CA is an experience. Sammy the snail, Stella the starfish, Flipper, Skippy, and Peanut the dolphins, three different species of sea serpents, Ozzie the octopus, three seals and octopus, and Minnie the whale are the sand lagoon’s permanent residents (see Figure 3.1). Upon witnessing them in person for the first time, the research I had done on the story of the site became even harder to believe. If it were not for the Friends of La Laguna nonprofit organization, the playground would have been demolished replaced by a soccer field as part of the greater Vincent Lugo Park renovations that started in 2006. Incredibly, Friends of La Laguna was able to convince the city to instead preserve the playground as an official historical site. The site is in the middle of the preservation process, with a few pieces that have been completely repaired and most awaiting treatment. La Laguna is the least generic playground I have ever been to, and

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<sup>1</sup> Märit Jansson and Bengt Persson, “Playground planning and management: An evaluation of standard-influenced provision through userneeds,” *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 2010: 37.

standing in the sand close to the sea creatures reconfirmed the question I'd had since I first learned of the playground in the summer: How could any city ever intentionally demolish a place like this? I was at the playground to meet with Senya Lubisich and Eloy Zarate, two of the founding members of Friends of La Laguna, to find out what had and what had not happened here. For geographic and historical reference, San Gabriel is roughly 11 miles northeast of Los Angeles and the drive takes about 25 minutes. The San Gabriel Mission is the same Mission San Gabriel Arcángel that preceded the founding of el pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de la Los Angeles, which would eventually become the city of Los Angeles.

## **Methodology**

My case study of La Laguna de San Gabriel playground consists of three main elements, which are discussed respectively in the three following sections of this chapter: 1) an interview with members of the Friends of La Laguna nonprofit; 2) a brief discussion of the findings presented in the “Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan” that was prepared by Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. for Friends of La Laguna in 2008 and is the “first step towards the development of a comprehensive preservation project focused on the long-term viability of La Laguna as a playground and beloved community resource”<sup>2</sup>; and 3) my own analysis of the playground’s design, as informed by the aforementioned “Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan,” my personal research on the history of playground design trends and safety standards in the United States, and a site visit to La Laguna itself. The “Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan” is a highly detailed, thorough

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<sup>2</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc., “La Laguna de San Gabriel: Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan, Prepared for Friends of La Laguna,” 2008: ii.

document that provides historical background on the site, an architectural evaluation, an assessment of existing conditions, and the project objectives and recommendations for the playground's preservation—it is the most complete source of information on the La Laguna playground and is the first report of its kind compiled for a playground.

My own analysis of the playground site has inherent limitations, and the primary one is that there is no widely-accepted official method of surveying a playground site. The most official method of assessment is through use of the CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission) Public Playground Handbook and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) regulations. This kind of assessment, however, is limited to matters of play equipment compliance with industry standards. The pieces of equipment and the ground surface below them are taken into account, but the overall layout of the playground area and how it integrates into its surroundings, whether they be parkland or more urban, is not considered. Similarly, these standards do not account for the role a playground plays within a community. Safety features are an important part of a playground, but it already established that the individual structures on the La Laguna playgrounds are not compliant with either CPSC standards or ADA regulations. This is not an analysis of how safe or unsafe the playground is—my goal here is to assess what messages are communicated through the playground's physical layout. The results of my design assessment, paired with this chapter's discussion of the playground's role in the community will provide a more inclusive definition of this playground space, its relevance, and why it is worth the preservation effort.



The central argument of this thesis is that safety considerations based in the fear of liability should not be the primary (or only) factor that determines current playground design standards. In the creation of this rubric (see pages 61-62), my intent was to highlight “Elements of Design” that I found most representative of different urban planning ideals, neighborhood planning ideals, and some general theories of children’s play, that I believe should influence playground design. “Influence” is more appropriate than “standardize” because site-specificity is an existing condition in every case—no two existing playgrounds are exactly alike even if they have the same equipment, nor are the play site traits (such as size, quality, and location of the site itself, maintenance schedule, available funding, surrounding space, etc.). Standards that make sense at one site may be completely irrelevant elsewhere. In this respect, it is easy to see why safety is the standard we currently use to evaluate playgrounds—it applies to everyone everywhere. However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, there are other ideals we should integrate into our influence of playground design. With the creation of a set of standards for playgrounds that better reflect the multifaceted urban design and development process and communicate sustainable planning goals, playgrounds could be designed to be better integrated urban sites that are more meaningful and more useful to their surrounding communities than current playgrounds are.

Many of the “play site traits” listed above must be measured qualitatively rather than quantitatively, and it is would thus be challenging to create standards for such features; even for features that can be measured quantitatively, there is no real standard for comparison between two places where different conditions exist. Each

individual site has many observable variables, but there are no universal controls. A related challenge is that some of these elements are more subjective than they are objective—in particular, the assessment of a playground’s “Graduated Challenges,” “Originality,” and “Usefulness” would vary based on the evaluator’s perception of a playground user’s capabilities and willingness to take risks, as well as the evaluator’s personal opinions, tastes, and relationship to the space. Some of the elements I list such as “Topography” and “Control” do not highlight design benefits of La Laguna playground. This is completely intentional. I do this partially in effort to keep my level of bias to a minimum, and more importantly, because beyond being useful in my study of a specific playground, I hope that a rubric of this type can be used as a starting for the creation of a more thorough rubric that could be used commonly in the planning processes of future playgrounds and critiques of existing playgrounds.

