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THE BEST BACKYARD IN BALTIMORE

BALTIMORE'S BEATING HEART IS RENEWED AFTER DECADES OF NEGLECT



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Can a park save a neighborhood?

For conservationists and many landscape architects the answer is an obvious yes. “Great parks make great cities” and “all great cities have great parks” are two of the guiding mantras of the burgeoning city park movement. For people who treasure Henry Thoreau and John Muir, it seems indisputable that trees, flowers and fields bring softness, greenery and value to an urban community - just look at the genteel neighborhoods surrounding such greenswards as New York’s Gramercy Park, Atlanta’s Ainsley Park, New Orleans’s Audubon Park and Denver’s Washington Park.

Not all urban experts agree. To Jane Jacobs, influential author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, parks too often break up a city’s intricate (and economically necessary) fabric of walkable destinations, become uncontrollable no-man’s lands, or create “border vacuums” that lead to urban blight. This is the charge Jacobs leveled in her 1969 book: *Conventionally, neighborhood parks or parklike open spaces are considered boons conferred on the deprived populations of cities. Let us turn this thought around, and consider city parks deprived places that need the boon of life and appreciation conferred on them. This is more nearly in accord with reality, for people do confer use on parks and make them successes - or else withhold use and doom parks to rejection and failure.*

To back this contention, Jacobs disciples can point to neighborhoods surrounding such underused and sometimes frightening green spaces as McLaren Park in San Francisco, MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, Watts Branch Park in Washington, D.C. or Highland Park in New York.

Since we’re about a century-and-a-half into the American urban park era, there should be a good understanding of the relationship between parks and neighborhoods, but rhetoric seems to drown out rigorous study. Yet the question holds more than academic interest, particularly for gritty cities casting about for revival strategies.

Most mayors instantly focus on the bottom line: should I sink money into faded old parks, or simply let them sink? But putting the question that way doesn’t yield a useful answer -- the issue can only be analyzed on a park-by-park basis. If a park offers its surrounding community enough value that the neighbors are willing to pull together to save it, then the city investment will probably pay off. But if the perceived value isn’t there, likely no amount of municipal investment will generate a return.

When it all works right -- when it’s an upward spiral, a virtuous cycle - it looks a lot like Baltimore’s Patterson Park, the park that really is saving its neighborhood.

Located only about a mile from the downtown intersection of Calvert and Pratt, the modest, working-class Patterson Park neighborhood is truly old Baltimore. Don’t think “inner harbor” here; think rowhouses, ethnic populations, short horizons. It’s blacker than it was in the 1930s, there are fewer factories, and the “Arabs” with their horse-drawn carts have largely disappeared from the alleys, but this is city life the way it used to be. And Patterson Park is once again its beating heart.

Though Patterson is now reckoned Baltimore’s most successful park, this outcome was

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no foregone destiny. There was a time in the 1970s and 1980s when the city came close to losing the park and, with it, the greater Patterson Park neighborhood. Changing demographics, turf battles, vandalism and drug dealing began tipping the park from amenity into quagmire. Structures were damaged and vegetation killed; most tragic was the arson blaze in 1972 that destroyed the beloved Music Pavilion that had defined the community and been the site of thousands of concerts and courtships.

The Music Pavilion was never rebuilt. Had there been a friends-of-the-park organization at that time, a fund-raising campaign for a replacement might have been the perfect tool to reinvigorate the community, the park and even the wider neighborhood. But this was before the growth of the park friends movement. (Boston's Friends of the Public Garden had just started, but New York's Central Park Conservancy was still eight years in the future.) Moreover, Baltimore Street was no Fifth Avenue - there was little intrinsic wealth for a major private park rejuvenation effort as there would be in New York. And, on a larger scale, Baltimore was in a period of steady economic decline that seemed to preclude park repairs.

The nadir came in 1985 when a youth was severely beaten in the park in a widely publicized racial incident. As Jane Jacobs had written, a large, ungovernable space in a changing, racially polarized neighborhood was becoming the kind of "gray area" that can bring

down its entire community. But what Jacobs didn't fully appreciate is that the same plot of land, if loved, can become the very catalyst around which other neighbors organize to save their community.



The first few efforts - straight save-the-park efforts - sputtered and died. In 1993, however, a broad group of area leaders produced a farther-reaching community plan that included a vision for improving the parks. At the same time the Baltimore Department of Recreation and Parks decided to concentrate some financial attention on the city's major parks, and

the city council prepared to offer voters a \$10 million bond to pay for the work. Momentum was building, but would anything actually happen?

If the Patterson park story were a sports parable, it would not be the story of a victorious football team led by a dominating superstar quarterback. Rather, it would be the tale of a scrappy collection of self-motivated basketballers dribbling and scoring against all odds.

