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Democratic Design

in the

Pacific Rim
 Japan, Taiwan, and the United States

Edited by
 Randolph T. Hester
 Corrina Kweskin



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Making a Community's Place:

The *Case* of Davis' Central Park and Farmers' Market

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The Wednesday "Picnic in the Park" event brings thousands of people to the park on summer evenings.

Introduction

I have written on the importance of being proactive in one's professional life, linking participatory action with visionary thought (Francis 1998a). As someone who has always tried to use participation in my own design and planning work, I have come to know the limits of participation. I have learned first hand that participation can sometimes result in ideas directly in conflict with established views of what makes good places. I have come to believe that strong vision needs to accompany participatory practice to create a more sustainable and democratic world.¹

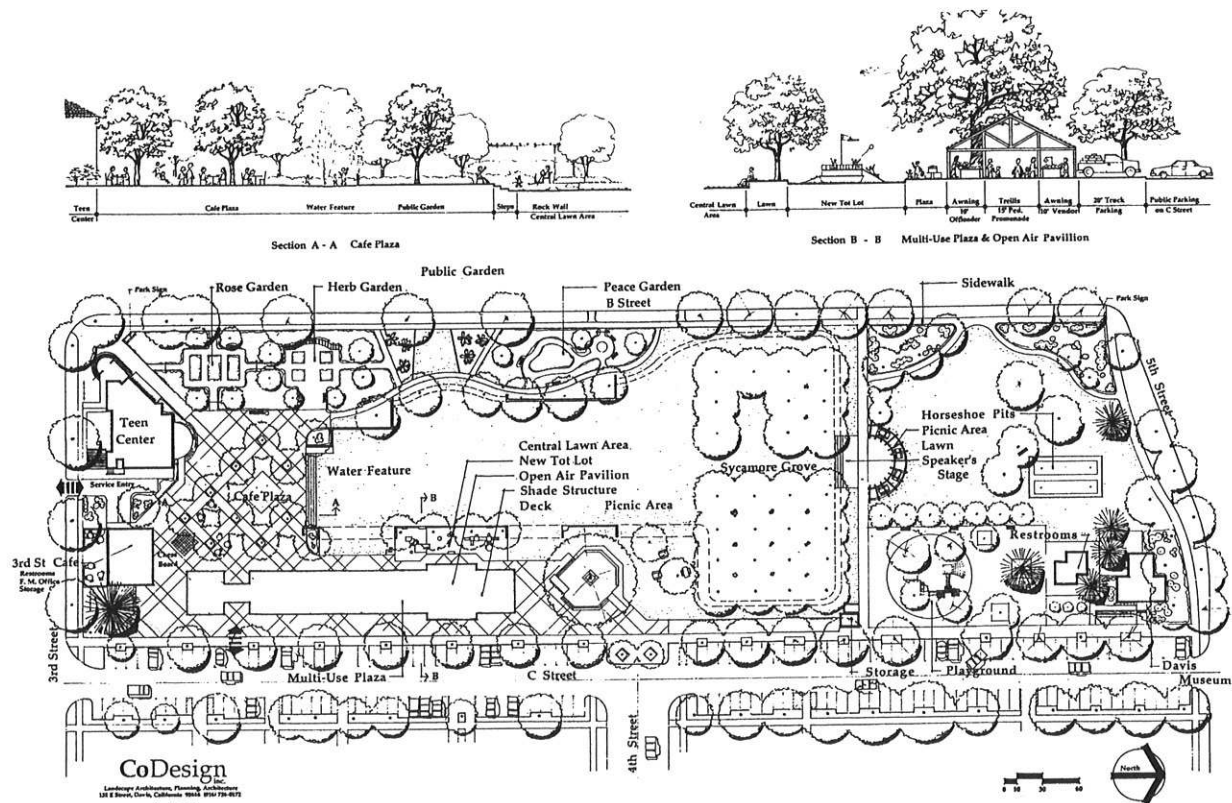
One project I have been involved with for over fifteen years, Davis' Central Park and Farmers' Market, exemplifies this approach. While not aware of this as "proactive practice" when I first started imagining and designing the park, looking back I realize that its ultimate success may be due as much to a clear vision as strong user participation. In this story are some of the

lessons about making successful community places as well as the pitfalls that are often found in these kinds of projects.