My own rubric is very basic and is obviously limited to my knowledge of playground design. Despite the innate shortcomings of this rubric, my research has given me an informed understanding of who should be involved in the creation of a much better version: landscape architects, architects, urban planners, city employees responsible for maintenance of park areas, city government, artists, historians, play studies professionals, movement therapy professionals, landscapers and gardeners, local children, local residents, local parents, children’s teachers, recreation coaches, community groups, and school groups. I list these types of professionals, enthusiasts, and community members in no particular order, nor as a definitive selection—public space applies to everyone, so everyone’s input is relevant and important in the process of designing a space that will best serve its surrounding area. In short, playground

design is ideally as multi-disciplinary as the design of cities over time. I have done my best to negotiate the challenges that are innate to a self-designed assessment and draw meaningful conclusions on the topic at hand. The work I present in this thesis is meant to contribute to a growing base of knowledge and theories on playground design that will hopefully result in a greater number of higher quality playgrounds and public spaces.

### **Interview: The La Laguna Story**

This November, I met with Senya Lubisich and Eloy Zarate at the playground that only continues to exist because of their efforts. Senya and Eloy, professors of history at Citrus College and Pasadena City College, are two of the founding members of the Friends of La Laguna (FoLL) nonprofit that came together in 2006 in rapid response to the news that the playground was going to be demolished as part of Vincent Lugo Park's restoration. In this section of my paper, I discuss our interview and attempt to specifically point out information, as shared with me by Senya and Eloy, that could be useful for other groups of people who want to preserve a playground. As is established early on in the interview, this sort of thing does not happen often at all. Therefore, it is important to share what is known about the playground preservation process. The first thing Eloy and Senya told me is that they were not the first group to take on the protection of La Laguna—six different attempts had been made since 2003, the year the City of San Gabriel received a grant to renovate Vincent Lugo Park and announced the planned demolition of the playground. The interview was particularly informative because it provided an explanation of the early stages of the preservation process (the hard part); though the “La Laguna de San

Gabriel: Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan” discussed in the following section of this paper provides an excellent history of the site and set of specific recommendations for its preservation repairs, it was prepared after the City had already agreed to work with FoLL and preserve the playground as a “historical and cultural resource.”<sup>3</sup> The Preservation Plan document is a breakthrough effort in the small field of playground preservation, but the number of previous failed attempts to protect La Laguna indicates a lack of instruction or general knowledge on how to embark upon this sort of project. Eloy and Senya also communicated a sense of the unknown—there were no guidelines for what they were doing, so they had to formulate their own as they went along. Therefore, as stated above, I use this section primarily to convey their information that could be relevant to groups interested in playground preservation.

According to Eloy and Senya, the main problem the other groups had not been able to move past was La Laguna’s lack of compliance with Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) playground safety standards. As I iterated in my previous chapter, CPSC standards are not regulation, but they enforce themselves because play equipment that does not comply is considered a greater liability. Additionally, the individual sculptures at La Laguna did not meet ADA regulations. The City also cited aesthetic reasons as cause for the playground’s demolition. It was hard to envision this last argument, because the playground is currently in great condition—there are no signs of vandalism and the sculpture pieces, though most have not yet undergone their full preservation treatments, do not appear to be in a state of disrepair—if anything, this is further testament to the excellent work of FoLL. The early groups in support of

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<sup>3</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 1.

La Laguna were caught by the safety argument because of when La Laguna was built. Because it was built before 1994, it was officially subject to neither the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) standards nor the CPSC guidelines. Similarly, pre-2000 construction meant that it was not officially subject to ADA regulations.<sup>4</sup> The issue here was one of modification versus maintenance: if accessibility-increasing modifications were made to any of the play structures, “all structures will be required to be made accessible to the same degree.”<sup>5</sup>

La Laguna’s official classifications have helped it avoid the standards and regulations that would require a series of major modifications—it was listed to California Register of Historic Resources in 2009 and is acknowledged by the City as “local cultural resource” and a local landmark.<sup>6</sup> Because the playground has made the California Register of Historic Resources, the “Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties” is its designated source of preservation treatment standards.<sup>7</sup> It is useful to officially define “preservation” (as opposed to rehabilitation, restoration, or reconstruction, which are the other official treatment options for historic properties) as it applies to treatment of historic properties:

As a treatment, preservation allows for the resource to be properly maintained but does not seek to return the resource to a particular point in time, nor does it try to modify the resource in any way. The goal of this treatment methodology is to stabilize the resource for continued enjoyment within the boundaries of its originally intended use.<sup>8</sup>

“Historical property” may seem to be confusing terminology to apply to a playground—it is. Classification may be a challenging factor to negotiate in the

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<sup>4</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 9-11.

<sup>5</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. ii.

<sup>7</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 5-6.

