Pocket Parks

Alison Blake

Urban Parks

Greenacre Park, New York City, NY
photo credit:
psu9jm85100, webshots.com

Pocket parks, also known as minipark or vest-pocket parks, are urban open space at the very small scale. Usually only a few house lots in size or smaller, pocket parks can be tucked into and scattered throughout the urban fabric where they serve the immediately local population.

These diminutive parks tend to act as scaled-down neighborhood parks, but still often try to meet a variety of needs. Functions can include small event space, play areas for children, spaces for relaxing or meeting friends, taking lunch breaks. etc. They can be a refuge from the bustle of surrounding urban life and offer opportunities for rest and relaxation. However, because space is restricted and user needs are both diverse and vary throughout the day, conflicts can sometimes arise between different groups. Thus, in organizing pocket parks, designers must often work out a delicate balancing act so that all groups can use the space in peaceful co-existence.

One of the unique and exciting characteristics of pocket parks is that they may be created out of vacant lots or otherwise forgotten spaces. Many pocket parks are the result of community groups, private entities or foundations reclaiming these spaces for the benefit of the local neighborhood. Unfortunately, they are sometimes easier to create than to maintain because without functional design, community support, use and maintenance, they may fall into disrepair.

The ecological functions of pocket parks are probably limited as they are typically designed for heavy use by people and because they are typically located in dense urban areas. However, they do present opportunities for increasing the amount of permeable surfaces throughout the city and could also function as patches for some animals, particularly birds.

We must provide facilities for recreation, reset and relaxation that are available to all citizens in every walk of life. We must consider the urban citizen who wants his recreation within the city. We must, in particular, consider the pressin gneed of the low-income families living amid the congestion, noise, drabness, and unbroken monotony of asphalt and brick characteristic of the deprived areas of our cities. Here, obviously, we have the greatest deficit of green space and recreational facilities.
Robert C. Weaver “Recreational Needs in Urban Areas” (From Whitney North Seymour Jr. An Introduction to Small Urban Spaces p3)

The midtown park may be defined as a small park- yet big enough in essence to reaffirm the dignity of the human being. Robert L. Zion

For such parks to contribute effectively to city life, they must be readily available. Further, they should not be looked upon as mere amenities. They have become necessities, and necessities must, by definition, be close at hand, easily come by. Their presence must be felt everywhere thoughout the area- on the way to work, on the way home, as well as during the lunch hour. If such a system of parks is to succeed, there must be proximity as well as profusion- one such park for each square block.
New Parks for New York Exhibit, 1963 (From Whitney North Seymour Jr. An Introduction to Small Urban Spaces p3)

Contexts

Ideally, pocket parks are closely tied into the neighborhoods they serve. By nature, they tend to be scattered and disconnected because they are usually created opportunistically. With some planning, they can be connected if they are placed along greenways or bike paths as long as they would still be visible to a sufficient number of pedestrians who are also potential users.

From an ecological standpoint, pocket parks, at best, act as very small patches. Because they need be sited in areas of heavy pedestrian traffic so they themselves remain safe and functioning, potential use by many other animal species is negligable. However, greenery within pocket parks can help regulate microclimates and act as the “lungs” of the city, while permeable surfaces increase infiltration.

The establishment of pocket parks throughout the urban environment also has the potential to benefit the overall ecology of cities because communities who have parks that meet their needs within walking distance are less likely to drive far away for the same resources, thereby reducing pollution, traffic and the consuption of resources such as oil. Along these same lines, pocket parks could relieve pressure on the same larger, more distant parks. These large parks would conceivably see fewer demands for play areas (and the other needs that pocket parks can meet), allowing them more flexibility to devote larger park areas to habitat and ecological function.

Philadelphia’s Pocket Parks:

Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Dates created: 1961-1967
Number of Parks created: 60
Sizes: 900 sq. ft. to 9,000 sq ft. (average size, around 3,000 sq. ft.)
Overseen by: Philadelphia’s Neighborhood Park Program
Uses: Play, sitting (focusing on children and the elderly)
Features: Climbing structures, areas for exploration, bright colors, community involvement, basketball courts, flower or vegetable gardens, “tot lots,” etc.

Philadelphia was one of the first cities to begin developing pocket parks within its neighborhoods. These were constructed on the site of vacant or abandoned lots that had become eyesores and were located in low-income areas that needed local open space in addition to the limited facilities already available. These parks involved the community in their design and construction and had a specific focus on childrens play areas.