Among the team heroes were:

Sidney Brower, director of Urban Studies at the University of Maryland, who got a federal grant in 1995 to assist the community with a masterplan for the park. One of his students, Erica Todd, spent the next two years pulling neighbors into the process, helping to inventory all the park's physical features, measuring erosion, and working to organize a park festival and an ongoing park friends group. Brower's team also conducted a thorough user survey that revealed two possible red flags: Patterson Park's users were overwhelmingly male, and almost half of the community's residents never went into Patterson Park at all.

Myra Brosius, a staffer with the Rec and Parks Department and a landscape architect by training, who served as process facilitator. "Under then-Mayor Kurt Schmoke," Brosius explains, "the position of the department was, 'If there are no complaints there are no problems.' They didn't want to ask the community any questions because they were scared to find out what they might hear. A few of us on the inside kept saying, 'We've got to talk to the community. They know the park better than anyone else and their observations will add tremendous value. The risk is worth it.'" Brosius was finally allowed to cautiously try a community process on the masterplan for Druid Hill Park, Baltimore's best-known park. "The community was brought in and nothing terrible happened," she said. "It made it much easier the second time, with Patterson Park."

Mary Roby and **Nancy Supik**, two 20-year residents of Southeast Baltimore who threw themselves completely into the effort. With Roby moving from the Masterplan Advisory Committee to the presidency of the fledgling Friends of Patterson Park and Supik rising from volunteer par excellence to paid director, the Friends in four years has become not only the soul of the park but also the envy of parkland supporters in other neighborhoods. "Our membership fund-raising goal in 2002 was \$6,000, but we actually raised \$18,000," said Roby. "How often have you heard a story like that?"

Ed Rutkowski, director of the Patterson Park Community Development Corp., and **John Huppert**, director of Banner Neighborhoods. Neither organization is a park group - the one does housing, the other services for seniors - but each devotes a full-time paid staff member to Friends of Patterson Park. Having a staff makes the difference between good intentions and actually getting things done.

The planning for Patterson Park's revival began in 1994 and involved two years of study, meetings and deliberations. "It was not easy," explains Brosius. "There are eight distinct neighborhoods around the park, each with its own set of concerns and, often, its own particular values. Everyone was impatient to see tangible results, but you can't short-circuit the time it takes to build trust. Not only weren't the neighborhoods unified, but many people came into the process with a history of feeling let down by the city of Baltimore."

The key moment came when the advisory group had to take its dozens of ideas and prioritize the construction projects.

“The masterplan said we needed \$10 million in repairs, but the city said it had only \$1 million to spend,” recalls Roby. “I thought we were going to have a knockdown, drag-out fight pitting neighborhoods against each other, but it didn’t happen. The process had really worked. Someone suggested that the first project should involve the perimeter of the park - the full 22-block perimeter, the edge of the park that we all see and use - and everyone agreed. I was amazed.”

Ironically, because of quirks in contracting and funding, two other projects were undertaken and finished before the perimeter - the renovation of the Pagoda (thanks to a challenge grant from the Maryland Historical Trust) and the reconstruction of a major playing field (through a grant from the National Football League) - but the group’s consensus held and, by summer 2002 Patterson Park had dazzling new perimeter lighting and two improved entrances. Moreover, \$2 million had been further authorized, and the Boat Lake was under reconstruction.

The results are evident well beyond the park boundaries. Property values, the single most sweeping indicator of community value, have been rising steadily all around the park - even as they have been stagnant or falling in the rest of the city. Home rehabilitation is evident and on the increase, and there is even that modern indicator of rebounding urbanity, a new coffee shop on Eastern Avenue with the emblematic name Patterson Perc.

Ironically, perceptions are outstripping reality. “Now that Patterson is beginning to shine again, I’ve been hearing some grumbling in the neighborhood,” says Gennady Schwartz, director of capital development for the city’s Department of Recreation and Parks. “They say to me, ‘Only rich folks can afford to live around Patterson Park any more.’” In fact, although neighborhood housing prices increased by about 20 percent between 2000 and 2002, the average price for a rowhouse near Patterson Park (\$34,000) is still way below the average citywide price (\$62,000). With Baltimore’s massive 50-year population drain, there is still a large supply of vacant buildings and empty parcels available for redevelopment.

Patterson Park dates from 1827 when William Patterson donated six acres near the top of Hampstead Hill for a “public walk.” A wealthy merchant, Patterson hoped to increase the value of house lots he was selling nearby. Following his death, a series of additional purchases and condemnations (there was a time after the Civil War when Baltimore was the most aggressive park-acquiring city in the nation) ultimately brought the size up to 134 acres, making Patterson today the fifth largest park in the city.

