

# 1. Architecture and Urban Design



**Research Team Title:**  
Parks and Open Space Planning for the Common Good

**Grand Challenge:**  
Designing Urban Parks for Civic Vitality and Sustainability

**Key Terms:**  
Social interaction, community events, economic feasibility, efficient processes, ethnicity, recreational preferences, urban parks, facilities, sustainable park, ecoliteracy, sustainability, open space, CCDC, redevelopment, Downtown San Diego, commodification

**Student Leader:** Mayra Medel

**Student members:**

- Mayra Medel - The Loss and Regain of Civic Vitality in Urban Parks: A Part of San Diego Case Study
- Chris Wong - Determining the relationship between ethnicity and recreational styles in urban park design
- Dave Eng - Defining the Sustainable Park: A Case Study in Re-envisioning Urban Parks for the Future
- Mark Arroyo - Strategies for Open Space in Downtown San Diego

**Mentor(s) Leader:**

- Patrick McDonough
- Judy Tjong

**Team Narrative:**

To the idle eye, trees and parks are sole remnants of nature in the city. But

nature in the city is far more than trees and gardens, and weeds in sidewalk cracks and vacant lots...Nature in the city is the powerful force that can shake the earth and cause it to slide, heave or crumple...It is the consequence of a complex interaction between the multiple purposes and activities of human being and other living creatures and the natural processes that governs the transfer of energy, the movement of air, the erosion of the earth, and the hydrologic cycle... Nature has been seen as a superficial embellishment, as a luxury, rather than as an essential force that permeates the city. Even those who have sought to introduce nature to the city in the form of parks and gardens have frequently viewed the city as something foreign to nature, have seen themselves as bringing a piece of nature to the city. (Spirn, 1947, 4-5)

Parks enhance community livability and sustainability and create spaces for people that improve their quality of life. With the increased density in many of our communities, parks and open space are not a luxury; they are a necessity. In light of demographic transformations, shifting cultural preferences, and changing lifestyles, planning public parks to accommodate these different trends is an increasing challenge.

This research team focused its efforts on planning parks and open space for the common good. The group members studied park-planning aspects that ranged from analyzing urban park design strategies to tactics for securing future open spaces in downtown San Diego. The study of open space planning is important for several reasons. As city life becomes increasingly hectic, overly populated, and highly developed, it is necessary to secure open space as a counter balance to the strains of this lifestyle. Urban theorists argue that open spaces enhance community livability and sustainability. Open space can serve city dwellers by instilling them with civic pride, especially between people from diverse backgrounds (Banerjee 2001). Furthermore, parks not only provide psychological benefits to city dwellers, they also provide health benefits. As argued by Rosenberg (1996), public spaces designed around natural elements not only preserve nature, but they serve as calming nodes of space that promote tranquility in people. She further emphasizes the healthy benefits of designing park spaces that cater to people's needs (Rosenberg 1996). Therefore, we argue that the various merits of park planning should be acknowledged by planners since parks serve as a safety value to ensure a diverse and functional community. The research methods used by the four members of this research group to gather data included interviews, observational data, evaluative surveys, and archival analysis.

In researching the role that the Centre City Development Corporation will play in the future conservation and planning of open spaces in downtown San Diego, researcher Mark Arroyo uncovered some compelling findings. First, since open space is becoming increasingly commodified by design practices, there has been a shift toward the creation of private corporate plazas, quasi accessible open spaces, and gated condominiums which prevent civic engagement in downtown San Diego. Second, although CCDC has a visionary goal to attain land for open space and has the money to implement such goals, it remains ambivalent about the creation of open space because its redevelopment policies prohibit paying the maintenance costs of these areas. Accordingly, Arroyo concludes that the importance of park space planning in downtown San Diego has not been fully considered by CCDC.