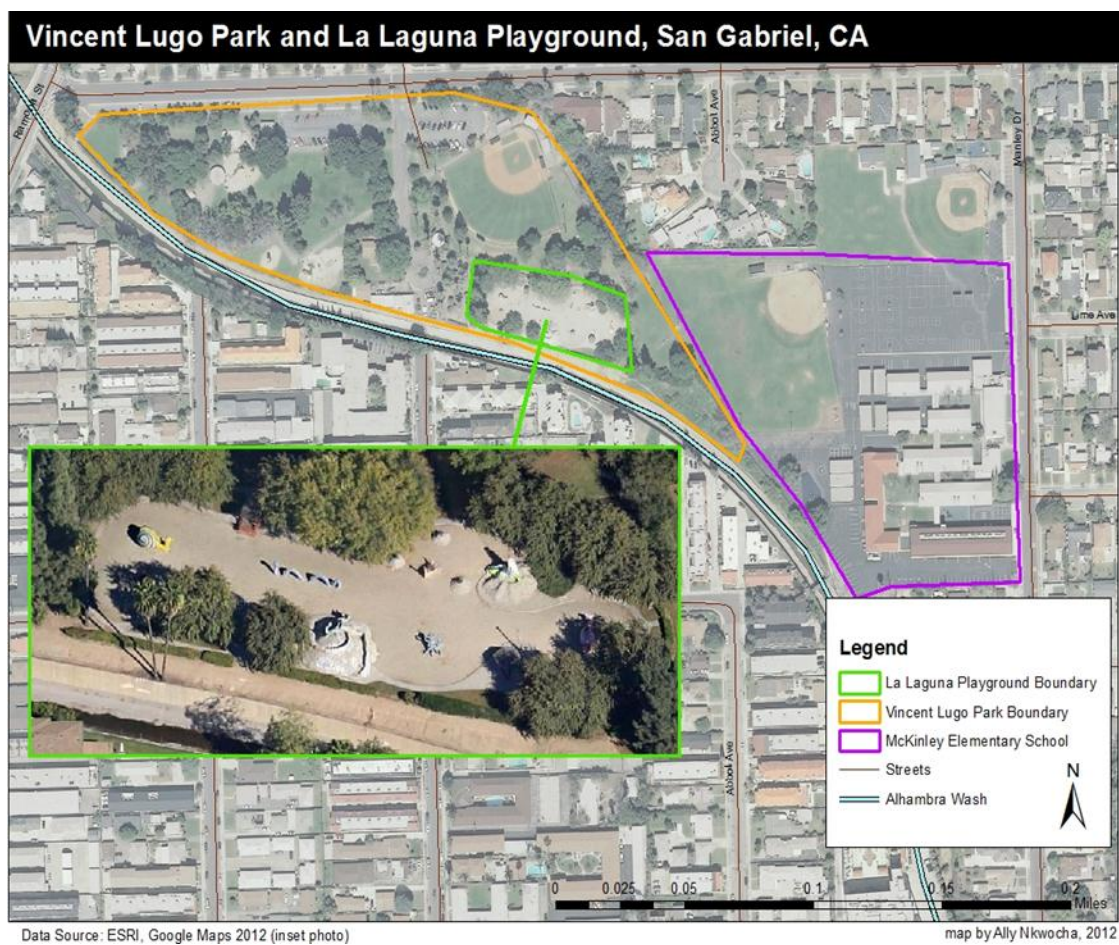
process of saving a playground, but it can make all the difference in determining which standards the play structures must meet. This was certainly the case at La Laguna. Eloy described the confusion: “Another thing that’s important in this—before we started getting involved and we had ties to preservation, nobody knew what they were doing anyways. [...] Most of the report that was done was with people scratching their heads. Nothing like this had ever been done in the history of preservation or playgrounds... When we brought in our experts, they were wondering “Is it a structure? Is it a play structure?” They had a tough time dealing with what it was.”

The City’s plans to demolish La Laguna were not widely known. When the grant for the renovation of Vincent Lugo Park was received in 2003, the City did technically notify the public as it was required to. Senya explained how because “the City is only required to notify people who are living within 500 feet of a project site” of upcoming City projects, very few people actually found out about the planned playground demolition when it was first announced.<sup>9</sup> Measuring out from anywhere in Vincent Lugo Park, which has about 0.25 miles between its furthest ends, 500 feet does not go far (see map Figures 3.2 and 3.3): to the north is a baseball diamond, to the east are the fields of McKinley elementary school, the Alhambra Wash to the south separates the playground from the closest houses, and to the direct west is Ramona St., which denotes the beginning of the city of Alhambra. Other than the houses across the Wash, only the houses at the juncture between the baseball diamond and McKinley’s fields, just northeast of the playground, could have made the 500 foot cut. I elaborate here to make the point that notification is another potential problem with playground-related efforts. It was not until 2006 that Senya and Eloy learned of the City’s

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<sup>9</sup> Senya Lubisich, Personal Interview, 16 Nov. 2012.

demolition plans, which were scheduled to begin soon thereafter, when an announcement was published in a quarterly city newsletter. Senya pointed out the importance of being in touch with other community groups—whether it be school groups, local groups, nonprofit groups, or any other group-type, it is easier to stay informed about what is going on in the area, easier to network, and easier to find support for a project when you are linked into the community.



**Figure 3.2** An aerial showing the location of Vincent Lugo Park and the La Laguna Playground in San Gabriel, CA. The park is located next to the fields of McKinley Elementary school. Author's map (ESRI base map, Google Maps inset photo), 2012.

Eloy and Senya responded to the news of the demolition immediately. A contact at the National Trust for Historic Preservation advised them to raise both community support and city support for the playground's preservation in order to eventually nominate La Laguna for registry with the National Trust. Community support was easier to come by—Friends of La Laguna was able to get 3000 signatures on a petition to protect the playground. Outreach efforts were made in San Gabriel school groups, through communication with other local and community organizations, and by door-to-door canvassing. Though Senya and Eloy are San Gabriel residents now, they weren't at the beginning of their communications with the City about La Laguna. Senya briefly touched on the difficulty this posed—"There's a really clear pecking order when you start dealing with government of any size. 'Who do you represent? Are you a resident?' And if you don't have anyone you are representing and you're not a resident, they don't listen to you all that much."<sup>10</sup> Even if the proponents of a group attempting to save a playground are highly invested in the space, they may find it difficult to hold the City government's attention if they are not official members of the city's community, as defined by residency status. We also discussed this issue from the other side.

Though the members of city government have the power to make decisions that impact the quality of life in a given city, this obviously does not mean that these individuals are city residents themselves. Thus, their decisions may not be informed by perceived impacts upon their own quality of life. In a place like San Gabriel, which is bordered by the wealthier cities of San Marino and Pasadena to the north, this point poses a definite concern. Additionally, if public spaces associated with quality of life

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<sup>10</sup> Senya Lubisich, Personal Interview, 16 Nov. 2012.