Davis' Central Park and Farmers' Market resulted from a ten-year community open space design process. The goal was to create a mixed-use urban park like no other in Davis, a community of about 50,000, which is internationally recognized as a sustainable city. The approach combined participatory design with advances from research on contemporary public space. The built result is a heavily used and popular downtown urban park.

Beginnings

The Central Park project began in a rather modest way in 1984. The Davis City Council had voted to turn the block square park site adjacent to the historic Central Park into a shopping mall. It had negotiated an agreement with a developer and had begun the final environmental review process. In my urban and



CENTRAL PARK REVISED MASTER PLAN

C I T Y O F D A V I S C A L I F O R N I A

community design studio at the University of California, Davis in 1983, I decided to explore alternatives to the mall and see if the students and I could build community interest in doubling the size of the existing Central Park. Inspired by our park proposal, a local group called Save Open Space (SOS) was formed to try and pass a referendum to force the city to develop the site as an expanded Central Park. After a long and contentious election, the community voted to create the park. I was hired with my firm, CoDesign, in 1987 to develop a Master Plan using community involvement, by then standard practice in Davis. We were given a complicated program consisting of a permanent covered pavilion and plaza for Davis' popular Farmers' Market, a teen center, a café, a children's play area, a central lawn area, a fountain, and new parking on a street adjacent to the expanded park. After the Master Plan was approved, our firm was hired by the city to design and implement the park in several phases. The first phase was completed in 1990 for \$1.5 million and the second in early 1994 for \$500,000. The third and final phase, construction of the park café, is still uncompleted.

The original vision

My original interest in planning Central Park was to create a new kind of urban park incorporating emerging ideas of public space (Jackson 1981; Francis et al. 1984) and of public life (Brill 1989; Carr et al. 1992; Turner 1996). While we know much more today about what makes an urban park work (Garvin and Berens 1997; Cooper-Marcus and Francis 1997; Gehl and Gemzøe 1996), in 1987 there was a predominant view that urban parks were simply grass and trees. I wanted to develop something different, especially since Central Park was already valued by the community and I wanted to establish it as Davis' central community place.

We developed a number of visions for the park, some taken from the community design process, others gleaned from past research as well as my own design experience with other projects. When we began the design of the park, I had just concluded some research projects on the comparison of community

gardens with parks (Francis 1984), the possibility of putting gardens in parks (Francis 1989a), and the role of control in making good public space (Francis 1989b). I wanted to integrate these ideas into the design of Central Park and the Farmers' Market. I also had goals of making the park a learning landscape (Adams 1990; Stine 1997), a town center (Calthorpe 1993), a "familiar" place (Brower 1988), a downtown place with nearby nature (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989), and a remembered place (Chawla 1986; Schama 1995; Lyndon and Moore 1996). In addition, I wanted the park to be a multiple-use, people place (Oldenburg 1989; Carr et al. 1992), a modern day pleasure ground (Schenker 1997), a community event (Sommer 1989), a child's adventure place (Nabhan and Trimble 1994), a park that would work for teens without discouraging other users (Owens 1988), and a place where people could interact with plants (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Lewis 1997). Looking back, these seem like overly ambitious goals, especially for just one place but many were in fact accomplished, at least to some degree.

We also knew what we did not want the park to be. We were concerned that the park not be over-designed. We also did not want it to be overly built up with excessive paving and buildings. Even more importantly, we did not want it to be an urban theme park (Jackson 1981; MacCannell 1992; Sorkin 1992; Marling 1997).

