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# The Reclamation of Public Parks: An Analysis of Environmental Justice in Los Angeles

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# **The Reclamation of Public Parks:**

## ***An Analysis of Environmental Justice in Los Angeles***

**Key terms:** urban revitalization, public space, sustainability, gentrification, park access

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## **ABSTRACT:**

People who live in cities are far more likely to suffer the physical and psychological effects of urban environments--high noise levels, automobile emissions, toxic industrial waste, crowded living conditions, and a general scarcity of open space. Combating these issues, public parks do more than provide recreational space. They are fundamental to any efforts focusing on urban revitalization, social justice, and sustainability. In downtown Los Angeles, public parks are rare, especially in low-income communities. Several new public parks have reclaimed abandoned land, unwelcoming spaces, and the City's brownfields. After years of intense private use and neglect, spent land has been reinvigorated as green communal space.

This study focuses on Vista Hermosa Natural Park, Grand Park, and Los Angeles State Historic Park. It combines previous research with site visits and interviews that explore the degree of success these recent reclamation movements have experienced and if there are any lessons learned that can be applied elsewhere. My conclusion is that the reclamation movement in Los Angeles is largely successful, especially when parks feature multiple benefits such as ecological restoration, recreational enhancement, and cultural engagement. But the less community involvement and public accessibility any reclaimed park has, the less success a park will have in alleviating spatial injustice.

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## **CHAPTER 1: Public Space, Place and Reclamation in the City**

### ***The context:***

Cities invariably become epicenters of social and environmental injustice. In cities, where 50% of the world's population and over 80% of Americans live, most instances of injustice are direct products of the poor allocation of space.<sup>1</sup> Many people living in cities suffer from the lack of sustainable and ethical urban planning in their communities. This is especially true for people marginalized within society based on their age, race, mobility level, and socioeconomic status. But regardless of their background, most people who live in cities are far more likely to breathe polluted air, drink contaminated water, be exposed to contaminated soil, and lack public spaces.<sup>2</sup> Urban populations, especially in communities of color or low-income residents, still face disproportionate exposure to these social and environmental injustices.<sup>3</sup>

Of all American cities, Los Angeles (LA) possesses a long history of injustice as well as a new pattern of reclaiming spaces on behalf of the city's economy, community, and environment. As the second most populated city in the United States, LA has nearly four million people who depend on the city and its allocation of space for their food, water, transportation, work, and relationships.<sup>4</sup> In other words, four million people depend on Los Angeles as their greater home.<sup>5</sup> A majority of these people come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. During the suburban sprawl of the "white flight" movement in the twentieth century, wealthier people moved outside of the polluted confines of the city. Many of the people remaining in the city established ethnic communities since they could not afford the wealthier suburb lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> Those remaining in the inner rings were left with a scarcity of public open space and an abundance of pollutants. Land use policies and zoning are largely responsible for this distribution of space. Home for many became an industrial epicenter filled with warehouses. To compound matters, poor maintenance of the few remaining urban parks meant that many parks were perceived as dangerous and unsafe areas: this resulted in further disuse.<sup>7</sup> The negative cycle fed itself as the degradation of public spaces transformed many inner city open spaces into further neglected and

<sup>1</sup> Urban Population Reference Bureau: 2012 World Population Data Sheet. *KFF*. Web.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Varney (2007). *Cleaner Cities, Healthier Cities: Urban Environmental Challenges, Urban Successes*. EPA.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Wolch (2005). Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity-Mapping Analysis. *Urban Geography*. 26.1 (4-35): 5.

<sup>4</sup> City Park Facts 2012: Center for City Park Excellence (2012). Trust for Public Land (TPL).

<sup>5</sup> City Park Facts 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Chona Sister, Jennifer Wolch and John Wilson. (2010). Got Green? Addressing environmental justice in park provision. *Geojournal*. 75.3 (229-248):29.

<sup>7</sup> Sister 230.

unsafe areas, especially for children. Some communities lacked parks entirely, including modern-day Chinatown which did not have a single public park until the victory over a plot of land called The Cornfield. Other areas did not have parks built for over a hundred years.

Although many socio-environmental issues plague city residents, numerous studies demonstrate that cities are not imminent social and environmental disaster zones. With more sustainable and ethical planning, cities can serve as clean and livable spaces that address the diverse needs of multicultural communities. Cities are products of their planning and in many cases, their lack of planning. For most cities, access to clean air, land, and water has been limited throughout history as industries privatized and polluted resources. Current land-use conflicts and political disagreements over the role of the city suggest that *re-valuing* urban spaces is vital to redress prior injustices. Many cities emphasize their drive towards more socially and environmentally holistic cities that nurture social and environmental well-being. The redistribution and reclamation of shared public spaces accelerates this transformation.

Reclamation projects have gained momentum throughout the city. Public agencies as well as individuals have championed for the establishment of parks in the urban core. To what extent are recent reclamation projects successful in this vision of a more equitable city? This thesis aims to explore the relationship between public parks and social justice, gentrification, and ecological restoration. It involved studying the physical placement of three parks, the visions of the parks and stakeholders, and assessing the impact of the parks thus far. The parks in this study--Vista Hermosa Natural Park, Grand Park, and Los Angeles State Historic Park—also called The Cornfield—are all near downtown LA in places previously polluted, degraded, or unused. All established in the 2000s, their impact has not been assessed extensively. Though they are all public parks in low-income and ethnically diverse areas, each park offers a very different user experience. By studying each park individually and cross-comparatively, my research aims to expand the dialogue regarding the role of public space as a means to promote social and environmental justice in urban environments.

Parks in urban landscapes have multiple benefits. Besides people, wildlife find habitat, particularly if the landscape design incorporates restoration of native habitats. Large tracts of native habitat in turn provide various ecosystem services that save the city millions of dollars annually. They also make the city healthier and safer. Restored wetlands, for example, work as sponges that can control and absorb floodwaters during heavy rainfall. In Los Angeles alone, that

one service equates to millions of dollars for flood control each year.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately the tendency in LA has been to prioritize short-term economic profit over long-term economic and social prosperity. Even though the city benefits financially from the ecosystem services public parks offer, public parks are limited as far as numbers of parks, park acreage and park funding.

In an ideal city, minimizing external costs is both feasible and beneficial. As successful reclamation projects prove, LA can evolve - and *is* evolving - into a more accessible and equitable city for all people, including those who are of low-income and people of color. It is a community that is addressing the needs of people of diverse socio-economic backgrounds more rather than solely those with privilege. With each additional public space reclaimed as parkland, walkways, bike paths, and the like, the benefits multiply. Both human and ecological communities benefit from the reclamation of public parks. Slowly, the accumulation of shared spaces kindles a long-neglected level of connectedness.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of public spaces and parks in LA is not new. El Pueblo, the earliest park in LA, was established in 1781, just after the American colonies declared independence.<sup>10</sup> Other parks in Los Angeles boast thousands of acres and millions of visitors. Topanga State Park has nearly 9000 acres of wild park land and Griffith Park serves as a large tourism venue; however, the median park size in LA is only a little over 5 acres.<sup>11</sup> While LA is close to the national average ratio of city parkland to residents, this is only because the presence of a few huge parks. Griffith Park's massive acreage, for example, boosts the parkland-to-residents ratio without actually increasing access to parks for the majority of the Los Angeles community. The size of Griffith Park is great, but it is important to value small parks, or "pocket parks" as well. Such spaces can transform polluted or abandoned industrial sites into socially and environmentally holistic spaces that benefit diverse park-poor audiences.

Today some 300,000 acres constitute the Los Angeles city area and of that, only 4% of the city area is public park land while some 12% of the city area is wilder, ecologically-restored parkland.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that in total, 16% of the city space in LA is some form of public park land, over 50% of people living in Los Angeles do not have access to a park within a 10 minute

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<sup>8</sup> Wetland Ecosystem Services (2011). *RAMSAR: The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands*

<sup>9</sup> Eric Brightwell. (2012). *Get Out of the Car: Walking CicLAvia*. KCET.

<sup>10</sup> City Park Facts 2012: Center for City Park Excellence (2012). Trust for Public Land (TPL).

<sup>11</sup> City Park Facts 2012.

<sup>12</sup> City Park Facts 2012.



walk from their home.<sup>13</sup> This is especially unjust to children and residents with limited modes of transportation: both groups are far less likely to access a park if it is not within walking distance of their home. Parks are especially important for children who need such landscapes for play, physical exercise, and free-form exploration through which important strides in social and intellectual development are made. Despite the significance of parks in the lives of children, only 30% of children in LA have parks within walking distance from their homes.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of park growth in the city is disconcerting, especially with the prevalence of derelict and unused industrial sites. Until 2008 when Vista Hermosa Natural Park opened, no parks had been built in downtown LA for over a century.<sup>15</sup> Compared to other cities, LA lacks in number, size, and quality of public parks. A recent publication from the land conservation organization Trust for Public Land (TPL) studied the most populous American cities and ranked them according to their parkland and user access. LA received a rating of two out of five stars.<sup>16</sup> Well behind the top urban park leaders like Minneapolis, New York, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Boston, Los Angeles just does not compete in terms of public parks. But with the various ongoing and future reclamation projects, Los Angeles should move up the ranks if park development plans ensue.

LA is a city of mixed communities, experiences and interpretations. According to its name, it is often touted as the city of angels. According to its reputation, it is the city of cement, traffic, and pollution. With its potential and current projects, it could be the city of healthy public spaces, environmental justice and long-term prosperity. But before delving into the three specific parks near downtown LA, it is important to understand key concepts like place, reclamation, and spatial injustice. After all, parks cannot be analyzed separately from their greater social and environmental context.

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<sup>13</sup> Our Work: Parks for People: Los Angeles County. (2013). *Trust for Public Land (TPL)*.

<sup>14</sup> Our Work: Parks for People.

<sup>15</sup> Vista Hermosa Natural Park (2011). Mia Lehrer & Associates Landscape Architecture.

<sup>16</sup> City Park Facts 2012.

## **CHAPTER 2: The Theory of Place**

The Romans perceived **place** as an “outward revelation of the living spirit.”<sup>17</sup> If their philosophy of place holds true, then what does Los Angeles as a whole reveal about the living spirit? This question depends on *where* in Los Angeles we look. There are as many different and complicated aspects of the living spirit and human nature as there are sites within the city. A reclaimed park offers a very different experience than an abandoned rail yard littered with industrial waste. Parks also offer a very different experience for members of a soccer team, a businessperson on their lunch break, or a multigenerational family enjoying a picnic. Place is as personal as it is situational. The perception and treatment of place reflects the inner manifestations of human nature then. If places are in the eye of beholder as well as the beholder’s language, culture, and experience, how people describe places is not only a product of language but also a product of societal constructions and perceptions of place.<sup>18</sup> Space and place intersect in meaning and are used interchangeably in this paper.

Broad concepts describing place like “nature” and “community” are as socially constructed as they are historically situational.<sup>19</sup> The urban landscape of LA is as much a product of any person’s perception as it a product of industrial and private use and misuse. The sprawling concrete and asphalt stretches in LA present a bleak view of what it means to be human, but not a hopeless view. Ignoring the ecological reality of any place, the Romans saw place as the potential to be anything humans perceive or imagine it to be. When people care for places in ecologically and socially holistic ways, parks possess boundless opportunities for positive change. Understanding the role of place and perception is especially important when considering urban spaces, especially in industrialized cities where public spaces are shared by masses of people each day. While urban spaces are often only seen as polluted, grimy, and unwelcoming areas—and they often are—accepting such spaces as permanent decrepit spaces is defeatist and unhelpful.

Urban places can meet economic, environmental, and social goals with well-considered reclamation projects. As landscape architect and urban designer Sarah Moos argues, this begins with understanding such urban sites as part of an “urban landscape.”<sup>20</sup> Moos’ word choices

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<sup>17</sup> Charles W. More, William J. Mitchell and William Turnbull Jr. *The Poetics of Gardens*. Cambridge: MIT Press (1988): 1.