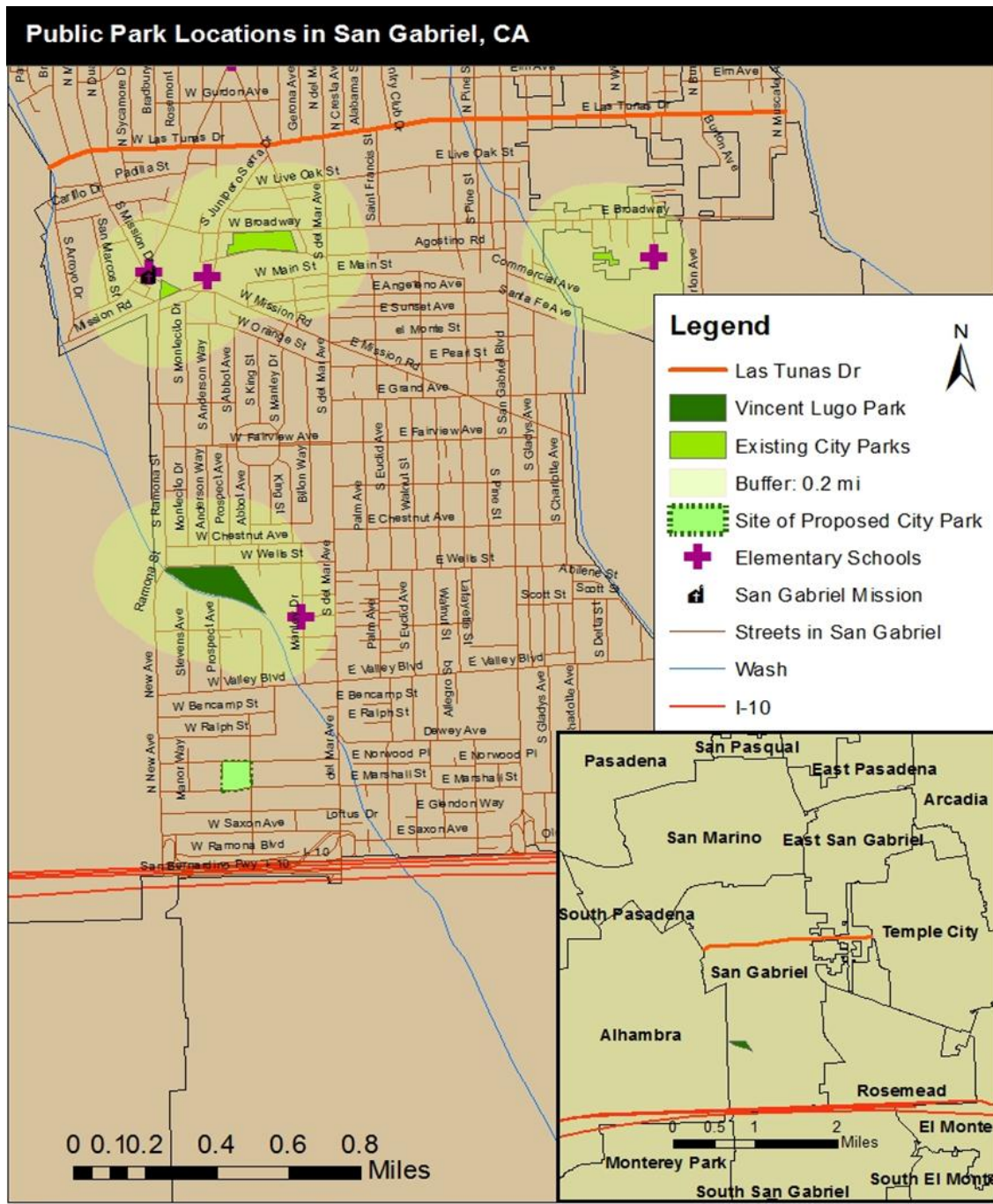
are made less relevant to a community, residents may become less invested in their city over time, or even leave the city.

Eloy and Senya described Las Tunas St., which runs across the city on an east-west axis, as the line that divides San Gabriel socioeconomically and racially, for the most part. The majority of the wealthier and white population lives north of Las Tunas St. and the majority of the poorer, non-white and immigrant populations live to south of Las Tunas St (see Figure 3.3). Though city parks are typically better distributed in wealthier areas, all four of San Gabriel’s parks are located below Las Tunas St. Two of the parks are very small and have minimal facilities. The two main ones are Smith Park, which is a few blocks south of Las Tunas and about a mile north of Vincent Lugo, the other main park (see Figure 3.3). Smith Park has courts for tennis and basketball, picnic areas, and two ordinary playgrounds. These recreation facilities are valuable, but Smith Park lacks the site-specificity of Vincent Lugo Park, which can be specifically attributed to La Laguna. The playground is a unique feature that affords Vincent Lugo Park some competition with the parks in the cities of San Marino and Pasadena that may be nicer, better equipped, and closer to the homes of the northern San Gabriel residents. The role of La Laguna as a city “draw” was an important facet of the argument for the playground’s preservation:

Part of our argument was that in San Gabriel there are two parks and both of them are below Las Tunas, which cuts the city in half. So this is one of the few things that bring people from the north across down into the south—to come this. And so if you get rid of this resource and you put in just a standard playground, well then I’m going to head further north. I’m going to go up into Pasadena or San Marino, which a lot of people already do. And so you lose, or you further divide a divided city.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Senya Lubisich, Personal Interview, 16 Nov. 2012.



**Figure 3.3** A map showing the locations of public parks in San Gabriel, CA. The main map shows the locations of elementary schools, which have field and playground facilities. The buffer on each park represents a 0.2 mi radius of access (0.2 miles is used as a distance that is considered reasonable for walking). The park that Senya and Eloy refer to as the city’s “other” park is Smith Park. It is located on W Broadway, to the direct north of Vincent Lugo Park (in dark green) and to the south of Las Tunas Dr. There are no city parks above Las Tunas Dr. Las Tunas Dr., which Senya and Eloy discuss as a socioeconomic dividing line in San Gabriel, is highlighted on both maps in orange. The smaller inset shows San Gabriel’s location relative to the surrounding cities, particularly San Marino and East Pasadena (both are north of San Gabriel). Vincent Lugo Park appears on the inset map in dark green just east of the “Alhambra” label. Author’s map, 2012.