A case study by Mayra Medel on Bahia del Sol at the Big Bay (Bahia del Sol) sought to uncover and eliminate the roadblocks encountered in the implementation of this public benefit program, which focused on increasing social interaction in public parks by utilizing urban park design principles. Medel found that some of the main problems encountered during this program's implementation process stemmed from financial and bureaucratic roadblocks prompted by an overarching lack of understanding of the program's purpose. Through analyzing the Bahia del Sol program at various levels, it became apparent that intra-departmental and inter-agency networking coupled with the presence of a strong program leader is necessary for effectively implementing public benefit programs that aim to increase socialization patterns and park usage.

The third group member, Chris Wong, considered the extent to which there is a correlation between ethnicity and recreational leisure preferences in public parks. In comparing the user frequency and ethnic makeup of Doyle Park, Kimball Park, and City Heights Urban Village, Wong found a clear pattern of ethnic segregation in these parks. For example, the dog trail path in Doyle Park encourages semi-private and smaller group activity, and it is especially popular with the white residents. The picnic area in Kimball Park accommodates large social gatherings and is a favorable place for Hispanic users. In the City Heights Urban Village, Hispanic students like to congregate at barbeque stations and picnic benches, using them for social hangouts. In contrast, White and Asian residents are frequent users of the Urban Village's tennis courts and swimming pools. Although there are signs of segregation in the Urban Village, multi-ethnicity exists in the amphitheatre. Wong's research project identified facilities that accommodate a specific ethnic need by using this ethnicity-leisure-preference relationship. These findings can be used to prevent further ethnic segregation in urban parks and provide facilities that encourage more multiethnic interactions.

Finally, David Eng sought to provide insight into how features of the newly emerging Sustainable Park model have been implemented by conducting a case study on Debs Park in Los Angeles. The Sustainable Park is a new model that promotes activities such as hiking, bird watching, and education to foster an understanding of the integration of humans within the larger ecosystem and to promote a sense of stewardship in the urban and natural world. Eng found that since the city of Los Angeles has a lack of funding and resources for parks and recreation in general, non-profits may be better suited than public sector entities at successfully managing urban parks and perhaps implementing the Sustainable Park model more efficiently.

Public parks and recreation departments in San Diego County have tough challenges ahead. The high costs of land, a quickly growing and diverse population, and a population that is ever increasingly alienated from nature all change the way parks need to be planned, designed, and managed. The privatization of parks by land developers adds an interesting and dangerous dynamic that tends to limit access based on certain demographic attributes. Policy makers who are limited by constant budget cuts, pressured by land developers, and confronted by a growing population, are now faced with decisions that could irrevocably change the quality of life of their constituents. San Diego must ask itself whether it is willing to become another Los Angeles. Its residents must also consider the best ways for society to measure the value of open space versus the benefits of infrastructure and development. It is also imperative to question the long-

term social implications of a population that loses touch with nature or has no place for multiethnic interactions in its outdoor spaces. San Diego's resources are finite. Accordingly, land use decisions must incorporate the value of open space and urban planners need to educate policy makers.

Although many environmental, cultural, and social challenges are more complex than ever before, the knowledge and tools available to address them are far more sophisticated. They need only be applied. Park design should not be a superficial manifestation of nature that ignores the underlying natural processes, and it should not be a temporary solution to the problems of the metropolis. As Anne Whiston Spirn articulates in her seminal book The Granite Garden, "Nature in the city must be cultivated and integrated with the varied pursuits and purposes of human beings, but first it must be recognized, and its power to shape human enterprises appreciated" (1947, 11).

### **References:**

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Sprin, Anne Whiston. 1947. *The Granite Garden : Urban Nature and Human Design*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

### **Links:**

1. Global Planning Educators Interest Group (GPEIG) - <http://gpeig.org/>
2. Port of San Diego - <http://www.portofsandiego.org>
3. Audubon Society at Debs Park - [http://ca.audubon.org/debs\\_park.php](http://ca.audubon.org/debs_park.php)
4. Centre City Development Corporation - <http://www.ccdc.com/>
5. Parks and Recreation - City of San Diego - <http://www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/>

### **Multimedia Archive:**

Available Presentations for this group can be found on the Senior Sequence website at: [http://seniorsequence.net/?page\\_id=440](http://seniorsequence.net/?page_id=440)