Participation

In planning and designing the park, we utilized a number of well-established and lesser-known methods of participation (Hester 1990; Hart 1997). These included structured workshops, scored walking tours, observation, (Zeisel 1991), models and simulations (Bosselmann 1998), and community surveys. Each method resulted in a different kind of knowledge and not all were directly useful for design. One of the most useful methods was a community design workshop held in the existing park next to the Saturday Farmers' Market.² This workshop attracted a large turnout of seasoned community participants as well as interested



The design process began with a participatory workshop held in the park.

people and helped to establish the overall Master Plan framework for the park.³

Programming

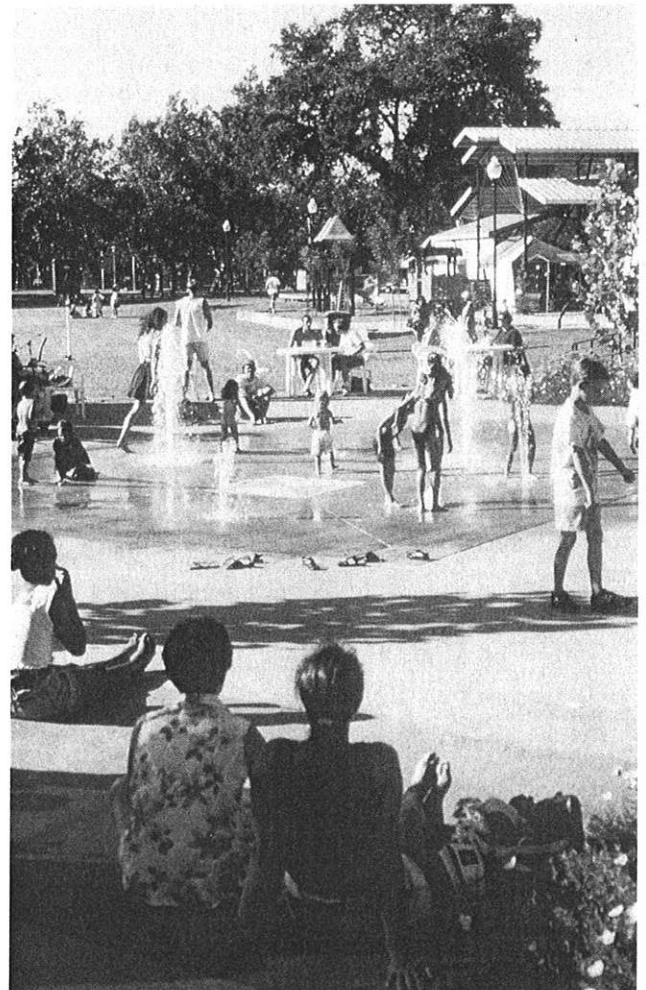
The City Council had a tendency to add elements during the process, many of which did not fit the space or original vision. Surprisingly, one benefit of the participation process was to help limit the number of program elements. The final program elements for the park included the following:

- Closing and removing Fourth Street, which separated the site from the existing park.
- Constructing the first permanent Farmers' Market pavilion in a park in California.
- Designing a participatory fountain in a new Central Park plaza. The fountain has since come to be called "the beach" by kids and parents. People arrive early in the morning with towels and coolers to spend hot Davis days at the fountain.
- Establishing a multiple use public space integrating diverse functions including a teen center building, a Farmers' Market pavilion, a market deck under the heritage oak, a public garden, and new children's play areas.
- Creating a "great lawn" area that serves as a flexible activity space for weekly events such as political rallies, concerts, art fairs as well as informal games and relaxation.
- Collaborating with artists to create several landscape art projects including a series of granite seat walls to provide extensive sitting space.

- Creating a public garden with diverse plantings including a peace garden, an herb garden, and a drought tolerant garden that will attract butterflies and birds.

Design and planning

After the two-year master planning process and approval by the City Council, final design work began. This stage involved continued community meetings and individual design work with interest groups such as the Farmers' Market board and teen center staff. Especially complicated was design of the Farmers' Market area as there were very precise requirements for trucks off loading and seller space. We sometimes worked out conflicts or problems on-site with dimensions laid out in chalk on the bare site. Surprisingly, the overall design for the park has held and required little modification over time.



The plaza fountain is a popular gathering place for children and families.



An early morning view of Central Park and the market structure.



Mayor Julie Partansky's group regularly performs in the park.