<sup>18</sup> Gottlieb 20.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Gottlieb. *Reinventing LA: Nature and Community in the Global City*. Cambridge: MIT Press (2007): 5.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Moos. “Reclaiming Remnant Urban Spaces.” (2013). Noon Lecture Series. Scripps College. 17 April 2013.

reinforce the idea of spaces in their broader ecological context. While acknowledging that historically, these urban spaces are highly altered, inequitable, and anthropocentric landscapes, Moos fortifies the idea that people and their buildings are still a part of the landscapes; thus they should consider their ecological and social value. This inverts the Western urban tendency to categorize space as either urban or wild, completely overlooking how urban spaces are ecologically rooted too.

By recognizing urban spaces as living systems, it becomes more difficult to ignore or justify the abuse and exploitation of such spaces. When dissected from their ecological and social roles, these spaces suffer: dysfunctional anthropocentric uses of the land prevail and transform spaces into unlivable, inaccessible places for humans, especially for people of lower socioeconomic levels and non-human species who are most affected by spatial abuse. Sadly, misuse of public and shared places abounds in Los Angeles.

**Spatial injustice** is the most prevalent misuse of space. As a subset of social-environmental injustice, spatial injustice connects how the distribution and use of space places an unfair and disproportionate burden of toxins, unlivable spaces, and degraded landscapes on people of color and lower socioeconomic statuses.<sup>21</sup> Like its broader category of environmental justice, spatial justice is a legal movement that traces back to the environmental calamities of Love Canal or Warren County, where communities began to question the industries colonizing their towns with degraded and toxic spaces. Though all communities should have the right to healthy, safe and livable spaces according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, many communities do not have the access to such spaces. Justice is a matter of **access** as well as rights.<sup>22</sup> Access is one of the greatest issues regarding disparities in parks and public spaces. It includes physical proximity to these public spaces as well as social, cultural, ecological, and economic access to such spaces. The numbers of parks, geographical distribution of parks, size of parks, and surroundings of parks influence the accessibility of parks.<sup>23</sup> While dissected and degraded communities often lack the political and financial clout to change their surroundings, many communities like LA have fought - and continue to fight - for more equitable access.

Spatial justice challenges the proximity of communal spaces to disamenities - such as landfills, superfund sites, and polluting industries - as much as it stresses the need for positive

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<sup>21</sup> Spatial Justice: Environmental Issues (2013). Spatial Justice.org.

<sup>22</sup> Gottlieb 337.

<sup>23</sup> Parks & Recreation in Underserved Areas: A Public Health Perspective. (2012). (NRPA): iii.

amenities like parks, campgrounds, plazas, and other shared spaces.<sup>24</sup> Because the spatial distribution of the built environment controls many human activities, it is imperative that public places like parks are as accessible as possible.<sup>25</sup> For most contemporary American communities, public space is not something that always existed but rather something that exists because of protest and struggle.<sup>26</sup>

The communal cry for public space traces back to ideas by social theorist Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre stressed the “right to the city,” or the right for people to have access to shared, non-alienating spaces amidst highly privatized, commodified, and alienating spaces.<sup>27</sup> Affordable living spaces are not typically located in safe areas, so public parks in those areas are even more needed. Even if people have a right to the city and public places, that right is ignored often. On a national scale, people of color and low-income are less likely to have access to healthy spaces and suffer from disproportionate exposure to unhealthy and undesirable spaces. In this way, the very infrastructure of cities can alleviate or perpetuate oppression.

While access to safe public spaces varies, the importance of place remains uncontested. Along with breathing, eating, drinking, and reproducing, *dwelling* is a basic need of all humans.<sup>28</sup> Everyone occupies space regardless of choice, but to dwell, one must have a space where they *can* dwell.<sup>29</sup> The majority of people who access public parks and spaces have another location in which to live and sleep, however people without a private shelter of their own depend on these public spaces as much, if not more, as people who use these spaces as other forms of refuge. While every human occupies a place, and several places throughout the day, this access is not guaranteed as a right.<sup>30</sup> Thus, **placemaking** revolves around the making and sustaining of places in ways that enable communities to survive *and* thrive. The same way that all humans occupy space, all humans live in places and depend on places. Yet without an attachment to a place—or a sense of place—the lack of care and attention results in mistreatment of the space and those who depend on it. As landscape architect Lynda Scenkeeloth aptly summarizes, “without our attention, our *places* are endangered. And when our places are endangered, as revealed in the

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<sup>24</sup> Sister 230.

<sup>25</sup> Lissette E. Peralta. *Neighborhood Revitalization, Gentrification, and Displacement*. San Luis Obispo: California Polytechnic State University. (2000): 18.

<sup>26</sup> Don Mitchell. *The Right to the City*. New York: Guilford Press. (2003): 33.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell 36.

<sup>28</sup> Moore 1.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchell 33.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchell 33.

current ruins of our inner cities, our poisoned rivers, our inhospitable offices, and our dilapidated houses, we are at risk.”<sup>31</sup>

Re-envisioning these endangered places is possible. **Reclamation** offers one of the best solutions and entails the practice of transforming degraded public spaces into safe and healthy spaces. To reclaim a space is to reassert ownership and rights to a place. The word reclaim also suggests that powerful individuals and corporations misused a shared space that wider audiences deserve access to. Reclamation does not only mean physical and territorial assertion, but also personal, emotional, social, and ecological reassertion of space. It reexamines the potential of degraded spaces on people and other species. Through the reintroduction of native plants and habitats, reclamation can promote biodiversity and natural habitat while also improving the connectivity, accessibility, and overall atmosphere of urban areas. By redistributing resources, reasserting communal rights and access to a place, thorough reclamation addresses the failures and abuses of a corporate-centered private market.<sup>32</sup>

As places, reclaimed sites are perceived in as many ways as there are people experiencing them. Such sites can be transformational and inspiring places, or a “fake” version of nature, or an unwelcome gentrifying change to the community. Such various impacts are largely a result of the design, implementation, and maintenance of the site. Any time humans alter the landscape, the situation presents a complicated role about the human relationship to nature. As many restoration ecologists question, reclaimed sites present confusing and often conflicting messages about the human place in wild areas: reclaimed sites are often as “unnatural” as their urban architectural surroundings, regardless of the existence of native or non-native plants.

Perceiving urban spaces and the built environment simply as natural or unnatural is limiting. As researcher and Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy Robert Gottlieb suggests, reclaimed landscapes are neither natural nor artificial, but rather part of a complex and ambiguous relationship that is difficult to categorize.<sup>33</sup> The idea that anything humans touch or alter becomes “unnatural” reinforces the idea that humans are separate from the natural systems surrounding them and any human-nature interactions are inherently destructive. Similar to the wilderness-civilization dichotomy that permeates the Western paradigm of place, the natural-

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<sup>31</sup> Lynda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley. *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. (1995): 18.

<sup>32</sup> Sister 230.

<sup>33</sup> Gottlieb 25.

artificial dichotomy also presents a severed relationship with nature that promotes social and environmental abuse. Rather than categorizing such sites as either natural or artificial, which promotes dualistic view of the human relationship to nature, Gottlieb offers a more thorough analysis of the roles of such spaces simply by acknowledging their indistinct status that is very situational and site specific.<sup>34</sup> Any time humans alter the landscape, which humans have been doing for a few millennia, changes ensue the same as they do when other species exert their influence on place. Whether or not reclaimed spaces are natural or artificial presents a limited and circuitous dialogue, whereas questions analyzing *how* humans impact such spaces and how places impact humans offer deeper insight.

Reclamation and revitalization are interconnected. Revitalization refers to the process of recreating the urban core, or center of cities, via development.<sup>35</sup> Reclamation does not focus on redevelopment of infrastructure but rather reinventing remnant public spaces like abandoned lots or run-down fields. Use of these terms does not imply that urban areas were “devitalized or culturally moribund” before, but rather that certain areas are experiencing an unfair and disproportionate burden of the city’s spatial injustice.<sup>36</sup> The making of safe, healthy spaces can bring unwanted changes to communities when socioeconomic and cultural implications are ignored. For example, **gentrification** rejuvenates urban areas and boosts economic vitality, but at the risk of oppressing and displacing marginalized communities.

As a social process, gentrification not only transforms the physical environment of a place via reclamation and restoration, but also changes the culture of a place.<sup>37</sup> Such changes often benefit certain classes and cultures while marginalizing others. Revitalized places can evolve into financially inaccessible places for some, in addition to making certain people feel unwelcome. While community succession is a natural social process and gentrification reverses the process of disinvestment, it presents a paradoxical situation with winners and losers.<sup>38</sup> More often, newer residents benefit from the transformation, while the previous residents suffer from raised prices costs of living, even for basic amenities like food.<sup>39</sup> Gentrification begets inequity, presenting a dilemma for cities aiming to recreate public spaces in a way that promotes equity.

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<sup>34</sup> Moore 51.

<sup>35</sup> Peralta 4.

<sup>36</sup> Peralta 30.

<sup>37</sup> Peralta 31.

<sup>38</sup> Peralta 35.

<sup>39</sup> Peralta 36.

With public parks, displacement from gentrification remains less likely compared to the building of middle-income high rises; however, a lack of access to the reclaimed site remains a concern. For better or worse, reclamation changes the social relations in the community.<sup>40</sup> Community involvement and the rethinking of older approaches to designing and managing spaces helps ensure that reclamation begets positive changes for the surrounding communities.<sup>41</sup>

Reclamation begins with imagination as community members, landscape architects, ecologists, and others realize the potential of transforming abused, underused, and misused spaces. Nostalgia often drives such visions to restore spaces that undo the personal and communal damage of places lacking open space. A sense of history can also bridge communities and enable personal connections to place and people thrive. Reclamation tries to rectify wrongs against people and to restore the places and resources that are the backbone of a city's existence. Reclaimed urban areas and parks exist as tiny patches throughout the city; these patches contribute to the community socially, ecologically, and economically. It is ironic that cities like LA have a history of polluting basic resources and landscapes that are fundamental to public health and survival. But reclamation projects like the many along the Los Angeles River show how isolated sites also can connect and merge with other paths and parks. This multiplies the impact of such spaces.

As the city's population grows, the privatization and industrialization of open space further exacerbates the urban landscape: the demand for accessible public spaces grows as the amount of these spaces shrinks. Reclamation works to alleviate these concerns and defend open spaces as sacred communal areas. The three public parks in this paper are reclaimed communal spaces with anthropocentric and ecocentric benefits. Anthropocentric benefits focus on human-centered aspects of the park, such as picnic tables, benches, and child play areas. Ecocentric benefits include nature-centered aspects of the park, such as areas featuring native plants and habitat. These three parks vary in their focuses. Vista Hermosa and The Cornfield have a slightly more ecocentric approach to park design whereas Grand Park focuses on the anthropocentric importance of public parks. Each park presents questions revolving around who exactly has access to these spaces and the extent that their respective reclamation efforts have been deemed successful.

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<sup>40</sup> Peralta 31.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy Beatley and Kristy Manning. *The Ecology of Place: Planning for Environment, Economy, and Community*. Washington DC: Island Press (1997): 3.

The impact of urban green space grows with each new park, but the role of smaller parks should not be undervalued. As noted scientist and author David Suzuki astutely states, “Even the smallest park can provide refuge from the concrete, steel, and plastic that otherwise dominates much of urban life.”<sup>42</sup> Such refuges can be physical, visual, spatial, audible, spiritual and psychological refuges with positive impacts. Many studies confirm the power of places that reconnect people with their social and ecological surroundings, as these parks strive to do.