One of the obvious social implications of the “divided city” that could be worsened by the loss of a resource that gives incentive to cross the divide is a lack of communication. In the case of La Laguna’s planned demolition, the San Gabriel divide was one of the reasons why information was not passed from south to north. The primary reason, of course, is that a very small number of residents were initially notified in 2003. As previously stated, it was not until 2006 that the City’s plans became more commonly known among San Gabriel residents. It is clear that the divide is not the only factor at play in the issue of city-wide communication, but with the background context of what Las Tunas St. represents socially and what La Laguna represents culturally, a map of San Gabriel that shows the street and the playground makes a powerful visual case for the practicality of preserving a feature that truly brings the community together (see Figure 3.3). As Senya pointed out, there are already reasons for northern San Gabriel residents to continue north for recreation options—La Laguna is not one of these, and its use by residents of both the north and the south speaks to its overall relevance as public space in San Gabriel. Currently, Vincent Lugo Park is listed as one of the City’s Top 10 Destinations on the City of San Gabriel, California website. Aside from its relevance to City residents, the playground is an attraction that draws in people from other cities in the Los Angeles area too:

It’s the most important thing that pulls people not from, we learned later, not just from the city, but people from San Marino, San Bernadino, Santa Monica come to this park when they go visit the mission. So this was a thing that was a much more regional resource than we had known before.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Eloy Zarate, Personal Interview, 16 Nov. 2012.

While the City may have a hard time justifying site preservation based on inter-city social issues alone, the economic benefits of increased tourism are an easy selling point—recall the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan’s frequent reminders of the eventual profit that would occur following preservation of the city’s best attributes, as discussed in the first chapter of this paper. Of course, not every unique playground may be considered to have tourism potential, but for historic sites such as La Laguna, this could be a convincing argument to present to a city.

Senya and Eloy also attribute their success with La Laguna to learning about the relevant legal processes and being persistent in slowing the City’s progress down. They gave credit to a friend for pointing them toward the City’s CEQA before it closed. The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is designed “to evaluate whether a proposed project may have an adverse effect on the environment and, if so, if that intended effect can be reduced or eliminated by pursuing an alternative course of action or through mitigation measures.”<sup>13</sup> Under CEQA, the “environment” includes historical resources. With the City’s CEQA still open, Eloy and Senya were able to then make a claim for La Laguna’s value as a historical resource. In addition to the claims they made in support of La Laguna, they also demanded that the City back up its claims with evidence. Based off of the City’s reactions to requests for evidence that Eloy and Senya made, it became clear that the previous La Laguna groups had not gone to such lengths to put pressure on the City.

This type of dialogue with the City was not only informative from a legal-perspective, but it also was an effective way to push back the start date of project. For

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<sup>13</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 9.

any playground preservation group, a persistent and critical outlook on the City's claims against the playground is necessary—evidence must be demanded.

Perhaps the most basic and challenging necessity of any preservation effort is funding. Even if the City could agree not to demolish La Laguna, it still would not be able to fund the extensive preservation treatment the site required. The “La Laguna de San Gabriel: Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan” outlines a total estimate cost of \$1,200,000. Without adequate funding, a price like this is exorbitant and completely unrealistic. Friends of La Laguna was fortunate enough to earn sizable grants from the California Cultural and Historical Endowment and the Annenberg Foundation (two times). In addition to these awarded grants, with fundraising, FoLL has been successful in doubling or tripling the dollar amount of each received grant. Currently, the organization is at the halfway mark. It has also been helpful for FoLL to have the support of some big names in the historical preservation world, such as the California Preservation Foundation, the Los Angeles Conservancy, and the aforementioned National Trust for Historic Preservation. Talking about funding led our discussion to the more general concept of value. It is challenging to justify or quantify the value of a site; the experience of place is completely subjective, and there is no uniform perspective from which all users of a space understand it. Eloy articulated this ambiguity well:

We said “Hey, this is bigger,” but we never had a grasp of “Well, what is this place—right? What does it mean?” And I think in a lot of ways that’s one of our biggest problems. Because it is a playground, but its art, and kids play on it, and it’s a site, and it’s a landscape—it’s all of these things that are so nuanced. [...] That’s why with a playground, it needs to mean more than just the play. Is it the only place people gather? Is the only place... you know, these

are things that have to take a value because ultimately the city or whatever people that are making decisions are going to say, “We value that too.”<sup>14</sup>

How do we define our playgrounds? How do we ascertain their value? How do we communicate their value in a way that will ensure their preservation? The cost of a playground can be estimated before it is installed or before it is repaired, but a cost estimate of the loss of a unique and important public space would be harder to come by. Playgrounds are sites with creative play value, physical exercise value, memory value, social value, artistic value, design value, monetary value, spatial value, and any other type of value a playground user could come up with. In short, playgrounds are subjective and ongoing experiences. It would be a shame to demolish meaningful sites before their value had been determined.