The Public Garden was designed as a stroll garden with a number of different theme gardens.

Keeping the vision

Proactive practice often means paying close attention to a project over time. This was true in our case since preserving the vision for Central Park required fighting and winning several space battles.⁴ The first battle was an effort by the Farmers' Market board to keep the existing Fourth Street open, which would have divided the park into two pieces separated by a road. Another battle was the proposal to locate a large

Science Center building on the southeast corner of the park, which would have significantly reduced the amount of open space and the size of the Farmers' Market pavilion. Early in the design process for the market pavilion, the Farmers' Market board decided they wanted to enclose their proposed shade structure to create a very large building in the park. At another point in the process, the Davis City Council proposed putting in an enclosed, gated skateboard park. All of these proposals required continued participation, education and negotiation to maintain the original park vision. Fortunately, the Master Plan was strong enough to withstand attempts to stuff more elements into the park or deviate from its main goals.

Modifying the vision

A few times the Master Plan did get changed, mostly to the benefit of the park but not always. One positive example was the addition of a children's carousel as a fundraiser for a local education group. The hand painted and peddle-powered carousel was sited where a small plaza had been proposed and has proved to be a positive and popular addition to the park. The most significant change has been an effort to eliminate the café due to objections from downtown café owners. The café has not been built to date, leaving the southeast corner of the park undeveloped and oddly empty. How this will play out in the future is uncertain.

Use

For me, the true test of how well an urban place works is how it is used (or not used). From day one Central Park has been heavily used. It functions as a green space, a town square, a place of gathering, a setting for protest, and an outdoor living room for the community of Davis. Our design goal was to preserve the historic qualities of the older park while addressing the need for a major public space for the community and region. For example, we extended the lower lawn area over 300 feet to the south so that it would appear that Fourth Street had never gone through the middle. We attempted to combine a safe and secure environment where people could shop and meet



The Farmers' Market pavilion is used on Saturday mornings and Wednesday evenings.

friends in the market, sit quietly in the garden, plaza, or Sycamore grove, play in the fountain and two playgrounds, ride the carousel, relax on the "great lawn," or sit on the many landscape walls. I think these goals have been largely achieved. Times of greatest use are during the Saturday morning or Wednesday evening Farmers' Market when literally thousands of people use the park for shopping, talking, meeting friends and neighbors, sitting, or listening to the variety of performers. The park also supports a wide diversity of uses and users. Its main problem has been over use. As the town grows, this problem will undoubtedly intensify.

Evaluation

But how well does the design really work? Frequently we gauge design success by photos and awards. Rarely are designed places

systematically evaluated. A University of California, Davis graduate student, Suzanne Monroe Santos, conducted a post occupancy evaluation (POE) of the park in 1995 for a graduate seminar that I teach in public space and public life. She found the park and market to be heavily used by a wide variety of people. This is confirmed in a study by the environmental psychologist Robert Sommer who observed a total of 4,400 people in the park on a market day, almost one tenth of the current population of Davis (Sommer 1989). The POE also showed that the park is highly valued by its users. For example, in the local newspaper's annual survey of best places in Davis, Central Park and the Farmers' Market repeatedly have come out on top, along with the University's Arboretum. The success of the design can be seen in increased sales and numbers of visitors to the Farmers' Market. The board of Davis' Farmers' Market reported that sales at the market increased by 30% to over \$2 million a year after moving into the park.