### ***Research Methodology:***

My interest in the subject of public parks coalesced with several of my courses and a personal fascination with wild spaces amidst urban sprawl. As a student of environmental analysis and art history, I found many of my classes discussing the recurring theme of how certain spaces perpetuate forms of injustice and oppression, while other spaces provide pockets of hope for a more equitable and sustainable society. The complexity of environmental justice issues, the planning of urban spaces, and the use and misuse of public space really captured my attention. I enjoyed untangling the social implications of space and reclamation, especially for the city in my own backyard: Los Angeles. While this city shares a history and contemporary existence rife with spatial injustice, it also possesses many inspiring places that are reclaiming what it means to live in Los Angeles.

I wanted to discern exactly *who* benefits from these reclaimed sites, as well as the issues these sites were experiencing. How do public parks with multiple agendas even measure success and to what extent are the three parks that I studied considered successful? I began researching the less tangible ideas of place as they relate to reclamation efforts, which led into further research of spatial injustices with urban planning. This grounded my understanding and analysis of the three public parks all in close proximity to one another in downtown Los Angeles. The parks, Vista Hermosa Natural Park, Grand Park, and Los Angeles State Historic Park (The Cornfield), seemed to have different agendas, issues, and potentials. I was eager to study these differences and begin to understand the complicated role and impact of urban public parks. After my research on historical discussions of the role of place and public parks, I studied each park individually and through comparative analysis. Rather than only categorizing the parks’ success or impact as “good or bad,” I wanted to uncover the greater complexity of reclamation and

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<sup>42</sup> David Suzuki and Dave Robert Taylor. *The Big Picture*. Vancouver: Greystone Books. (2009): 72.



public spaces. By understanding each park's existence as a part of an ongoing reclamation process, I found each case study insightful and hopeful.

The methodology for my work first involved compiling previous studies before expanding the dialogue with questions about the role of reclamation, park access and environmental justice. The current impact of these parks and extent of their success had not been studied extensively. Site visits and interviews allowed me to recognize overarching patterns and issues within each case study and cross-comparatively. Conversations and interviews with staff at the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, The City Project, and California State Parks offered insight I could not have found elsewhere.

Each of the case studies first explores the history and design of the park before delving into the degree that the park serves the community. Following this, the research focuses on the degree to which the parks alleviate park inequity or address other issues. Each park provided a unique case study with diverse visions and impacts. Collectively, they helped me understand how parks negotiate conflicts revolving around user accessibility multiple agendas.

All of these parks opened in the 2000s. The study of Vista Hermosa Natural Park revealed a very successful park that balanced ecological restoration without compromising the diverse needs of the community. Grand Park is the newest and most developed park, providing a widely used and engaging social space in the middle of the civic center of LA. This thriving cultural hub also presented insight for the relationship between urban revitalization and gentrification. Lastly, The Cornfield is the largest and oldest of the three parks. Rich with its historical and cultural history, this park's planning and design work entailed dealing with conflicting user demands, civil rights laws and community engagement.

It is impossible to consider each park in isolation; their relationship to each other exists as a network of shared public space and greenery amidst a largely inaccessible city. By combining previous studies with my own site visits, interviews, and photographs, I found many intersecting issues and successes facing these parks and urban public spaces. Individually each park presents different solutions to various issues the parks face and collectively, they provide insight into how current and future parks can achieve maximum success and equitable access.

The benefits of public parks and green patches throughout a fragmented city like Los Angeles are limitless. Even with small pocket parks, the possibility to reclaim entire cities is realistic and promising. Yet without analyzing the current states and issues of parks, especially

newer parks, it is impossible to discern the negative and positive impacts of each park. Exploring the recent trend of park reclamation in Los Angeles is complex with differing site limitations, user needs, funding, and park agendas. Comparing parks is an insightful way to untangle the limitations and potential of parks. This study explores the extent to which these three recent parks alleviate environmental justice issues relating to the distribution of space in urban areas.

### ***The Research Questions:***

Intrigued by the park reclamation movement gaining strength in Los Angeles, I wanted to delve into the extent to which these parks contribute to a vision of a more sustainable and just city. To what extent are these three new parks successfully reclaimed urban spaces? To answer this, I first needed to determine how to define success in relation to these parks. After reviewing previous studies and interviewing landscape architects and experts in park reclamation, I found a consistent way to measure this. In the process of reviewing the impact of these spaces on their surroundings, issues facing each park appeared. It would be inadequate to analyze only the success of each park without delving into the complexity of these issues. Given these issues, how do parks try to maximize their accessibility and balance diverse user needs? What is the relationship between reclamation and gentrification? These interrelated questions enabled a more thorough understanding of the impact of these parks.

## The Parks: A Visual Overview

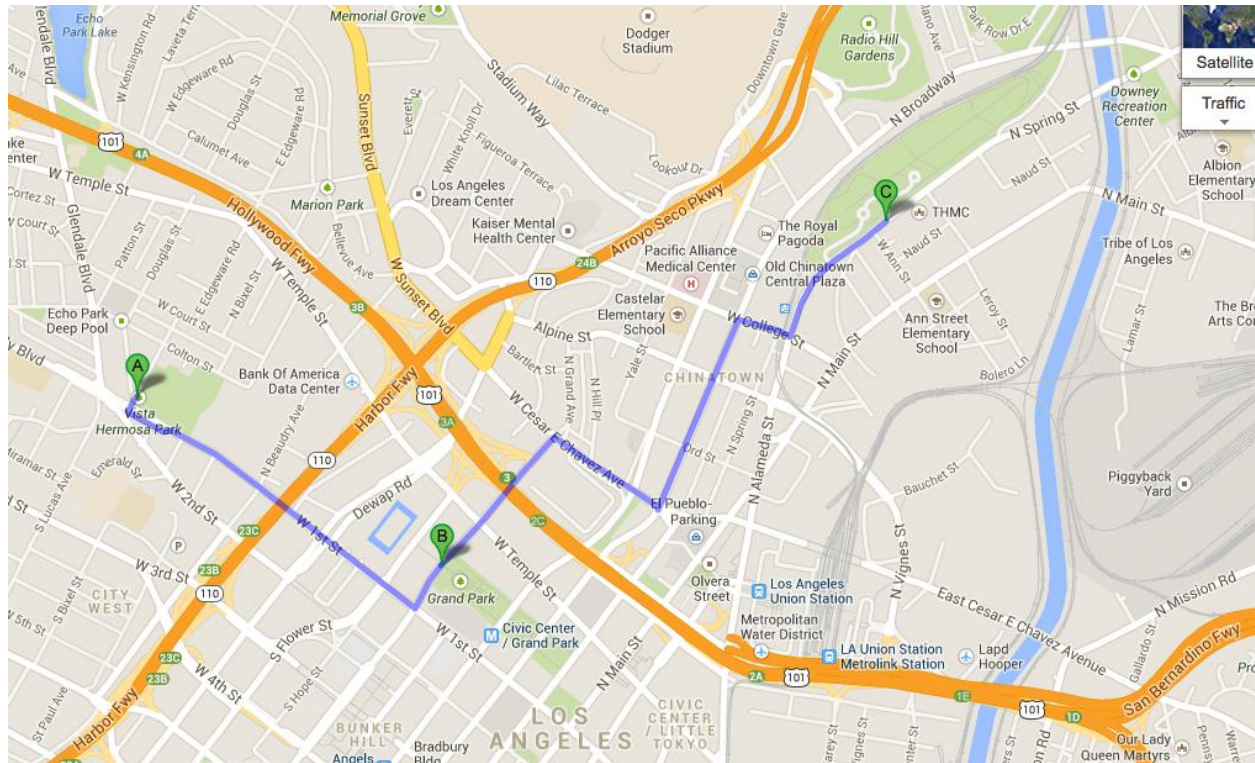


Image 1.0: Map showing park locations and layouts. *Image courtesy of Google Maps, 2013.*

As this map of downtown Los Angeles shows, all three parks exist as patches of green space amidst streets and freeways. As mentioned earlier, the parks are near each other with the similar goal of providing a public area to park-poor communities. Point A marks Vista Hermosa Park, the first case study. Point B marks Grand Park, the second case study. Point C marks Los Angeles State Historic Park (The Cornfield), the third case study. Each park has a different allotment of space, with Vista Hermosa existing as a condensed square while Grand Park and The Cornfield stretch over a longer area. Over twice the size of Grand Park and three times the size of Vista Hermosa, The Cornfield offers the largest open space. The Los Angeles River, depicted by the blue strip on the right side of the map, is the focus of many future reclaimed parks. Collectively, these reclaimed public spaces offer a more equitable sustainable vision of Los Angeles.

### **CHAPTER 3: First Case Study - Vista Hermosa Natural Park**

Before Vista Hermosa opened in 2008, there were no new public parks built in downtown Los Angeles for over a hundred years.<sup>43</sup> This fact would be alarming for any downtown, but it is especially concerning for a city like LA whose industries and population have skyrocketed since the early 1900s. Prioritizing corporate growth and success over communal health and well-being has been socially and environmentally detrimental. For a century, the city government and industries neglected to create new and accessible parks for extremely marginalized and low-income communities. In the process of industrialization, they also exacerbated spatial injustice by locating polluting industries and alienating spaces in the center of communities already struggling with injustice. While the creation of one new park cannot rectify a century of neglect, it can fuel efforts towards a more just society and move the city in a more holistic direction. This holistic vision refers to a city more grounded in its social and ecological surroundings. It includes the revaluing of communal spaces with policies and funding that favor public parks; a holistic vision of LA also incorporates more ethical development practices so that development does not only benefit wealthier communities or burden low-income communities and communities of color disproportionately.

On the corner of 1<sup>st</sup> Street and North Toluca Street, this park is not only the first new park in downtown LA, but also the first park in downtown to feature restored native habitat. Dirt paths wind through grassy fields, native riparian and chaparral habitat, a children's adventure playground, a soccer field, picnic tables, a stream, scenic views of the city, and a 120-student capacity outdoor amphitheater.<sup>44</sup> The \$15-million park is a joint-use partnership between the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, Los Angeles Unified School District, and the city of Los Angeles. In addition to these four partners influencing the creation and design of the park, landscape architect Mia Lehrer and her firm deserve significant credit for the vision and actualization of the park's design.

In only 10.5 acres, Vista Hermosa Park weaves multiple environments into one holistic space and addresses a variety of needs for a park-poor community. At the main entrance to the park, a metal sculptured gate greets visitors with a powerful reminder of the grimy industrial history of LA (Image 1.0). Crowded buildings beneath a billowing smog cloud represent the city

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<sup>43</sup> Vista Hermosa Grand Opening (19 July 2008). The City Project

<sup>44</sup> Vista Hermosa Grand Opening

and specific buildings like City Hall. Black swirls at the bottom of the gate allude to the LA River. The artful entrance gate reminds visitors of the value of this park, especially for a city that lacks park space and has a bad reputation for air, water, noise, and visual pollution. Far more than a bleak depiction of the city's state, the gate frames the park beautifully. Through the windows of the crowded miniature buildings, the open space of the park unfolds, framing the landscape and beckoning visitors. The gate juxtapositions the gritty cityscape against a reclaimed park that counteracts pollution and spatial injustice. It symbolizes a new framework for Los Angeles that involves the revaluing of greenspaces and reclamation of public parks.

The other main entrance is parallel to West 1<sup>st</sup> Street, near the soccer field. Once in the park, a visitor's center welcomes and familiarizes people with the park. This building and the park restroom feature green roofs (Image 1.5). With vegetation that absorbs carbon dioxide, filters pollutants in the air, reduces stormwater runoff, and decreases sound pollution, these roofs benefit people and the planet.<sup>45</sup> Natural lighting and the potential for solar panels also enhance the architectural integrity of the site. These roofs are beautiful statements by themselves and they are not the only sustainable components of the park.



Image 1.1: Sculptural Entrance Gate. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Garvin. *Public Parks: The Key to Livable Communities*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. (2011): 41.