I end this section with a summary of useful pointers, as learned from an hour long conversation on FoLL’s experience thus far, for people interested in preserving a playground:

- **KNOW THE SITE**—classification counts, and it is best to be clear on what the site is and, therefore, what standards it will need to abide by.
- **MODIFICATION VERSUS MAINTENANCE**—Know which is the best option for site, and know what standards site will be subject to if one is chosen over the other.
- **NOTIFICATION**—Communicate regularly with other community groups to stay up to date on city happenings.
- **LOCAL OUTREACH**—Connect with other local groups, community groups, and nonprofit groups. This is beneficial for networking, exchange of knowledge on processes, and general project support.
- **QUALITY OF LIFE**—How will loss of this site effect city? Quantify as much as possible.
- **TOURISM VALUE**—Does site have tourism/commerce value? If so, this could be another argument to present to city.
- **GET EVIDENCE**—Be persistent in dealing with the City. Demand evidence for claims made against site. Become as legally informed as possible on relevant rules, regulations, and standard.
- **ASSIGN AS MUCH VALUE AS POSSIBLE TO SITE**—Make site relevant and valuable to as many types of people as possible. The greater the range of value, the greater the number of supporters.

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<sup>14</sup> Eloy Zarate, Personal Interview, 16 Nov. 2012.

## The Playground Preservation Process



**Figure 3.4** Lookout Mountain on the playground’s “Opening Day, May 16, 1965” (left) and a current photo of the same spot (right). Lookout Mountain is the largest piece at La Laguna and is 10-15 feet tall. Photo credit: (left) original copy is from the Dominguez family collection and a digital copy is available in the Friends of La Laguna website photo gallery; (right) Author’s photograph, 2012.

In this section, I draw from the “La Laguna de San Gabriel: Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan” to establish the significance of the site’s history and provide a brief summary of what La Laguna’s preservation treatment entails. San Gabriel “did not undergo significant development and growth until after World War II,” which caused the city’s population to nearly double from just under 17,000 to almost 28,000 in the ten years between 1945 and 1955.<sup>15</sup> Though planning became a major consideration in Los Angeles in the late 1920s and 1930s, it was not until the 1950s that San Gabriel adopted a plan for development.<sup>16</sup> The neighborhood plans discussed in the previous chapters, though developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were still relevant to post-WWII development. During this time, “the neighborhood unit became a central feature in the rebuilding of existing towns and in

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<sup>15</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 19.

the planning of new developments, and had a great influence on residential layout.”<sup>17</sup>

As was preferred in the Olmsted-Bartholomew report, upon construction of a city park in 1951, the city of San Gabriel chose to site it next to the local elementary school so as to maximize upon green space and ensure a central location—“Municipal Park” is today known as Vincent Lugo Park.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the post-WWII design ideals that made this site historically relevant, the Preservation Plan discusses La Laguna’s status as a “Cultural Landscape.” In the early 1960s Benjamin Dominguez was specifically commissioned for the playground by the City’s Parks and Recreation Director, Frank Carpenter, to “create a playground in San Gabriel that would be unrivaled by neighboring cities and that could lend a unique characteristic and attraction to the city.”<sup>19</sup> Dominguez designed the playground, which was the last one he would finish, to be “his gift to the children of San Gabriel” and intended for the whole site to create an experience:

With all of his fantasy parks including La Laguna, Dominguez felt strong that there was an appropriate space for each of the pieces he created and that he various animals should ‘talk to each other...they should not be separated.’ He felt that the careful placement of the pieces would create an environment that had artistic appeal to visitors and that would foster imaginative play on the part of the children.<sup>20</sup>

The fantasy parks that Dominguez designed and built were similar to the better known modern art play sculptures and American adventure playgrounds in their distinct break with traditional playground form. Dominguez’s work was unique—he was a cement

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<sup>17</sup> Nicholas N. Patricios, “Urban design principles of the original neighbourhood concepts,” *Urban Morphology* 2002: 27.

<sup>18</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 15.



artist that specialized in “concrete wood.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to the overall playground layout design that Dominguez carefully considered, he also specifically designed the sculptures to be as fun and safe for children as possible; he chose sea creatures for this reason, as they allowed for slides and “smooth skin and shapes.”<sup>22</sup>

The preservation process is ongoing at La Laguna. As mentioned in the previous section, FoLL is about half a million dollars away from the full amount required for the treatment processes of all playground pieces. Thus far, Lookout Mountain (see Figure 3.4) and the Dock have been fully restored. The specific preservation treatments are outlined for each playground sculpture and structure in the “La Laguna de San Gabriel: Historical Structures Report and Preservation Plan.” The least expensive treatment, as anticipated by the Preservation plan, will be the Starfish, for \$9,148.<sup>23</sup> The treatment of Lookout Mountain (the most expensive), which was estimated to cost between \$135,809 and \$143,790, entailed surface replacements, “surface consolidations,” surface repairs, grout injection, and surface coloring.<sup>24</sup> The Dock was estimated to cost between \$35,872 and \$42,462 for slide removal, stair installation, and reconstruction with “in-kind” materials.<sup>25</sup> For most of the structures, multiple preservation strategies were proposed. These detailed strategies are more technical than the scope of my paper allows for, but it is relevant to show the level of site-specific analysis that would be required of an official plan for a playground’s historical preservation.

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<sup>21</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 14. At La Laguna, this effect can be observed on the sunken ship sculpture.

<sup>22</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 70.

<sup>24</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 80-81.

<sup>25</sup> Garavaglia Architecture, Inc. 66-67.