Some lessons learned

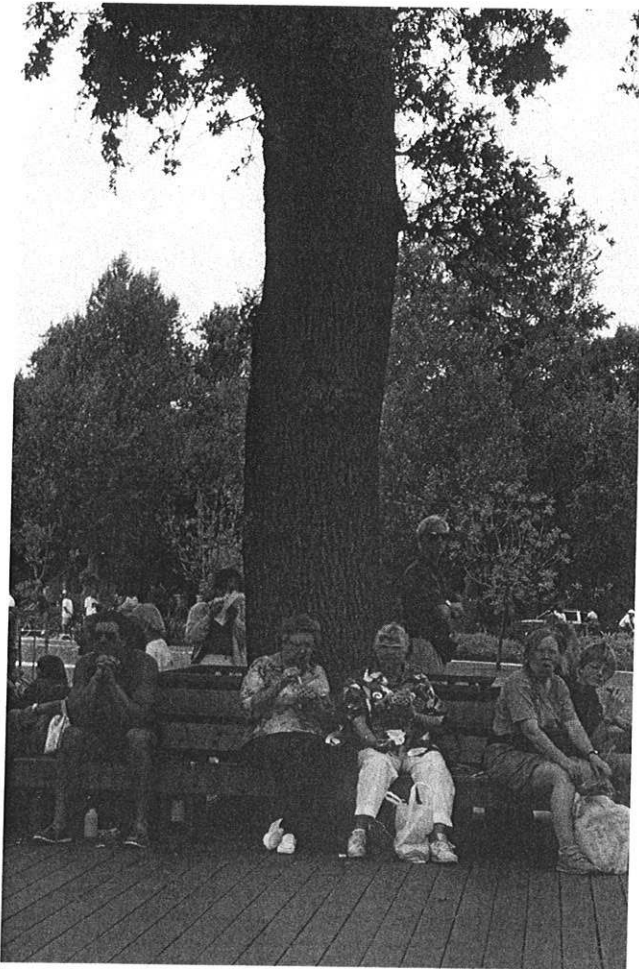
There is much established knowledge about what makes good community places (Girling and Helphand 1994; Garvin and Berens 1997; Groth and Bressi 1997). Research about the design of urban places can be an effective tool in participatory design. I have found that research results, if well presented, can help guide a participatory process away from more exclusionary or restrictive ideas.

Could this project success be possible without an extensive participation process? In this case, I doubt it as the listening step of the participatory process led us to make some critical design decisions. For example, I learned from the first workshop that the existing lowered Sycamore Grove was a valued place. This gave me the idea of extending this lowered lawn area into the new part of the park. The cohesiveness of the design today is due in part to this major feature. The other benefit of the participatory process is that it helped develop an ongoing constituency of community advocates for the park. Without them, the project may not have been completed.

Some final points about theory

Telling stories through case studies is extremely useful for informing practice (Francis 1998b). Case studies can guide design but they are particularly useful in developing theory about how places work. Stories like Central Park can develop new approaches to urban design and can inform the larger debate on the design of urban places.⁵

In the case of designing Central Park, I have learned some important lessons. First, a strong design alone is not enough. A designer needs to be involved over the long-term (often after all the design fees have been collected) and keep a watchful eye. He or she needs to understand that good urban places evolve over time.⁶ In a day when some people spend more time in cyberspace than real space (Mitchell 1995), there are larger community issues that place-making must address.



A late afternoon gathering on the Heritage Oak tree deck.

What can this case contribute to advancing the practice of participatory design elsewhere? For me, the most important lesson is the need for making new community places, something that transcends place and culture. What I have learned is that making a community's place requires strong participation in addition to healthy doses of vision and persistence.

Endnotes

¹ See Randy Hester's "A Refrain with a View" (1998) and the special issue of *Places* (1998) on participation for a full review of "participation with a view."

² We were aided in this workshop by consultants Moore Iacofano Goltsman.

³ A perennial problem with participation is that it often attracts the same vocal participants without attracting broader grassroots participation.

⁴ The design of an urban place always requires a team of people to be successful. In the case of Central Park, my partners at CoDesign, Skip Mezger and Jim Zanetto, and our staff including Cheryl Sullivan and Dimitrios Georges, were instrumental. In addition, the many community members and City Council members, including Ann Evans and Mike Corbett, who continued as advocates for the park over time deserve the bulk of the credit for its ultimate and continuing success. City staff were also critical, especially Bob Cordrey and Pat Fitzsimmons.

⁵ There is a large and often contradictory literature about the design of urban places. See for example Lyndon and Moore (1996), Turner (1996), Lewis (1997), and Rowe (1997).

⁶ I am currently exploring these questions in a Graham Foundation funded book about the theory and design of urban places.

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