Image 1.2: View of the LA Skyline from the Park. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

Drought-tolerant landscaping throughout the park conserves water, offers shade, provides habitat for native species, and enables ecosystem processes to take place that purify the air, water, and soil. Dirt paths offer a walking loop that meanders through the park's various spaces. In some areas along the path, the native vegetation has already grown so tall that it provides a beautiful maze of native color and smells (Image 1.2). Sycamores, willows, toyons, and oaks anchor the landscape, along with other key plants of chaparral, coastal sage scrub, meadow and oak savannah communities. Such foliage also frames the LA skyline in a promising way: the city seems less separated from its natural surroundings, and more connected to the very resources it depends on for its own existence (Image 1.1).

Historically, wild spaces and downtown LA have not existed within the same realm; Vista Hermosa reclaims that relationship and offers a welcome refuge from the pace, noise and atmosphere of city life. Within the park, native songbirds have also reclaimed their former territory. Wind rattles the giant sycamore leaves that speckle the ground with a mosaic of color. After the rain, pungent smells of the chaparral and sage scrub plants perfume the landscape and a small recreated stream flows. The native habitat also frames views of downtown, instilling a

sense of place and pride for a more sustainable and just city. Spanish for “beautiful view,” Vista Hermosa fulfills that promise with its wild, grassy refuge and striking views of the LA skyline.<sup>46</sup>

Besides providing beauty and a sense of place, the native landscaping provides other benefits for park visitors, city-dwellers and the environment. Any water that the foliage does not absorb recharges aquifers rather than being swept into the LA River and channeled to the ocean. Even the permeable surfaced pathways and parking lot were designed with sustainability in mind. Like the green roofs, this permeability decreases the spread of toxic pollutants via stormwater runoff.<sup>47</sup> Rather than coursing through the city and collecting heavy metals and oils, soil absorbs and processes the water. Meadows also filter the water even more before it enters a subsurface cistern. This 20,000-gallon capacity cistern enables on-site water storage and irrigation.<sup>48</sup> In a water-hungry city ridiculed for its excessive consumption of resources like water, these efforts that utilize local rainfall are old yet visionary solutions to conserving limited resources. Besides serving practical and ethical purposes, these multiple forms of pollutant purification also save the park money. Rather than directing funds to irrigation or trail maintenance after heavy rainstorms, the park can focus on other endeavors like school and public outreach via environmental education programs and presentations in the student amphitheatre. Instead of prioritizing ecological restoration and sustainability over recreational space, Vista Hermosa incorporates both needs into one park. Rolling grassy fields complement the native landscaping (Image 1.3). The grassy areas are open to the needs of the visitor. Native habitat exists throughout the park. Sycamore groves along the grassy edges provide an intriguing space as well as shade. Picnic benches dot this area. Whether a place to play catch with a dog, to reflect, to let children play tag, or to picnic with a view of the city skyline, these areas cater to diverse user needs. Any dogs on leash are allowed in the park while the children’s adventure playground creates a safe outdoor play space where children can run, hide, and socialize with other children (Image 1.4). With a giant sculptural snake and climbable giant turtle, this exciting play environment offers a safe play space that is rare in downtown LA. Multiple ponds throughout the park use boulders as seats and create a more relaxing gathering place. The park is a place to walk, learn, socialize, play, and do many things in a safe, accessible, and beautiful space.

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<sup>46</sup> Vista Hermosa Natural Park (2011). Mia Lehrer & Associates Landscape Architecture.

<sup>47</sup> Garvin 42.

<sup>48</sup> Vista Hermosa Natural Park.



Image 1.3: Dirt Paths and Native Habitat. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*



Image 1.4: Grassy Field with Native Trees. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*



As a joint-use park, Vista Hermosa is tied to Edward Roybal High School, previously the site of Belmont High School. Prior to the land's development, the school board of the Los Angeles United School District (LAUSD) voted to abandon and sell the site that became Vista Hermosa. Concerns over hazardous waste on the property escalated, but these concerns dissipated when research revealed that the "hazardous waste" was small amounts of naturally occurring methane venting from the land.<sup>49</sup> More so, a public park rich with native habitat would help process these emissions with methanotropic bacteria in the soil.<sup>50</sup> Largely because of the efforts of park-justice advocacy organization, The City Project, the LAUSD plan to sell the site failed.<sup>51</sup> The park materialized largely due to the efforts of Robert García at the City Project, who pushed the school district to research if reclaiming the run-down site was logistically and financially viable. In 2004, the LAUSD Citizen's School Bond Oversight Committee voted that such reclamation was possible, and the space was designated park land.

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) conceptualized the vision for the park, hired designers, and oversaw construction.<sup>52</sup> An interview with Lisa Soghur, Deputy Executive Officer and Chief of Developed Resources for MRCA, revealed how the MRCA still oversees this patch of land. Their hope of connecting the community with this urban and wild space has materialized in many ways. Positive feedback from the community has also conveyed the positive impact of this space in terms of numbers of visitors, visitor diversity, and visitor enjoyment of the space. Downtown LA lacks easy access to wild areas, and this small patch of land provides a welcoming place of interaction. The school district is also still involved with the park. It owns the property and manages the synthetic turf soccer field jointly with the city of Los Angeles. Playing fields of this quality are in high demand, especially in low-income communities that tend to lack playing fields at all, let alone nice playing fields. Both the soccer field and student amphitheatre reflect a shared goal between the school district and the park: to create parks, especially in park-poor communities, and rectify spatial injustice.

Adjacent to the school, the same soccer field offers a safe fitness area and increases access to the rest of the park. Because people who live within walking distance of a park are far

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<sup>49</sup> Lisa Soghur. Interview. Deputy Executive Officer and Chief of Developed Resources for MRCA. (21 November 2013). Telephone Interview.

<sup>50</sup> Climate Science of Methane (2010). Environmental Change Institute at University of Oxford.

<sup>51</sup> The New Vista Hermosa Park: Newsletter Summer 2008. (2008). The City Project.

<sup>52</sup> Lisa Soghur Interview.

more likely to exercise, this field addresses health disparities in urban environments.<sup>53</sup> This impact is especially significant for a low-income community where nearly half of the residents are children and of that, one-third of the children suffer from obesity.<sup>54</sup> Children of color disproportionately live in districts that lack parks and in LA, every city council district is park-poor and shares this trend.<sup>55</sup> This top-notch soccer field environment also meets FIFA requirements and as far as sustainability, does not require irrigation or intense maintenance. Besides increasing park visibility and accessibility, the field promotes community bonding via sports events. For a park surrounded by low-income Latino communities, the field offers a place for those who would otherwise lack access to a safe place of recreation, fitness, and gathering.<sup>56</sup>

The 120-capacity student amphitheatre also reflects the parks ties with the school and community. People use the amphitheatre as a communal gathering area and outdoor classroom. Bilingual programs available at the visitor's center include free bus trips to the mountains, young naturalist programs, and evening campfires where interpreters share stories and facts about the native habitat and animals. The bus trips to the mountains not only give people access to the mountains, but also allow park visitors to understand the MRCA's vision of the park as a wild area reintroduced to the city. The park also offers an outdoor learning environment for the high school, where students can apply their learning to field science and outdoor observation rather than only learn inside with a textbook. This engaging approach to learning aligns with the parks' role as a place where community members reconnect with nature in a direct and tangible way. The weekly programs also facilitate the park's role as a "social mixing valve" where visitors can also reconnect with their community.<sup>57</sup> Whether attending a program at the amphitheatre or experiencing the park in other ways, visitors to the park can develop a relationship to the surroundings that most of downtown cannot offer.

Vista Hermosa is a reprieve from city life and a place of reconnecting. Its Spanish name helps signify its priority to serve as a welcoming and accessible park for the surrounding low-income Latino communities. Landscape architect Mia Lehrer deserves much credit for the park's design. A believer in native habitat restoration, sustainable design, and park equality, Lehrer creates pockets of nature and recreation amidst marginalized, densely populated, and park-poor

<sup>53</sup> Robert García and Aubrey White. (2006). Healthy Parks, Schools, and Communities. *The City Project*.

<sup>54</sup> The New Vista Hermosa Park

<sup>55</sup> Robert García (2013). *Full and Fair Funding for Parks and Recreation, and a Healthier, Prosperous City*.

<sup>56</sup> The New Vista Hermosa Park

<sup>57</sup> Garvin 38.

communities.<sup>58</sup> Her firm Mia Lehrer and Associates (MLA) has many projects that transform unused industrial and commercial land into neighborhood parks.<sup>59</sup> Only five years since its grand opening in 2008, Vista Hermosa has already been described as a model of urban revitalization and a “LA park like no other.”<sup>60</sup> Lehrer describes all of her projects as places for people to enjoy and Vista Hermosa fulfills this goal as an open and inviting space for a very park-poor community. According to Lehrer, the first part of her landscape design process for this park was listening to the community.<sup>61</sup> Rather than hypothesizing or projecting community desires, Lehrer gathered local opinions which gave the local residents a voice. After listening to family and individual needs, Lehrer incorporated these user needs into her landscape design. Besides representing community needs, this method results in parks that are more used and cared for.<sup>62</sup> Communal involvement is central to Lehrer’s work and central to this park’s success.

By re-introducing native habitats in a way that enhances recreational, educational, and ecological benefits, Vista Hermosa softens the injustices of city life. Lehrer’s philosophy as an urban planner trace back to that of the great American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. As designer of New York’s Central Park, Olmsted believed in creating landscapes rather than buildings. He was also the earliest park designer to vocalize the restorative effect that well-designed public parks can have for city dwellers.<sup>63</sup> City inhabitants most affected by spatial injustice have an equal right to safe shared spaces; yet without communal needs vocalized, equitable urban planning cannot ensue. By the simple act of asking and listening to the surrounding communities, Lehrer enabled people to visualize the reclaimed land and partake in the reclamation process. It is ironic how many public parks neglect this part of the process, especially given that public parks impact the surrounding residents the most.

With urban planning as her tool and public parks like Vista Hermosa as an example, Lehrer tackles spatial injustice in a way that empowers the community to imagine what a space could be and enable that vision to materialize.<sup>64</sup> Allocating enough funds for these meetings to

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<sup>58</sup> Vista Hermosa Natural Park.

<sup>59</sup> Vista Hermosa Grand Opening

<sup>60</sup>Yoli Martinez. (9 October 2012). Iconic Hispanic Angelenos in History: Mia Lehrer. *KCET*.

<sup>61</sup>Media & Awards (2011). Mia Lehrer & Associates Landscape Architecture.

<sup>62</sup>Media & Awards.

<sup>63</sup>Garvin 33.

<sup>64</sup> Social Departures: LA River: Mia Lehrer. (2013).

happen is critical to the success of a park's planning process.<sup>65</sup> Re-valuing public input also promotes a park constituency that invests their own time and energy in neighborhood projects like parks. With the creation or enhancement of each park, Lehrer contributes to her vision of LA as a city where people could live, work and play all in the same area.<sup>66</sup> After all, as Lehrer states herself, sustainable communities are about being able to offer people: jobs, transportation, education, and overall good places to live.<sup>67</sup> Yet because such places are often "communities within communities," these small parks within large cities are critical to shaping a new urban vision. Ultimately, these parks and pockets of healthy, livable spaces are woven alongside similar spaces that knit a city together spatially, socially and economically.<sup>68</sup> By revaluing greenspaces and reclaiming public parks like this one, LA can establish a new framework for a healthy and sustainable community.

Urban green and wild spaces like Vista Hermosa influence the urban landscapes in profound ways. The following page features a table that organizes these previously discussed benefits of public parks into three categories: personal health, communal health, and ecological health (Table 1.0). All of these factors overlap and influence each other. For example, a park abundant with native plants and trees like Vista Hermosa purifies the air; this enhances ecological health as well as personal health by reducing pollution. This in turn contributes to a more civil society where low-income communities face less disproportionate burdens of issues like pollution. These overlapping factors influence each other in a positive way that addresses multiple interrelated issues like pollution and public health.