## How Can We Assess Our Playgrounds?

My design analysis of La Laguna playground is contained in the following rubric (see pages 61-62). Earlier in the chapter, I discussed the challenges and limitations posed by this rubric system. Here, I attempt to answer the question posed by the title of this section—how can we assess our playgrounds? The short answer is “value.” We touched on the topic of value in my conversation with Senya and Eloy. Senya powerfully summed up the value of site-specific playgrounds:

What would our grandchildren visit? Or, when our children grow up and leave, what will they come home and see? And if you’ve so radically changed your community that there’s nothing there, then it ceases to be that place where you grew up and it’s just some place you go visit or where your parents live. What are the stomping grounds that you want to go back to? [...] We wanted it to be one for our children and their children.<sup>26</sup>

Communities are valuable. The space shared among members of a community is valuable too. Playgrounds need to be assessed as sites that are rooted into the ground—play equipment is literally planted into the ground. In the same way that a socially-conscious understanding of architecture dictates that building design is necessarily informed by the needs of the community the structure will serve, a value-conscious assessment of play space will take into account what function the space serves and how well it does so. If there is a disparity between the site’s level of intended function and the level of its actual function, with the former value being greater than the latter, there is a problem. Public space needs to work. We don’t have much of it. If a public space is observed to be high-functioning (i.e. successful), it should be defended and maintained. I define a sustainable site as one that can be used and maintained over the long-term without a decline in level of function over time. We

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<sup>26</sup> Senya Lubisich, Personal Interview, 16 Nov. 2012.

can assess our playgrounds as sustainable sites, as public space. They are small, but representative pieces of something larger—they should not be forgotten.

**An Informal Rubric  
for the Analysis of  
Playground Design**

APPLIED TO LA LAGUNA PLAYGROUND  
(SAN GABRIEL, CA)

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN	COMMENTS
<p>GRADUATED CHALLENGES/ SELECTIVE PLAY</p> <p>Does the playground as a whole allow the child to pick and choose activities, with some being easy and some ones to "grown into"?</p> <p>Are there separate, designated areas for different age groups of children?</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>Sculptures such as the dolphins and the starfish are low to the ground and easy for children of any size to climb on or interact with. Others, such as the snail and the lighthouse, have slides that involve a steep climb that children under a certain age would not be able to complete on their own. The whale slide is lower to the ground, less steep, and easier to access. Lookout Mountain gives users the option of two different stair cases (one is steeper and narrower than the other) as well as a free climb up the front of it that lead to the slide, which is the tallest on the playground. Children who are not tall or strong enough would not be able to climb up the narrow length of the sea serpent, as it has large handholds that are only on one side. The octopus is also challenging to climb-it is taller than the sea serpent and offers fewer handholds.</p>
<p>CONTROL</p> <p>Are there any movable parts that allow children to alter environment?</p>	<p>No.</p> <p>All of the playground features are cement sculptures, slides, metal bars for climbing up the slides, or wood-type material (the dock). Children cannot modify the play equipment, but sand does allow for children to alter the play space on a smaller scale.</p>
<p>SURFACING</p> <p>What is the surface on the ground beneath the play equipment? How interactive is it?</p>	<p>Sand.</p> <p>Sand can be very interactive and can constitute a play activity in itself (ex: sand with water, digging, sand sculpting). Rubber matting allows for greater accessibility (more ADA-friendly than sand), but less interaction as it cannot be modified through play.</p>
<p>MAINTENANCE</p> <p>Is equipment and space well-maintained versus damaged, broken, vandalized, and/or dirty?</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>None of the equipment is broken. Vandalism was an issue when the playground was not well-maintained. Since preservation process has begun, the sculptures have been much better maintained. The preservation process is not yet complete, so some pieces still need to be repaired to ensure that they will be able to be used into the future.</p>
<p>SIGNAGE</p> <p>What signs surround the playground? Do they list warnings and rules? Are they liability-related? Do they explain how to use equipment? Are they welcoming?</p>	<p>The only sign on the playground reads "Laguna de San Gabriel." It is supported on two posts high enough to create a small archway or doorway effect, allowing users to walk beneath it before coming to the dock, which takes the user from the concrete pathway to the sand surface of the playground proper.</p> <p>There are no signs that list rules or warnings.</p>

<p><b>LANDSCAPING/INTEGRATION</b></p> <p>what surrounds the playground? Are there green areas (plants, fields, trees) that children can also play in?</p> <p>If the playground is in an urban lot rather than a park, is it integrated into the surrounding space?</p>	<p>The park's walkway and the walkway that is next to the Alhambra wash border the north and south sides of the playground. There are trees or large plants on all sides of the playground, and the landscaped area along its western edge provides a space where children could run through to enter or exit the playground (it is a more direct line from the parking lot to this landscaped area than it is to the sign/dock's "official" playground entrance) or play it. The park also has a baseball field that can be seen looking north from the playground. On game days, the playground draws users from the number of children attending little league ball-games. McKinley Elementary School's fields are directly to the east of the playground. As it is located near two other features (baseball field and elementary school) that together attract many children on a regular basis, La Laguna is in a conveniently located for children's use.</p>
<p><b>TOPOGRAPHY</b></p> <p>Does playground make use of area topography as a play feature? Is there artificial topography?</p>	<p>Vincent Lugo Park is a flat site and so is La Laguna. The only true source of topography on the playground is the 10-15 foot tall artificial hill of Lookout Mountain, which is a popular climbing feature among park users.</p>
<p><b>SUPERVISION</b></p> <p>Is there an official playground supervisor? How does playground design direct movement of children's parents? Are there benches for supervising adults to sit on? Is there rubber matting or asphalt so it is easier for parents to shadow children who are using the play equipment? Are there places where children can hide?</p>	<p>There is not an official playground supervisor.</p> <p>There are benches around the periphery of the concrete walkway that goes around the periphery of the sand. This could be considered a definite divide between where people play and where people supervise. Obviously, supervising adults can walk on the sand, but it is makes it a little less easy to walk around following a playing child than rubber matting would.</p> <p>If they chose to, children could hide without being seen in the Lighthouse, on the back stair case of Lookout Mountain, and in the whale.</p>
<p><b>ORIGINALITY</b></p> <p>Does this playground look the same as nearby playgrounds? Could it be labeled as stereotypical? Could it be labeled as unique?</p>	<p>This is a very unique playground. Dominguez created relatively similar playgrounds in two other Southern California towns (Whittier Narrows at Legg Lake and Garden Grove at Atlantis Park), one in Las Vegas, NV. Some playgrounds have a similar amoeboid shaped sand pit with surrounding benches, but most playgrounds certainly do not have multiple cement sculptures.</p>
<p><b>USEFULNESS</b></p> <p>Is this playground a useful space? Is it a public space? Is it a place where community members want to go? Is it valued/recognized as an important space? Do community members like it? Do children like it? what is the age range of the user group? what do people do in this space?</p>	<p>This public playground is a useful community space. Considering that enough community members signed petitions to preserve it, some have donated money to its preservation process, worked as part of the Friends of La Laguna nonprofit, and/or worked as volunteers at the playground itself, it is fair to say that the space is considered valuable and well-liked by the community. It has a high level of sentimental value for long-time community residents because of how long it has remained unchanged. Kids love it because it is so different and distinct from the other playgrounds in San Gabriel. During my site visit, I observed children too young to walk alone, parents, kids who looked to be about 10, high school aged teens, multiple middle-aged walkers, and two elderly people.</p>