After walking or driving Southeast Baltimore’s monotonous, largely treeless rowhouse-and-marble-steps street grid, coming upon Patterson Park is a jaw-dropping experience - an expansive panorama of green lawns, meandering pathways and venerable foliage, with

a romantic pond in the foreground and the muscular harbor beyond. Even in its own right it would be lovely; in the context of its somewhat drab surroundings, Patterson Park is a veritable oasis.

Patterson Park has other distinctions - historic military roles in both the War of 1812 and the Civil War, an association with the Olmsted Brothers landscape firm, home to one of the arboreal daughters of Maryland's famous 450-year-old Wye Oak, and the observatory universally called "the Pagoda."

The Pagoda, the whimsical 1891 creation of noted Baltimore architect Charles H. Latrobe, is the kind of building that a sober governmental analysis would recommend tearing down. With hundreds of non-standard panes of glass; a cast-iron superstructure constantly susceptible to rust and corrosion; an intricate paint scheme; an unheatable, uncoolable interior; balconies that almost invite daredevil tricks by teenage boys; and doors that are hard to secure; almost everything about it is irreplaceably one-of-a-kind. (Truth be told, the Pagoda has spent several good chunks of its life out of commission and sealed to the public.) Fortunately, the structure is so striking and so much fun that no one ever did look at it soberly, and every generation or two rises to the challenge of repairing and restoring the tower. The most recent restoration, completed for \$600,000 in 2002 through a collaboration between the city, the state, Friends of Patterson Park and some private donors, is the most comprehensive and historically accurate ever, and the rededication celebration -- complete with a makeshift band of 100 saxophonists -- drew thousands of current and former neighbors.

"I've never seen so many people so happy," says Schwartz, who is overseeing the gradual renovation of the park. "Seeing all their smiles was better than getting an award from the mayor."

Nancy Supik agrees. "People were thrilled. Folks who had moved to the county -- folks who hadn't visited a single time in 20 years -- came back. One of them came up to me and said, 'In the old days you should have seen how beautiful this place was.' Then she looked around and confessed, 'Well, actually, it never really did look as good as it does right now!'"

Despite its strengths, Patterson Park is not an intuitively understandable space. On the west side it is an undulating "country park" with curving walkways, historic battle site remnants, romantic meadow openings amid large arching trees, a lake, and signature buildings. On the east it abruptly flattens out to a large field broken up among scores of functional recreational facilities for baseball, basketball, swimming, ice skating, soccer, and tennis. Not only is the transition rather artlessly handled, it is hydrologically confusing: How could such a significant hillside not result in a stream at its base? (The answer is that the historical stream, Harris Creek, was put underground in a huge brick tunnel. At first its marshy surroundings were dredged for a lake - at that time the park had two ponds - but that was soon filled for sports fields. The present Boat Pond is located at an

artificial elevation above the fields.)

The anomalies reflect the park's 81-year land acquisition history, during which time the guiding paradigm shifted from "country park" to recreation park. Patterson Park was also chronically underfunded so that many design and acquisition ideas, particularly of the Olmsted Brothers firm during the period 1905-1915, were never implemented. Moreover, the park never had the benefit of a strong early design that might have carried it through changing fads and fashions. (Other venerable parks, like Central Park in New York and Franklin Park in Boston, were also buffeted by pressures for sports facilities and inappropriate structures, but their strong vision was able to hold off the most damaging changes.)

"It grew by accretion," says Patricia O'Donnell, principal of the Vermont firm Landscapes, and active in designing the renovation of several parks in Baltimore. "Patterson Park is a 175-year-old neighborhood common with an English Picturesque addition, a Victorian addition and a playing field addition. They never did the park over, they just kept altering its character."

Only the most sensitive, thoughtful master planning process could respect and restore the park's history while seeking to pull together certain elements that haven't worked well for decades. (One planned touch that will do wonders with context: installing small stone markers at the corners of each of the successive land acquisitions, showing visitors how and when the park was expanded.)

"Patterson Park has always been a relatively modest park with fairly simple detailing," explains Faye Harwell, a principal with Rhodeside and Harwell, Inc., which led the masterplan process for the park. "The community clearly said that it wanted to restore and rehabilitate the park, not redesign it. They told us to place emphasis on its structures and its many entranceways, make the perimeter beautiful and welcoming."

The guiding document for that process, is a wonderful 60-page masterplan - fact filled but readable, rooted in history but not fawning over a mythical past, thoughtful and creative while realistic and constrained, hardheaded about dollars and deadlines. Because the park was well documented in its early years, the masterplan was able to benefit from historical photos and schematics and also to document precisely the former location and species of trees and plants. (From a high of more than 1,700 trees in 1887, the number has dropped to well below 1,000.)