Though no formula exists to quantify the success of a park, one way to measure a park's success is by the amount of visitors, the diversity of visitors, and the diversity of visitor activities and purpose for coming to the park. According to this measurement and staff at MRCA, Vista Hermosa has experienced tremendous success thus far. People jog on the exercise trails, kids play around the giant snake, workers in business suits come to the park during lunch breaks, families picnic at the park, and soccer players flock to matches at the new field. Visitors and park success are not just limited to humans: the reappearance and diversity of wildlife to this area is equally noteworthy. From humming birds to red-tailed hawks, the bird life in this area has

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<sup>65</sup> J. A. Green. (10 September 2012). A Tricky Spot for Los Angeles' New Grand Park. ASLA.

<sup>66</sup> SoCal Departures.

<sup>67</sup> Green

<sup>68</sup> Green



Image 1.5: Children’s Adventure Playground. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*



Image 1.6: Green Roof of Bathroom and Native Landscaping. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

experienced a revival. Aside from filling the air with the sweet sound of songs, these birds reaffirm the ecological value of this multi-purpose park.

If these visual measurements of success were not enough, Vista Hermosa has also received numerous rewards and positive reviews. In 2009, the 39<sup>th</sup> annual Los Angeles Architectural Awards announced Vista Hermosa the Grand Prize winner, an honor that goes to the space that best embodies a visionary and sustainable Los Angeles. At the awards, President of the Los Angeles Business Council Mary Leslie applauded the park for its sustainability and attention to the needs of low-income communities.<sup>69</sup> The City Project, a parks advocacy nonprofit group based in Los Angeles, also applauds Vista Hermosa for its impact by describing it as everything most urban parks in LA are not.<sup>70</sup> With The City Project's goals to create more urban park space, revise park funding, and equalize park access, this statement is a significant and well-deserved compliment for Vista Hermosa. It also critiques the fact that other areas in Los Angeles need adequate attention and funding to make more equitable and healthy spaces.

As a park with a wide audience ranging from single workers to high school students to families, Vista Hermosa provides a place that balances and encourages multiple uses. The people who benefit the most from this park are the low-income Latino residents of this district. Many residents now have close access to a park *they* helped create. This is especially important given the lack of private backyards for many low-income residents, let alone the lack of public spaces. The park combines the need for native habitat with the public demand for open grassy areas and soccer fields. It addresses the need for cleaner air and water while not diminishing the value of occasional community campfires that connect people to each other and their surroundings. It provides a sustainable landscape that does not compromise beauty, but rather enhances it with native plants and scenic views that frame the downtown skyline. It integrates nature into the city while giving the community easy access to a more wild area and reason to appreciate its value. With widespread community use and endorsement of this park, Vista Hermosa serves as a model of what a newly reclaimed public park can do.

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<sup>69</sup>Los Angeles Architectural Awards Announced Today. (28 May 2009). *Bustler.net*.

<sup>70</sup>Sharon McNary. (9 May 2013). What About Parks? LA Mayor's Race. *The City Project*

Table 1.0: Summary of the Benefits of Successful Public Parks<sup>71</sup>

Personal Health	Communal Health	Ecological Health
Cleaner air	Diversity	Cleaner environments
Cleaner water	Healthy shared spaces	Carbon sequestration
Cleaner soils	Venues for social mixing	Sustainable spaces
Nature access	A civil society	Fresher air, cleaner water
Recreation	Special events, traditions	Pollution reduction
Fitness and exercise	City values	Heat island effect reduction
Stress reduction	Crime reduction	Corridor formation of habitats
Alienation reduction	Noise & light pollution reduction	Restoration of place
Pollution reduction	Public safety & health	Water collection
Sense of place	Property values	Ecosystem processes
Overall well-being	Economic vitality	Wildlife habitat
Livable environments	Communal identity	Habitat restoration

#### **CHAPTER 4: Second Case Study - Grand Park**

Sandwiched between the bustling intersections of Grand Avenue and Spring Street, Grand Park offers a revitalized public space in the Civic Center of Los Angeles. Small botanic gardens, a striking fountain, festive pink chairs, grassy fields, and a playful waterscape are some of the features that transformed this underutilized and inaccessible space into a more public and inviting environment. Self-proclaimed on its website and its welcoming signs as “The Park for Everyone,” this multi-leveled space occupies a 12-acre slope that leads from The Music Center to City Hall.<sup>72</sup> Seven county buildings surround the new park that experienced a packed first year with everyday activities and larger festivities. But unlike Vista Hermosa where the consensus on the park’s accessibility remains very positive, the reviews of Grand Park are mixed. As the newest of the three parks in this study, this park is described as a thriving cultural hub by some and a gentrified business-driven space by others. Because many people disagree on its impact thus far, Grand Park offers an interesting study of the complex relationship between park access, reclamation, and gentrification.

<sup>71</sup>Created by Allison Rigby, 2013.

<sup>72</sup>Grand Park PA: The Park for Everyone (2013). *GrandParkLA.org*

As of summer of 2012, this park opened to the public as a revamped version of its less exciting and older self. Previous main features included plazas, fountains and a Court of Flags, all of which remained a key part of the park's new design. Grand Park is a part of the larger Grand Avenue Project, which is a multi-phased plan to revitalize downtown Los Angeles. This greater project hopes to add several million square feet of commercial and cultural space to downtown LA.<sup>73</sup> This project emphasizes the importance of open space that respects diverse user needs while also promoting cultural and economic revitalization. Parts of the park are available to rent for private or public venues; businesses like Starbucks and food trucks also use the park.

With county support largely led by Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina and the Grand Avenue Committee, the vision of a new Grand Park materialized. Though \$56 million to construct, a real estate development firm called The Related Companies contributed \$50 million to the project in the form of pre-paid rent for ground leases; this made the reclamation an affordable endeavor for the city to pursue.<sup>74</sup> Drawing upon their historic focus on the creation of a more pedestrian-friendly LA, the landscape architecture firm Rios Clementi Hale Studios designed most of the park.<sup>75</sup> Designing Grand Park aligned well with the firm's goals of creating more accessible spaces that pedestrians, cyclists, and other city dwellers can experience. Supported by a general contractor, the landscape architects of Rios Clementi Hale Studios, an environmental graphic design firm, and various city-wide interest groups and individuals, Grand Park underwent its makeover.<sup>76</sup> After two years of construction, the park was complete and ready for the crowds it would draw.

To announce its creation, the city held an inaugural celebration in the summer of 2012 to celebrate the park's new energy and existence. People explored the four areas of the park, each marked by a drop in elevation from the previous layer and a closer proximity to City Hall. Some 5000 eager park-goers gathered before the professional vertical dance company Bandaloop.<sup>77</sup> These dancers and their shadows bounced gracefully off the walls of City Hall while suspended with ropes in the air, visually bringing energy and activity to an area that previously lacked such interaction and contact. Professional dancers also celebrated the newly restored fountain with a

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Slatin. (27 November 2012). Simple Start of a Bold Vision for Downtown LA. *The New York Times*.

<sup>74</sup> Joanna Rose. (26 July 2012). Gloria Molina Joins Civic, Artistic, and Community Leaders to Celebrate Grand Park Opening. *Related*.

<sup>75</sup> Slatin 2.

<sup>76</sup> Goodman 2.

<sup>77</sup> Slatin 2.



playful routine very reminiscent of all the people similarly drawn to the water. Crowds gathered on the main performance lawn to relax and listen to a multicultural array of music. The dedication itself featured speeches by people such as LA County Board of Supervisors member Gloria Molina. A procession of 88 children from the 5 districts of the county also celebrated the park's opening.<sup>78</sup>

Overall, the message of the park's inaugural celebration was clear: this park celebrates the diversity of LA and exists as a space for human enjoyment by fostering connections with each other and developing a more welcoming sense of place in downtown LA. Expression through the arts was also a key part of the park's inaugural celebration and overall vision. Live music with global influences reflected the cultural diversity of the city. Such performances celebrated the diversity as a wonderful asset worthy of sharing, enjoying, and generating pride that the people of Los Angeles deserve. The park plans to celebrate its "birthday" annually.

Before delving into the impact of this park, it is vital to understand the park's main features and layout. Signs at the upper and lower boundaries of the park label the new park as "The Park for Everyone." Most prominent, a four-side silver tower proclaims this welcoming statement in 25 languages (Image 2.0). *El parque para todos!* Such a tower and its statement expresses that indeed, the park is intended to welcome the many people and cultures of Los Angeles. Large enough to be viewed from the street, this sign reinforces the park's vision of existing for the benefit of many cultures throughout the city.

The park is divided into four layers, with the first two layers between Grand Avenue and Hill Street, and the latter two layers between Hill Street, Broadway, and Spring Street. Because the park gradually drops 90 feet from the top layer to bottom, these layers use that elevation change as a way to organize the park's areas. Each layer is divided by key features. Starting from the top layer and working down towards City Hall, the layers can be summarized as the fountain, the performance lawn, the community terrace, and the grand event lawn. At the top level of the park, the restored Arthur J. Will Memorial Fountain is, like the park name itself, quite grand. With a changing fountain spray throughout the day and a light show at night, the fountain brings an exciting energy to the space (Image 2.1). By nightfall, the combination of the vibrant colors and jets of water compliment the illuminated City Hall. Beneath the fountain, water in the wade-

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<sup>78</sup> Rose 2.



Image 2.0. Grand Park welcome sign. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*



Image 2.1. View of City Hall from the top of the park. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

able membrane pool grasps the attention of toddlers and adults alike. Smaller fountains squirt water into the air, creating a dynamic space that encourages movement and exploration (Image 2.2). Pink chairs and tables provide places to sit, watch the action that revolves around the fountain, picnic, and dine (Image 2.4). Few spaces in downtown LA exist like this where water serves as the entertainment and is shared by many in a communal space. As a playful waterscape that provides a safe and engaging space, this part of the park is incredibly valuable.

The next layer consists of the Performance Lawn, complete with a flat grassy area and a stage. There is an underground parking lot between this layer and the next, in addition to some parking along the sides of the park. Given the musical and cultural performances in the vision of Grand Park, parking is in high demand at this site. The performance areas serve as gathering spaces that use music to reflect the diversity of the city and appeal to a diverse audience. For this reason, a second performing area called the Event Lawn provides an additional performance space. Both of these spaces are grassy, tree-lined areas, creating a comfortable environment that is also capable of holding large crowds. The Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles, also called the Music Center, is in charge of all park operations and programming. Their goal is to bring people to Grand Park and to all of downtown LA by providing an array of free concerts and venues each year.<sup>79</sup> The Music Center works with the city and county, viewing itself as the catalyst to make Grand Park a welcoming epicenter of cultural expression.

With the priority of being the social heart of the city and a public showcase of the arts, Grand Park appears to compromise other features. Environmental sustainability is not a focus of the park, though the park still features many trees and small, culturally-themed botanical gardens. The third layer of the park called the Community Terrace also features drought tolerant plants; these plants require little to no supplemental watering and also provide botanical diversity that contrasts the lawns and deciduous trees. These drought tolerant plants reduce the need for irrigation while the grassy areas help absorb rainwater, reducing the spread of contaminants in stormwater. Unlike Vista Hermosa, however, there are no green roofs or rainwater collection and storage systems. While the large amount of concrete in this park is necessary for the large numbers of visitors the park receives, it reduces the capacity of the park to absorb excess flow.

