

“Parks are commonly thought of as the venue for ‘fun and games,’ but that is only one role they play in a metropolitan environment” (American Planning Association [APA], 2015, p.1). Parks significantly define layout, real estate value, traffic flow, public events, and the civic cultures of the surrounding communities. These open spaces create structure, splendor, and value for cities and neighborhoods (APA, 2015). A few of the many types of parks include neighborhood parks, community parks, recreational parks, city-wide parks, natural parks, and pocket parks.

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

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

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

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

Pocket parks occupy a wide variety of urban spaces. These parks are primarily developed on vacant or irregular pieces of land. They vary widely in appearance and character. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the community to decide on their park’s designs and uses (Blake, n.d.).

Though pocket parks do vary according to their specific purposes and locations, there are numerous characteristics that most have in common. Pocket parks typically occupy one to four house lots and aim to service a quarter-mile radius. Users of pocket parks should not have to walk more than 5 to 10 minutes to reach their destination. Parking may or may not be provided and parks should be accessible by both foot and bike. Ideally, they should not require the use of a car. Parks should serve a resident population of approximately 500-1,000 persons and should strive to accommodate as many different users as possible. Parks may have one or several of the following features:

- Flowers or trees
- Seating for adults
- Play space and/or equipment for children

- Gazebos or similar shade structures
 - Picnic tables
 - Signage and security lighting
- (Olmos, 2008)

Finally, parks should be visible from the street to discourage illegal activity, regular maintenance is necessary, and trash cans should be provided and emptied frequently (Project for Public Spaces, n.d.b).

PLAYGROUNDS AND COMMUNITY GARDENS

Playgrounds and community gardens are two of the more popular types of pocket parks found in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Playgrounds cater to young children and provide opportunities for growth and development. A playground with a wide variety of activities is vital to a child's cognitive, emotional, physical and social development (Shasta Children and Families First Commission, n.d.).

Age-appropriate equipment is one fundamental component necessary for playgrounds. Young children between the ages of 2 and 5 are at a very different developmental stage than children aged 5 to 12. Therefore, playgrounds should designate separate play areas and structures for each age group to accommodate children's developmental, cognitive, and sensory stages (National Program for Playground Safety [NPPS], 2016).

It is also imperative that the layout and equipment of a playground be both accessible and functional for children with a wide variety of disabilities (Playworld Systems, 2016). Accessible Playgrounds (2016) lists 18 playgrounds in Texas that meet these requirements, but the only fully accessible play park in the Kronkosky Charitable Foundation's counties of interest is *Morgan's Wonderland*, which is not a pocket park.

Community gardens are also a popular choice when creating a pocket park. Unlike playgrounds, they typically do not include play structures; instead they provide the land, resources, and the informational support necessary to grow food for local sale and consumption.

Community gardens serve a variety of purposes for the people who utilize them. They unite residents of all ages in fun and productive outdoor activities. They also facilitate the growth of community solidarity and neighborhood revitalization. Therapy gardens provide "horticultural therapy" for individuals with special needs. School and neighborhood gardens offer sustainable environmental education for youth and adults. Profits derived from the sale of community-grown fruits and vegetables provide a source of supplemental financial aid for low-income community members and families (University of Houston, 2010).

Most funding for community gardens comes from private charitable foundations, private individuals, and community organization memberships. In San Antonio, funding and advice for community gardens is available to non-profit organizations through Community Garden Starter Grants provided by Green Spaces Alliance (Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas [GSA], 2015a).

DESIGNING AND MAINTAINING POCKET PARKS

All pocket parks necessitate a committee responsible for overseeing design and ongoing maintenance (Jarzen, 2014). The creation and implementation of a written constitution and management plan are important to ensuring park sustainability.

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

- Active, frequent use
- Regular maintenance
- Heavy pedestrian traffic
- Opportunities for recreational activities
- Community groups and stewardship initiatives
- Formal or informal surveillance
- Access to help if needed (telephones)
- Proper signage and park information
- Ample lighting

(Project for Public Spaces [PPS], n.d.a; n.d.b)

Pocket park owners and organizers should keep certain objectives in mind when addressing park maintenance. On-going upkeep is necessary to prevent natural damage and keep park equipment safe, working, and up-to-date. Budgeting priorities should therefore secure long-term funding for future repairs, maintenance, and liability insurance costs. Each community should gather and select members to frequently check on the upkeep, look, and feel of the park (Jarzen, 2014).