"The master plan is a terrific document -- it got a merit award from the Potomac Chapter of ASLA -- but I think what was even better was the three-way relationship between the community, the city and the consultant," said Brosius, project manager for the Department of Recreation and Parks.

"Too often," Brosius explains, "an agency dumps an entire park rehab on a consultant's shoulders - usually without sufficient fee -- and then is disappointed at the end. Here,

the city did a lot of research and community building before the consultant was even brought in. When Rhodeside and Harwell came on board they were handed a concise scope of work, a user survey, a thorough analysis of existing conditions, and a knowledgeable local constituency to work with. The consultants could use their talent and experience to focus on recommendations.”

Tackling the park’s eight entranceways was no easy task since each had been constructed at a different time in a different style, often using different materials. “There’s granite, marble, concrete and asphalt pavers,” explains Harwell, “depending on the time period of the construction. Each one needs to be handled differently. On the other hand, such things as the new light standards and bollards need to be identical so that they are durable, maintainable and present a consistent look all around the park.”

As with almost all city park projects, the path to completion has been bumpy at Patterson Park, and Rhodeside and Harwell is now no longer involved. The master plan was a strong road map but the vagaries of engineering, contracting, funding, and decision making threw off the schedule and the priorities. By summer 2002, in addition to the Pagoda, perimeter lighting was installed, two entranceways had been cleaned, repaved and replanted, tennis courts were resurfaced, a 100-foot flagpole (the tallest in the city) was installed, and work was underway on the Boat Lake and the Marble Fountain. Some of the work had been high on the master plan’s list, some hadn’t been on it at all. On the other hand, permanent trash receptacles - which had been universally demanded - had been excised entirely by city staff for cost and logistical reasons, and the Friends was forced to undertake its own private fundraising campaign for trash cans. (Even that worked out fine: “It was a momentary crisis,” Roby reminisces, “but when we got the word out, 100 people sent us \$30 each to pay for a trash can. I suddenly knew we were somewhere deep in people’s hearts.”)

“Ultimately the master plan was less a road map than a process tool,” concludes Brosius. “The important thing is that everyone stays bought in and that we keep moving forward fixing this park up.”

Friends president Roby is optimistic. “In August 2002, a huge thunderstorm struck Baltimore, knocking down about 30 trees in the park. The next Saturday morning, 60 volunteers from the community showed up to haul branches out to the street for pickup. No one in the city had ever seen a community response like that before. That was when I knew we had turned the corner.”

Postscript: Is Patterson Park too Small - or too Big?

Virtually everyone in Baltimore - especially the residents of southeast Baltimore - considers Patterson Park a “neighborhood park.” But at 134 acres it is a very large space for one neighborhood to keep trim, healthy, filled up, and safe. And, with a repair price tag of over \$10 million it is asking a lot from Baltimoreans to spend so much on a neighbor-

hood park, particularly for those taxpayers who don't live in that neighborhood.

On the other hand, Patterson is a bit small, a bit off-center, and a bit short of icons to be defined as a park of citywide significance. Smaller citywide parks are not unknown - the 72-acre Boston Common/Public Garden comes to mind - but the majority range upwards of 400 acres and have several major draws, such as a zoo, conservatory, museum, band shell, boat pond, specialty garden, or at least a huge, open, unprogrammed meadow.

Patterson Park has a small pond, a good collection of sports fields, an ice rink, a pool, and, in the near future, will get an Audubon Urban Nature Center and a stop on the national War of 1812 History Trail. But its only unique icon is the Pagoda. Does that translate into \$10 million worth of value to the city as a whole?

If the answer is yes, it seems to be in programming. Under the leadership of the Friends of Patterson Park, the park is gradually becoming the favored site for a wide variety of festivals, events, and unusual attractions, including old-time standbys like the Turtle Derby (in its 62nd year), Preakness Frog Hop, Doll Show, and Fishing Rodeo, and new creations like the Great Halloween Lantern Parade, BikeJam race and festival, Bark in the Park, and the eye-popping Kinetic Sculpture Race of homemade human-powered vehicles (by land in the morning, by sea in the afternoon). In the summertime there are concerts every other Sunday night, a monthly Art Market Fair, and four big ethnic gatherings -- Polish, Ukrainian, Hispanic, and Latino. And then there are the one-of-a-kind, indescribable happenings like the synchronized swimming water ballet put on in 1999 by a multi-hued, multi-shaped cast of neighborhood residents (ranging in age from eight to 52), followed by dancing in Hawaiian shirts to the band Hula Monsters.

"One of our goals is to do as much outreach as possible in the parts of the neighborhood that have been less connected to the park," says Kini Collins, events coordinator for the Friends. "The main thing is to have fun - and we do!"

And as Patterson's good times roll further and further through Baltimore, the park is evolving from a big neighborhood park into a city park that's just the right size.