Throughout the park, some 300 trees provide beauty and shade while also producing oxygen, filtering pollutants, and sequestering carbon dioxide. In a city whose residents do not

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<sup>79</sup>Grand Park PA: The Park for Everyone

necessarily have ready access to green space and nature, these trees become psychologically significant elements such as by serving as a natural playscape for children. In addition to these trees, 24 multi-cultural botanic gardens are dispersed throughout the park.<sup>80</sup> These gardens exhibit over 140 plant species that collectively represent the world's six floristic provinces, or geographical areas that represent similar plant compositions. Colorful panels throughout the park identify and describe the kingdoms, providing an effective form of interpretation for park visitors (Image 2.5). The kingdoms are also representative of the global diversity of the city, and thus meant to embody the role of the park as an area of cultural and social mixing.<sup>81</sup>

Diverse plants, customs, food, and celebrations reflect the diverse audiences that park staff hope to attract and make welcome. A small dog run, made per community request, also encourages people and their pets to experience fresh air and exercise while mingling with others. Leashed dogs are allowed throughout the park. Places for casual sitting, exercising, splashing, eating, and enjoying performances abound. These spaces offer a cleaner, safer, and greener environment that celebrates the city's cultural diversity. As a social hub, the priority for widespread public use is above the priority for habitat restoration or sustainability. Sustainability is not a central part of the park's identity.

Grand Park represents the multicultural identity of Los Angeles through the diversity of its plants as well as its park venues. Whereas Vista Hermosa focuses on its role in creating more equitable and sustainable shared spaces, Grand Park focuses on creating a central space that can serve as an icon of Los Angeles' public culture.<sup>82</sup> By prioritizing the incorporation of cultural performances and special events, Grand Park is evolving into the central gathering space it hoped to become. These events are all advertised in the park's website that features an event calendar. For example, a new park tradition as of fall 2013 celebrates Grand Park's birthday, offering a lively scene with musical performances, food trucks, and dancing. Block parties throughout the year celebrate a variety of people and cultures, the most recent one marking the mayoral transition between Antonio Vallaraigosa and Eric Garcetti. Altars, food trucks, face-painting, bands and ceremonial dances in early November celebrated Dia de los Muertos and tried to appeal to a wide range of interests and ages. For the first time the park will host a New Year's celebration this year as well. With the hope that these special events morph into park traditions

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<sup>80</sup> Slatin 2.

<sup>81</sup> Slatin 2.

<sup>82</sup> George Villanueva. (1 October 2013).: LINES + LANES: Activating Public Space at CicLAvia's Grand Park Hub. *KCET*.



Image 2.2. Fountain and wade-membrane pool. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*



Image 2.3 Child exploring the wade-membrane pool. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

that attract large numbers, Grand Park hopes to bring people to downtown LA in an area that celebrates and promotes cultural diversity.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to these special events, weekly happenings include farmers markets, lunchtime food trucks, and exercise classes. In the first six months alone, Grand Park hosted 40 events aimed for mass audiences as well as those passing by.<sup>84</sup> The funding for these is partially paid for when the park spaces are rented for private events, but the LA County Board of Supervisors also allocated \$3.3 million for the first year's operating fees.<sup>85</sup> While most of this goes towards maintenance and security, it also funds smaller events like weekly free yoga on the grass. Such events offer free recreation and fitness in a communal setting that promotes social interaction and active lifestyles. Whether a lunchtime yoga session or a large concert, the park's many activities encourage personal reflection and social connections.

There is little doubt that Grand Park adds a culturally vibrant open space to a crowded city that historically lacked such space. Community meetings prior to the reclamation revealed a request for simple amenities, such as places to read, relax in shade, get food, and enjoy open space.<sup>86</sup> People of diverse ability levels can also enjoy the space. While the 90-foot drop in elevation throughout the park presented a challenge to the park's design, the whole park is ADA accessible. Grand Park offers a place for all of those activities while also adding an impressive assortment of venues. An interview with Ramya Sivasubramanian, the Assistant Director for park advocacy nonprofit organization The City Project, conveyed how parks can form central gathering spaces: doing so requires accessibility that attracts *lots* of people to the park as well as *diverse* peoples to the park.<sup>87</sup> Many studies have found that long-term successful parks make people of various ages, incomes, and ethnicities feel welcome and comfortable in one shared space. People may come to the park for differing reasons, but the meaningful social interactions that happen in urban parks add immeasurable value to a park and community.<sup>88</sup> Parks cannot serve as "social mixing valves" when not frequented by the very people they hope to bring

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<sup>83</sup> Garvin 39.

<sup>84</sup> Slatin 2.

<sup>85</sup> Slatin 1.

<sup>86</sup> Slatin 1.

<sup>87</sup> Ramya Sivasubramanian. Assistant Director for The City Project. (2013, November 22). Telephone Interview

<sup>88</sup> Garvin 38.

together.<sup>89</sup> Grand Park's goal of being "the park for everyone" is not as easy as making that statement and providing free performances.

The lack of socioeconomic diversity in Grand Park is concerning, as the park may not be as public and "for everyone" as it wishes. The park celebrates global diversity and social mixing, but appears to do so in favor of wealthier park visitors. While some think that the proximity to city and county buildings brings park visitors closer to their government, others fear that it renders the space less accessible to the surrounding community. People already working in the surrounding city and county offices have the most access to this park. People with the means and access to a car have the next easiest access to the park. Lunchtime yoga sessions that the park holds are not catering to people working lower-paying working class jobs; those without the privilege of a long lunch break or a job adjacent to the park do not benefit from these sessions. While these free exercise sessions should continue, the park should also invest in creating venues that are more accessible for people of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The park's activities revolving around diverse music, dance and the arts do impact a more diverse audience by appealing to people of many cultures, ages, and ability. People in general are also more likely to participate in the park's festivities because the activities are free. Increased public transportation to the park would also help the park serve as the diverse gathering space it aims to be.

With these concerns, the park risks benefiting the people gentrifying downtown far more than it benefits surrounding residents.<sup>90</sup> Any access to a park is better than no access, but the city should not only invest in parks for middle to upper income residents.<sup>91</sup> This is especially pertinent given the city's park-poor history, especially in low-income communities. Robert García, founding director of the nonprofit City Project suggests that a more equitable reclamation project would be one that upgraded parks throughout the city rather than investing a lot of money into a park that has a more narrow audience than it may intend. This is not to suggest that the reclaimed Grand Park is not a worthwhile investment, but rather that equal attention and funding should be granted towards other park reclamation movements. This is especially true since those accessing Grand Park either work in the nearby area or have a viable form of transportation to the park. Investing in parks and welcoming communal areas is vital, but the city should not only invest in parks for the wealthier residents.

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<sup>89</sup> Garvin 39.

<sup>90</sup> Avishay Artsy. (24 July 2012). Grand Park Set to Be Unveiled. *KCRW Which Way LA*.

<sup>91</sup> Green 2.

Concern also exists that the park does not exist for the underserved people of LA, but rather for business interests.<sup>92</sup> García expressed his concern that the development firm, *The Related Companies*, agreed to contribute \$50 million towards the park since it would boost tourism, economic activity, and real estate values; Grand Park may not be a gift from The Related Companies as much as it is an investment for their firm.<sup>93</sup> Many parks boost the economic vitality of a town, but if economic stimulus from new public parks revives the surrounding area in ways that compromises other people's access, then the space risks becoming unwelcoming.

Other business interests of the park include using the park as a space for the film industry. The park currently rents space out to film producers and initially asked for \$20,000 a day for each block of the park used.<sup>94</sup> Current rates for winter 2013 are between \$2000 and \$6000 or \$12,000 for the entire park.<sup>95</sup> The renting of space does help support the park financially and so far, there have not been enough filming projects to cause public outcry. But the rental of space presents a concern: this "public" space can be privatized by anyone with enough means to do so. Some park supervisors have expressed concerns that too much filming would restrict public access to this space.<sup>96</sup> But County Chief Executive William Fujioka hopes to encourage the LA Board of Supervisors to support increased filming at the park.<sup>97</sup> It is a complicated situation that deserves more research. How are the profits from the park rental distributed? Is the public benefiting in any way from this filming endeavor? Will there be a limit to the number of days each year that the park can be rented out? Given that the privatization of public spaces leads to more exclusive areas that are hardly public, these questions are important to discuss. Grand Park needs to develop ways to support itself financially while not compromising its vision of being "the park for everyone."

Grand Park is not alone in this fine balance between park reclamation and the privatization of space. Bryant Park in New York City faces similar concerns. While both cities are becoming more heterogeneous, their public spaces have become more homogeneous.<sup>98</sup> Some

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<sup>92</sup>Why Brown Gave Redevelopers a Haircut: LA Weekly Quotes City Project. (8 August 2011). *The City Project*.

<sup>93</sup> Artsy 2.

<sup>94</sup>Abby Sewell. (4 December 2013). Park Hosts Few Film Projects. *LA Times*.

<sup>95</sup> Sewell AA3.

<sup>96</sup> Sewell AA3.

<sup>97</sup> Sewell AA3.

<sup>98</sup>Chan Sewell. (14 August 2007). Is Gentrification Transforming the City's Spaces? *The New York Times*.



scholars think this trend happens because gentrification tends to create places that are less welcoming to diverse audiences. Gentrified spaces often become “controlled and privatized, with less opportunity for random interaction.”<sup>99</sup> When parks gentrify a given space, they often create an elite landscape that is also less “public” to those of lower incomes. Different cultures become underrepresented in the bordering shops. For example, a pet boutique bordering Grand Park recently replaced a thrift shop; the new boutique reveals the wealthier clientele that the park is prioritizing.<sup>100</sup> A Starbucks coffee shop near the fountain also caters to higher incomes who can afford a \$3.50 chai tea latte; the choice of having a Starbucks in the park also contrasts with the park’s vision of a healthy space of recreation. A better alternative would be to promote more affordable and socially interactive food options with independent businesses like the food trucks and farmer’s markets that reflect a diverse array of tastes, cultures, and prices. These trucks align more with the park’s vision as a global gathering place than Starbucks does.

Gentrification can be a positive economic trend that results in more desirable and healthy living environments. For this reason, many low-income communities want parks and Grand Park is no exception. But if Grand Park boosts surrounding real estate values too much, it runs the risk of displacing local low-income residents who could no longer afford to live near the park. Issues like displacement fuel further social injustice, as individuals and families move to areas that typically have even less open space. With each new park or neighborhood experiencing economic revitalization, a local low-income neighborhood might be suffering from displacement. To guard against displacement, it is vital to incorporate plans for affordable housing near public parks and revitalized downtowns.<sup>101</sup>

Grand Park is a grand idea and more time will reveal even further how it impacts the surrounding community. It did receive the 2013 Community Impact Award from the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual Los Angeles Architectural Awards.<sup>102</sup> This honor is significant, and gentrification may be less of a concern for Grand Park if the immediate community continues to have more access to the space and benefit from the events it offers.

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<sup>99</sup> Chan 2.

<sup>100</sup> Jennifer Medina (18 August 2012). Los Angeles Puts a New Park at Its Heart. *The New York Times*.

<sup>101</sup> Ramya Sivasubramanian Interview.

<sup>102</sup> Hilton Foundation Headquarters Wins Honors at 43rd Annual L.A. Architectural Awards (12 June 2013). *LABC*.



Image 2.4. Park visitors lounging in the pink chairs. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*



Image 2.5. A sign for the Paleotropical miniature garden. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

Park development and enhancement should occur in all communities. Reclaiming the unused open space in the civic center of Los Angeles as a public park is great, but it is important to consider who really benefits from this space. The park's agenda and venues need to reflect its bold vision as the park for everyone. More so, additional park development should occur, if not be prioritized, in low-income communities as well as the civic centers of downtowns. Downtown Los Angeles needs a park in any open, unused, or degraded space. With the numerous personal, communal, and ecological benefits that these spaces offer, it would only benefit the city to redistribute more funding to the reclamation of more public spaces. If financial investments continue in Grand Park, it is only fair to allocate more funds for the creation and enhancement of parks in park-poor and low-income communities.