However, in order for a pocket park to be truly successful, it is also imperative to involve community interest, support, and participation in the planning and maintenance process (PPS, n.d.a). Ideally, pocket parks are closely tied to the communities they serve and the design of the park should reflect those specific needs. In order to understand the unique political and social complexities of the neighborhood, park organizers should solicit and incorporate the ideas and volunteer efforts of community members, including children. Most community members tend to value and respect their neighborhoods more when they are included in the design and process of creating community spaces (Blake, n.d.).

Neighborhood residents can actively engage in pocket park projects in a variety of ways. One of the most popular avenues for community participation is involvement in park conservancies or stewardship groups. The active investment facilitated by these groups fosters a sense of ownership in community members, which, in turn, creates a strong incentive for them to protect and preserve their park (PPS, n.d.a). Parks can also serve as a catalyst for bringing diverse members of the community together that otherwise may not interact and allow them to work cohesively towards a positive goal (University of Houston, 2010).

OWNERSHIP AND FUNDING OF POCKET PARKS

Pocket park ownership varies widely across communities. Some parks are both owned and maintained by the city, whereas others are owned and maintained by a charitable foundation. Still other parks are held by public-

private partnerships; these pocket parks are long-term commitments which require a leadership initiative from the community.

There are many possible funding sources for the development of pocket parks. The Trust for Public Land is a national, non-profit, land conservation organization that offers assistance with private and public funding for parks (Trust for Public Land, 2016). State initiatives, such as the Texas Recreation and Parks Account (TRPA), which is funded through portions of Texas sales tax received on select sporting items, typically administer grant programs according to park function and size. However, budget cuts required suspension of these grants for the 2012-2013 biennium. Limited federal funding was still available for three local park programs (outdoor recreation, small community, and urban outdoor recreation) under the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (Texas Parks and Wildlife Department [TPWD], 2012). TPWD requested reinstatement of the Local Parks grant program for the 2014-2015 biennium with a total appropriation of \$15.5 million (TPWD, 2013). At the local level, public-private ventures, individual contributions, and philanthropic support are often solicited to underwrite start-up and equipment costs.

Some parks are financed almost entirely with private funds, as is the case with Paley Park in Manhattan, New York. Built on high-rent commercial land, the construction of this park in 1967 relied on the investments of former CBS Chairman, William Paley (Blake, n.d.).

In general, however, pocket parks are typically financed by a combination of various funding sources. For example, capital support for the acquisition, design, and development of the 6th Avenue NW Pocket Park in Seattle, Washington consisted of joint contributions from The Pro Parks Levy, the Neighborhood Matching Fund, and the community. These organizations also continue to contribute towards enhancement of park improvements including: a large lawn area, landscaping, paths, neighborhood gathering areas and interactive features for children's play (City of Seattle, 2016).

POCKET PARK PROJECT IN SAN ANTONIO

Several pocket park projects have been established in the San Antonio area. Bexar Land Trust, Inc. dba Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas is a local non-profit organization that has designed its Community Gardens Program to improve the health of the city's citizens and environment, beautify neighborhoods, and strengthen communities (GSA, 2015a). The program currently has approximately 30 community gardens in the San Antonio area (GSA, 2015b).

The Diabetes Education Garden, located on the grounds of the Texas Diabetes Institute at 701 S. Zaramora, boasts a variety of edibles in the form of fruits, vegetables and herbs (Texas Diabetes Institute, 2016). The food harvested from the garden is available for patients to taste and is incorporated into healthy recipes prepared by registered dieticians.

The San Antonio River Improvement Project (SARIP), which began in 1998, includes plans for

several pocket parks along the 13 miles of the San Antonio River that will be restored and/or enhanced in all phases of the SARIP (San Antonio River Improvement Project, 2016). San Antonio residents and guests are already enjoying pocket parks located on the river including: the King William Park; the Crofton and Constance Street park; and the Grotto at Camden and Newell Streets. A complete map of the Riverwalk and its parks and installations is available on the San Antonio River Foundation's website (City of San Antonio, n.d.; San Antonio River Foundation, n.d.).

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

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