## **Conclusion: Sustainable Shared Spaces**

At its core, this thesis is a defense of quality public space. As the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan emphasizes, there is only so much public space that exists within a city or town—it is essentially a finite resource that decreases as development increases, and the amount of this existing public space that can be classified as green space is even more so. Design choices that are informed by the social aspects of urban planning and neighborhood planning—such as accessible and useful public outdoor spaces, local food production, community involvement in design and planning decisions and processes, housing options that are affordable to people with a varied range of incomes and housing options that remain convenient and accessible as they allow area residents to “age in place”<sup>1</sup>—are becoming increasingly recognized as legitimate and significant elements of sustainability. Design matters, and can be used to strengthen both communities and the places within which they exist. With respect to public spaces such as parks, Jane Jacobs urges that not too much be expected of design choices because success is completely dependent upon what the surrounding community does with the space. Its presence alone ensures nothing.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I have argued that a park (and more generally, any public space) that is relevant and unique to a community will be well-used by the community and, thus, a successful space; it is in a city’s best interest to create such spaces where they are lacking and protect them where they already exist.

In the time that I have researched and written this paper, a beloved personal landmark has morphed from what was undoubtedly the most exciting feature at a great

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<sup>1</sup> These are some of the credit opportunities discussed in the “Neighborhood Pattern and Design” sections of the LEED 2009 for Neighborhood Development Rating System.

<sup>2</sup> Jacobs 124

playground in my hometown to the subject of much debate and negative attention from parties concerned about children's safety and city liability. For switch engine train #1285, which was built in 1924, used on the Southern Pacific Railroad's Pacific Lines, and eventually installed at Dennis the Menace Park in Monterey, CA before the park opened in 1956, this has resulted in a physical transformation.<sup>3</sup> Up until this fall, it stood just inside the playground entrance as a completely accessible play structure. Then, as if it had become a tennis court or construction zone overnight, a chain link fence covered in green mesh was suddenly erected around the train. Currently, it is encircled by a less obtrusive white picket fence that boasts multiple cautionary signs. One of these signs makes clear, in all capital letters, that THIS TRAIN IS A HISTORICAL EXHIBIT. YOU ARE WELCOME TO EXPLORE THIS EXHIBIT. HOWEVER, PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS NOT PLAY EQUIPMENT AND SHOULD NOT BE CLIMBED ON OR USED BY SMALL CHILDREN WITHOUT ADULT SUPERVISION. Another starts with a large, red WARNING. The fence situation looks and feels temporary, and the instant reclassification of the train from play equipment to "historical exhibit" is unconvincing at best (not to mention simply overruled by a steady stream of kids at play); the efforts by local residents to keep the train in place and open for play are certainly in their early stages, and it is unclear what the outcome will be. What Eloy Zarate so succinctly stated about the ongoing preservation process at La Laguna applies at Dennis the Menace too—"It's never saved until it's done."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Tracy's Locomotive": Southern Pacific #1293, *Railtown Tracy*, Web. 29 Nov. 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Eloy Zarate, Personal Interview, 16 Nov. 2012.



Surely many local kids have incurred some form of injury on such a heavily-used piece of equipment that was designed for grown men at work rather than for the small children through young teenagers who have been at play for the past 56 years. But does this mean that an epic childhood experience should be made unavailable to all? The switch engine will never be ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) or CSPC (Consumer Safety Product Commission) compliant in its given form, but it will forever be a part of Monterey's history and, as long as it remains in place, part of the city's collective childhood memory. Dennis the Menace is the largest playground in the area and draws in users from every town on the Peninsula. Area kids know it as the best playground around because it has the most space as well as the most unique and most exciting equipment (and old pictures of the park indicate that its current form is already a watered-down version of what it used to be)—it is truly one of a kind. Between its tower-like climbing structures and big slides, the playground offers kids room to grow. And they do. If these unique structures were removed and replaced with the generic post-and-platform pieces that meet all safety standards, as much of the formerly interesting play equipment at our local elementary schools already has been, the city would lose a specific and meaningful site.

Playgrounds do not have to be static sites, but safety standards should not be the only force that guides their evolution over time. Just as the ongoing transformation of any city is a product of many interwoven factors, the collection of smaller sites that delineates one city from another should reflect the same holistic influences. This is not an argument for the abandonment of the safety standards that influence playground design. Instead, it is an argument for the adoption of and stronger adherence to

community standards that influence city design. As applied to communities, a socially-conscious definition of ‘sustainability’ refers to stability, accessibility, and relevance over time. Communities are strengthened by long-term residents who are economically, politically, and socially invested in their city. As a built environment, the city ideally provides space for communities to grow around, and thus, for the community’s level of investment to grow around. Time and generations pass through the city, but the site-specific design of its physical spaces can allow it to maintain a unique identity that a community recognizes and protects as its own. The city and its spaces become places you can come home to.

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