Well-implemented public parks can offer safe spaces that address the unequal distribution of undesirable and desirable spaces. Unlike Vista Hermosa where the positive reallocation of space is clear, Grand Park offers a more complicated existence. Even if the developers of the park have the best intentions in their vision of reclaiming this space, the multiple business incentives jeopardize how public and accessible the park actually is. The relationship between park reclamation and the unintentional privatization of space is complicated. While downtown revitalization is a central goal of Grand Park, the act of reviving downtowns does not have to result in spaces unwelcoming to those of less financial means.

The popularity of Grand Park reflects the demand and need for more public spaces throughout Los Angeles. In terms of usage, Grand Park currently has large numbers of people from a variety of backgrounds using it. For the park's ultimate success though, it needs to ensure that diverse people continue to feel welcome and have access to the park as the city evolves. Park reclamation does not have to gentrify areas or cater to wealthier neighborhoods, and perhaps Grand Park will morph into a more accessible space with time. Analyzing the demographics of the park's visitors could help monitor the situation and discern the extent that the space is becoming a homogenous space. If so, then actions should be taken to ensure that park fulfills its vision of serving as a space that welcomes and represents the diversity of Los Angeles.

## **CHAPTER 5: Third Case Study - Los Angeles State Historic Park (The Cornfield)**

The Cornfield wasn't ever actually a cornfield, but it has been a central part of Los Angeles' social and environmental history for centuries. A decade ago during a developer's desire to transform the abandoned rail yard to industrial warehouses, the surrounding community retaliated. Tired of perpetual injustice manifesting in the lack of safe and accessible public parks coupled with plethora of air pollution, water pollution, and visual pollution, the community fought for this park *and* won. At the base of the Elysian Hills and just a little west of Chinatown, this park now exists as an inspiring environmental justice victory that the rest of the city and country can learn from. Its complex history and hopeful future provide inspiration that other communities could also pursue environmental justice suits with confidence and success.

This land currently exists as a dusty park with sporadic trees, but the 32-acre site could become one of the most prized open spaces that the city offers (Image 3.0). Compromise over the park's design and use were central to this park's creation and continue to be critical in its management. As a brownfield, or a site containing hazardous substances and pollutants, The Cornfield reclamation also involved the removal of pollutants from its rail yard days. Of the three parks analyzed in this research, this State Park has the most potential to serve as a historical, cultural, and ecological gem.

As part of a grassroots movement involving community engagement and protest, the fight for this park shares much of the history relating to the ongoing reclamation of the 52-mile greenway along the Los Angeles River. In fact, many of the same people and organizations who spearheaded that reclamation movement were the first to recognize the LASHP property as a potential public park.<sup>103</sup> Because the park was the last open space of this size in LA, the community refused to allow this space to suffer further pollution; the proposed development would force the low-income community to suffer disproportionately from the lack of open spaces and increased exposure to pollution. At the time, Chinatown also had no public parks.<sup>104</sup> Even at the middle schools and high schools, no playgrounds, playing fields, or green space existed; even in the elementary schools, grassy fields were nonexistent.<sup>105</sup> More so, over 90% of

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<sup>103</sup> Los Angeles State Historic Park (LASHP) Master Development Plan Final EIR. (2012). *California Department of Parks and Recreation*: 22.

<sup>104</sup> The LASHP at The Cornfield. "A Historic Monument" and "A Symbol of Hope (2012). *The City Project*.

<sup>105</sup> The LASHP at The Cornfield.

the community is of color and 30% live in poverty; this is nearly double the percentage of people living in poverty throughout LA.<sup>106</sup>

When developers advocated for building warehouses on this site in 1999, the community refused to let this happen.<sup>107</sup> Over 35 civil rights, environmental, and community organizations collaborated in protest of the proposed development. An interview with Ramya Sivasubramanian, the Assistant Director of The City Project, also conveyed the role of The City Project in this parks reclamation. The sizeable strip of land, with over one million square feet, was precious to the community; but it was also appealing to profit-driven developers under the firm River Station, LLC. The \$80 million industrial park had its appeal and developers had the right to purchase the property from the landowner at that time, Union Pacific Railroad. They almost had their vision of the space succeed.<sup>108</sup>

The ultimate task during the fight to save this communal space involved convincing the state to purchase the site for use as a park. This would benefit the community and the environment. Community protests escalated into a lawsuit around this inequitable development. Uniting against the manufacturing plans, community members became immersed in the efforts of The City Project, Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), and the Chinatown Yard Alliance. As three of the most central organizations invested in the park's cause, these nonprofits gave voice to a community with a long history of corporate and spatial abuse. The leadership of civil rights advocate Robert García, through his position as Founder and Director of The City Project, was monumental. Even with his history as a successful civil rights attorney and social justice advocate, García confesses that “fighting for the simple joys of playing in the park and school field for children of color and low-income children is the hardest work” he has ever done.<sup>109</sup>

But the developers lost this battle when powerful real estate developer Ed Roski Jr. faced the community in court. Fueled by the momentum of the community involvement, The City Project cited that the developers were using discriminatory land-use policies on top of their extensive history of depriving low-income neighborhoods of parks.<sup>110</sup> Environmental justice concerns under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 supported The Cornfield's cause: the developers had not considered environmental impacts of the warehousing near the LA River or

<sup>106</sup> García, Robert (2012). “LA State Historic Park: A Deserted Railroad Yard is Transformed Yet Unfinished.” *KCET*.

<sup>107</sup> The LASHP at The Cornfield.

<sup>108</sup> Our Work: Parks for People.

<sup>109</sup> The LASHP at The Cornfield.

<sup>110</sup> The LASHP at The Cornfield.

the impact that the development would have on the surrounding community of color. Civil rights laws protect against intentional and unintentional discrimination of people of color. Whether the developers were aware of potential impacts or not, they had legal obligations to analyze their impact or the federal agencies involved would not subsidize the project. Combining this with the pressure of the lawsuit and a community who wanted a park, a settlement was reached: if someone could buy the land from them, they would back out. At the time, California State Parks had bond money and was able to purchase the land. The park opened in 2006 after five years of park planning, but a permanent design of the park has not been implemented yet.<sup>111</sup> In the spring of 2014, the park will close for construction for about a year.<sup>112</sup> During construction, various programs will inform people of the park's status and accessibility. By 2035, the full park will be developed but as soon as spring 2015, The Cornfield will re-open to the community.



Image 3.0: View of the LA Skyline from The Cornfield. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

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<sup>111</sup> LASHP Master Plan 24.

<sup>112</sup> Jim Newland. Manager of Resources & Interpretive Services at CSP. (15 November 2013). Telephone Interview.



Image 3.1: Recreational use of the park. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

With this victory praised by the LA Times as “a heroic monument” and “a symbol of hope,” the protection of this open space demonstrates how civic engagement is monumental in the creation of public parks. Not all land-use fights end with a community victory; perhaps most do not. The Cornfield victory serves as a testament and inspiration to disadvantaged communities who possess the will, as well as the power in numbers to fight spatial injustice. With the hope of creating a more equitable society, improving the quality of life, and providing an ecological refuge, this park has tremendous potential.

Referred to as both The Cornfield and the Los Angeles State Historic Park (LASHP), this site belongs to the community who fought for its existence. But it also belongs to the State Parks, and thus needs to meet the collective State Park goals of preserving and enhancing historic and ecological integrity. Balancing these goals with user interests remains a struggle that demands compromise. The interim park, as it is called, is fairly run-down with unmaintained lawns and lots of dusty foot paths. But the future park plans are promising.

The parks’ elongated shape borders the metro line on one side and industrial warehousing on the other. It is currently open to the public for low-impact recreational activities like walking, picnicking, and informal play (Image 3.1). Even within the park’s current state, visitors are using

the area as a place to relax, exercise, and experience a more open version of downtown LA. The temporary vacancy of the site also makes it a rentable space for events like music festivals and concerts; the park saves any profits it receives from renting out the space to help fund the park's future construction (Image 3.3).<sup>113</sup> An interview with Jim Newland, Manager of Resources & Interpretive Services at the California State Parks Southern Service Center, conveyed how the park balances decisions like these. Though giant venues like these are not part of most State Parks, it is a well-justified choice; the park serves as a cultural hub and increases awareness of its existence, plus the discretionary revenue makes the park plans more financially attainable.<sup>114</sup> But following construction, these events will morph into venues more reflective of the park's core values: it is a historical park that celebrates the past and present people who have used and continue to use this space. While funding has been an issue and a threat to the design and vision of The Cornfield, great plans for it still exist.

Multiple phases of the park's construction are in store, but there are only secured funds for the beginning phase. Before concluding any design, over 50 committee meetings discussed community needs and the role of the State Park with this piece of land. Because the preservation of natural and cultural resources is central to the mission of the State Parks, recreation is not the primary use of this park. So in this case, soccer fields are not in the plans for The Cornfield even though the community expressed a strong interest in having active recreational space for organized sports. Such space is not a part of the State Park's vision, and there is a school with a track and field nearby. Yet as an *urban* State Park, The Cornfield still prioritizes recreational use more so than the state's wilderness parks. So as a compromise, the state allotted half of Taylor Yard (an urban State Park also recently reclaimed) as active recreational use.<sup>115</sup> More so, any one is welcome to engage in active sports and casually play Frisbee or kick a soccer ball around in The Cornfield, as long as it is not associated with an organized sports team. Some of the local schools use the one-mile loop around the park as part as a track for running and exercise.

The overarching goal of The Cornfield is to reconnect people with the history, culture, and natural habitat of Los Angeles.<sup>116</sup> The park aims to increase park access in an especially park-poor area, but it also aims to: celebrate the cultural and historical values of the park, restore

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<sup>113</sup> Jim Newland Interview.

<sup>114</sup> Jim Newland Interview.

<sup>115</sup> Jim Newland Interview.

<sup>116</sup> LASHP Master Plan 26.



patches of native habitat, and cause a revaluation of the city's open spaces. California State Parks rarely exist in urban areas unless a site is rich in history like The Cornfield. But unlike most State Parks, resource preservation is not the sole aim of The Cornfield. This is a public open space where people can engage in the natural and cultural surroundings that shaped LA into the city it exists as today. Historical, cultural, and ecological goals all share the idea of park equality and the right for people of all backgrounds to have access to the benefits that well-designed and adequately-funded parks offer (Table 1.0 on page 29 offers a summary of these benefits). For some people, this park may be the first State Park they have experienced in centuries.

The park shares a rich history. Throughout the past centuries, various people have shared and worked this land. Yaangna, one of the largest villages of the Tongva-Gabrielino people, existed near the current park centuries ago.<sup>117</sup> Indigenous efforts to address the unequal distribution of land are also significant to this park reclamation. Tongva Chief Red Blood Anthony Morales stresses the need for open space and recreation so that indigenous peoples and children suffer less from the lack of accessible public parks.<sup>118</sup> This modern connection reinforces the park vision as a living space for the community after centuries of neglect and abuse. Though the Tongva already inhabited the city, the Spanish founded and claimed *El ciudad de la reina de Los Angeles* in 1781. This founding happened only a half mile away from the current park at El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument. The first public works project in the city of Los Angeles exists on the park's property.<sup>119</sup> Deemed the *zanja madre* or "mother trench," this ditch brought water from the Los Angeles River to El Pueblo in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Without it, the city could not have developed.

Given the rich historical, cultural, and ecological importance of this site, public landscape architects first suggested this land as a public park many years ago. In 1930, the sons of Frederick Law Olmsted proposed this site as a much-needed public park in their report titled "Park, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region."<sup>120</sup> While it would take some 80 years for their hope to actualize at The Cornfield site, the park now exists with promising future plans once development begins.

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<sup>117</sup> LASHP Master plan.

<sup>118</sup> García, LA State Historic Park.

<sup>119</sup> LASHP Master plan.

<sup>120</sup> James Brausell. (27 February 2012). Full Cornfield Park Project Finally Moving Forward. *Curbed Los Angeles*.



Image 3.2: Industrial zoning in the background, bordering the park. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*



Image 3.3: Circus tent from a previous concert held at the park. *Photo by Allie Rigby, 2013.*

The historic and ethnic diversity of this site is also significant. Throughout later centuries, people of Black, Mexican, and Chinese descent worked the land in search of gold and as workers in the rail yard since the 1830s. As the anchoring site of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company's River Station and railroad yard, this land was central to city's growth.<sup>121</sup> This station grew at the cost of the land and communities who suffered the most from the pollution of the land and the industrialization of the city. When the rail yard days declined, various agricultural uses abounded largely fueled by Italian and French immigrants who used the site as a vineyard. Despite its deceiving name, The Cornfield never existed as a corn field aside from artist Lauren Bon's *Not a Cornfield* installation. After the park's initial success against the developers, Bon planted rows of corn throughout the park as a living sculpture of sorts and provocative art piece. But even before the park's official existence as a public park,

With only a \$30 million budget for this new park, California State Parks had to refuse their first-choice design firm who developed a beautiful—but \$150 million—vision of the park. With the occurrence of the Great Recession from 2007-2009, along with the state shutting down bond projects for a year, the State Park system created its own design team with its tightened budget of \$18 million. Far from being defeated, those involved modified The Cornfields' original plans into a more financially feasible endeavor. Four concept elements of the park exist: a cultural activities area, a recreational open space, a garden open space, and a natural open space.<sup>122</sup> The first area will inform visitors of the cultural heritage of this land. Recreational trails, picnic areas, interpretive features and shade structures comprise the second listed area. The garden open space area will contain gardens and garden, whereas the natural open space area will feature restored native habitats.

The City Project hopes the new design will connect the land to the struggles and histories of its diverse surrounding communities.<sup>123</sup> To make this connection more vivid, interpretation of archaeological features will be installed throughout the park, rather than via one central museum. LA already has many museums, some of which are struggling to remain open, so designers of this park did not want to create another.<sup>124</sup> This planning philosophy aligns with the park's vision to interpret more archaeological history *in situ*, where the visual surroundings can enhance the

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<sup>121</sup> LASHP Master Plan

<sup>122</sup> LASHP Master Plan.

<sup>123</sup> García, LA State Historic Park.

<sup>124</sup> Jim Newland Interview.

sense of place and time that have evolved with the land itself. In addition to part of the original *zanja madre*, the remains of a rail road roundhouse from the 1870s also exist on the property. Rendering this archaeological sites accessible via multiple forms of media including interpretive signs, lectures and Smartphone applications, is a central part of the park's vision. This area has been a cultural hub for centuries and now the park will be able to continue that legacy of serving as a place of gathering and cultural exchange.

In addition to calling out several interpretive venues, the master plan cites a 14-foot-tall elevated walkway, providing an alternative perspective of the park and its archaeological sites. Walkways, jogging trails, and interpretive trails will wind through the park. Micro-spaces within the park include a children's play area, a "Storytelling Circle" amphitheatre, an exercise area, group gathering areas, benches, picnic tables, bike racks, drinking fountains, trash and recycling bins, and two parking lots holding 75 cars each.<sup>125</sup> The amphitheatre complete with a campfire ring cannot be built until more funding becomes available. Over 300 native trees already exist throughout the park, with some 550 additional native trees to be planted in the near future.<sup>126</sup> Current native habitat is degraded, but plans include a "demonstration" wetlands area, bioswales that serve as stormwater basins, and a habitat area with a boardwalk.<sup>127</sup> Grass, shrubs, and both irrigated plants and drought-tolerant plants are part of the immediate plan. Though public art is sparse throughout the park, planners may wish to use art as a way to expression the general theme of connectivity and celebrating the historical and cultural backbone of Los Angeles.

Once the second phase receives funding, more elaborate park plans can take effect. Besides using the revenue from renting space to negotiate funding issues, the park is also working with UCLA, which has a more stable funding base and ability to raise money. All parks are part of a long-term reclamation movement and The Cornfield is no exception to this. The complete impact of the park cannot fully be measured since the park's plans have yet to be implemented. But as a model of community engagement and collaboration with socio-environmental justice organizations, this park is a success story for the surrounding community and environment. Since the State Parks acquired the park in 2001, the interim park has been open and well-used by the community. The creation of this park also raised awareness of the

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<sup>125</sup> LASHP Master Plan.

<sup>126</sup> LASHP Master Plan.

<sup>127</sup> LASHP Master Plan.

obligation to conduct an Equity Analysis under the Civil Rights laws.<sup>128</sup> This process requires a clear description of what a development project plans to do with a space while also considering alternative uses of the space. Social and environmental impacts on all communities, especially communities of color or low-income, are required. If disproportionate impacts are an issue, then the development plan needs to address that. By evaluating potential public health risks, pollution, and spatial injustices, this analysis prevents illegal or unethical development from occurring. Although the request for an Equity Analysis is a huge reason the park at The Cornfield won the lawsuit, there remains a lack of awareness of this legal requirement.<sup>129</sup>

By reinforcing the need for this analysis, The Cornfield serves as an example to other communities and organizations of how to prevent illegal and harmful development from occurring. While the economic downturn affected The Cornfield's ability to progress on the timeframe they wanted, the park has still served and will continue to serve the community. As a historic park, The Cornfield with all of its interpretive components, will tell the story of many cultures and people who shaped, and continue to shape LA.<sup>130</sup> As a major public open space, the interested parties hope that the completed park will serve as a gathering space for people of all backgrounds to celebrate the past, present, and future of Los Angeles.

## **CHAPTER 6: Further Discussion**

Reclaimed public spaces need to maximize user accessibility *and* balance multiple user needs in order to support the vision of a more sustainable and just city. Vista Hermosa Natural Park, Grand Park, and Los Angeles Historic State Park all share the vision of a more healthy and equitable city that redresses centuries of spatial injustice. As these parks, each to some degree, demonstrate, this multiple-benefits approach can strengthen the positive impact of the park. For example, native trees can create a calming space while also reducing air pollution, sequestering carbon dioxide, and providing habitat for wildlife. These benefits are summarized in Table 1.0 on page 29. While currently there is no well-agreed upon measure that quantifies park success, those involved in park justice efforts focus on maximizing benefits in three realms: personal, communal, and ecological. Monitoring the number of visitors, the diversity of visitors, and the variety of visitor activities can also reveal the visitor accessibility and engagement with the park.

<sup>128</sup> Ramya Sivasubramanian Interview.

<sup>129</sup> Ramya Sivasubramanian Interview.

<sup>130</sup> LASHP Master Plan.

Accessibility is the foundation of park justice and reclamation movements. For any site to have user diversity and success, people of various incomes, ethnicities, ages and abilities need access to the shared space. People of varied backgrounds also need to feel welcome and comfortable in the park. In this way, access does not only mean a geographical closeness to the park, but also a welcoming atmosphere and viable forms of transportation to the park for those who do not live near it. If a particular group is excluded from the park's audience, then the park has failed in its attempts to create a more equitable living environment. Incorporating a multiple-benefit approach to park design into existent parks and future parks enhances the success a park experiences. Park development is more complicated than rendering a site open to public use: awareness of the park's existence and development of a sense of belonging must also exist in order to encourage the widespread use of a park.

Social inclusion of diverse audiences may serve as the biggest influence that affects the accessibility of a public park. As Juda Baca, a Los Angeles based mural artist and community organizer, summarizes,

“If public parks are not accessible to the diversity of all people, then what spaces are?

Where can people meet and share the sense that they are citizens of a common land?

Where do we find places of respite, open places to meet that speak to a shared sensibility about what it means to be a citizen of our city, of our state and country?”<sup>131</sup>

As Baca's quote and this study support, the value of urban space is immense for intersecting forms of health that influence each other. For example, the communal health that a park enhances by providing a sense of place and a shared gathering space helps people develop a connection with their surroundings. The more people who develop this attachment to a park, the more likely people are to defend the park if any threats like park closure arise. More so, the more people are attached to a park, the more people feel connected to each other, to their city, and to their environment. This sense of belonging and city pride are vital to personal, communal, and ecological well-being.

In an age where common land is rare, especially in the urban core cities, public parks serve as one of the most effective ways of addressing spatial injustice. Each of the researched parks brought a much-needed change to a previously degraded area, especially Vista Hermosa

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<sup>131</sup>Robert García and Ramya Sivasubramanian. (21 November 2013). L.A. River Restoration Environmental and Health Justice Alternative. *KCET*.

Natural Park and Los Angeles State Historic Park. The reclaimed space at Vista Hermosa balanced the need for playing fields and organized recreational space with the need for wilder spaces and habitat restoration. It also did so without bringing unwanted changes to the community, largely as a result of listening and incorporating communal ideas into the design and implementation of the park. The crowds at Grand Park reveal the demand for more cultural hubs and communal gathering spaces; however the lack of ecological benefits and the social concerns like gentrification beckon further analysis. Requiring biannual reports on user demographics and needs would help monitor the access of the park. Lastly, the communal engagement against development at The Cornfield, and the park's Master Plan, reveal a highly successful reclamation effort that strives to preserve and celebrate ecological and cultural heritage. As its story confirms, involvement with park justice on any level, whether as a community resident or as staff at the State Parks, can affect change. When The Cornfield reopens in 2015, it will be an exciting space to experience and analyze further.

Healthy parks support healthy children who become healthy adults, who then form stronger and healthier communities. This positive social cycle should not be limited based on people's income and color. Public parks offer incredible hope for a more sustainable and equitable future that forms a positive feedback loop. As Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú Turn eloquently explains,

“It is very important that our children grow up healthy. The more they run, the happier they are. The more they play together with other children, the better people they will be in the future. Parks and school yards are a place for peace, a place where life-long values are built. Community activism to build parks and schools is a way of saying no to violence, no to war. Peace and hope are part of our children's education and culture.”<sup>132</sup>

Park reclamation has evolved significantly in downtown Los Angeles, yet many communities throughout Los Angeles County still suffer from spatial injustice and the lack of parks. Thus, the appearance of pocket parks throughout the city offers further hope that the reclamation movement is gaining momentum in Los Angeles. Park reclamation is often part of a long-term vision, a process requiring communal support, local government support, and time in order to offset centuries of spatial abuse. *Reclaiming* the land on behalf of social and

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<sup>132</sup> García and White, Healthy Parks.

environmental justice is only the first step towards a successful reclaimed public space. It is equally crucial to design an inviting space and monitor the new park's accessibility and impact.

Overall, this research found the reclamation movement in downtown Los Angeles successful thus far and very promising. To multiply the positive impact of successful parks, attention to other degraded and abandoned sites should be granted. Empowerment in low-income communities and communities of color can occur, especially if those developing an open space have not produced Equity Analysis Reports. Without these reports, development is illegal, though there is often a lack of enforcement ensuring these reports occur. The concluding points of this research are summarized below.

#### Concluding Points for Public Park Advocates:

1. Require biannual reports on user demographics and needs
  - i) Number of visitors, diversity of visitors, visitor activities, etc.
2. Defend *Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964*
  - i) Burden of negative impacts from development cannot disproportionately affect communities of color or low-income
  - ii) Developers are required produce Equity Analysis Reports
3. Reclaim more degraded spaces as public parks that maximize personal, communal, and ecological benefits
  - i) Funding for State Parks and park advocacy organizations like The City Project and City Parks Alliance

Reclamation rarely shows immediate economic benefits unlike commercial or residential development. However as part of a more holistic and long-term vision of a space, park creation and enhancement can transform cities over time, and it has. In terms of park justice, Minneapolis and New York City reflect much more equitable cities that understand the benefits and values of public parks and try to ensure that many people have access to such spaces. If Los Angeles continues the trend of incorporating more green spaces into its urban landscape, then it could become the West Coast's New York as far as thriving and valued communal spaces. With each new public park in Los Angeles, the city rectifies its park-starved legacy.



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