Three Philadelphia Lots Transformed
photo credit: City of Philadelphia & Philadelphia Neighborhood Park Progam

Essential Elements

Small Size:

Pocket parks tend to between 1-3 lots in size, with a tendency to be larger on the west coast than on the east (Marcus, 150)

Local Community:

These parks rely on a local population for their use and often for their upkeep (to at least make sure they are maintained)

Uses/Functions

Small Events, especially neighborhood events
rest, relaxation
lunch breaks
Play, both individual and group

Elements (Not all elements can neceesarily be accomodated within any one park)

plantings, trees, often water
natural elements are a common feature of pocket parks
Play areas
Areas to SIt
Gathering places

Greenacre Park:

Size: 6,360 square feet
Location: New York City, New York
Date opened: 1971
Developed by: Greenacre Foundation
Designers: Hideo Sasaki & Harmon Goldstone
Purpose:"some moments of serenity in this busy world."
Features: Visible from the street, moveable chairs, overhead trees, greenery, a waterfall, concessions, heat lamps for cool weather

Project for Public Spaces describes the waterfall at the back of Greenacre Park by saying that it "provides a focal point and a dramatic reason to visit the park and its noise creates a sense of quiet and privacy" and that "there is shade in the summer from the trees yet their thin structure allows a beautiful dappled light to pass through."
That this level of relief from the urban environment can occur in a slot of space only .14 acres in size speaks to the amazing potential of the pocket park and why it should not be quickly dismissed as an open space typology.
Greenacre Park is a privately endowed New York park that caters mainly to professionals, tourists and shoppers. It has now been a successful open space for over thirty years, which is a testament to the quality of the design, which has all the qualities of a successful small urban space, including visibility, flexible seating, things to eat, climactic comfort (shade or heat lamps, depending on the weather), and a key location with many potential users.

Views of Greenacre Park, New York City
photo credit: Project for Public Space

It is the redevelopment of the smaller parks, reserves and street closures that makes a difference to the local community. -Roger Jasprizza

Aquisition / Implementation Mechanisms

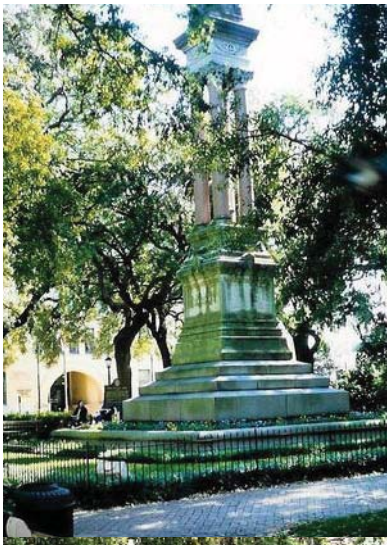
Community Activisim
Many pocket parks have been created as a result of community groups organizing and rallying for more open space and identifying spaces for parks within the urban environment.

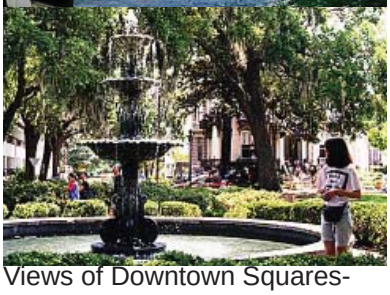
Vacant Lots and Parking Lots
Leftover spaces, othen eyesore present opportunities to become pocket parks and important amenities to communities. These are often purchased and owned by cities, with the agreement that they will be run and maintained by a foundation or other organization if the city is unable to maintain the park itself.

Foundation Owned and Run

City Organized
Land for Philadelphia's pocket parks was acquired at Sheriff's sales "at no cost other than the write-off of municipal liens, which often are unrecoverable"

Public-Private Partnerships





Views of Downtown Squares-photo credit: Project for Public Space

Downtown Squares, Savannah, GA

Size: .46 acres to 1.38 acres
Total Number of squares: 22
Location: Savannah, Georgia
Dates created: 18th & 19th century

Features: Variable by square, but range from seating, fountains, statues, mature trees, shade, monuments, gazebos, recreation areas, gardens, etc.

Although the largest of Savannah's downtown squares are somewhat larger than a traditional pocket park, the squares are notable as a comprehensive system of small parks that are an incredible asset by serving many functions and shaping the character and image of the city itself. Unlike other cities' pocket parks, which are oftern squeezed into leftover spaces, the Downtown Squares were designed with the city grid, placing them at the heart of the neighborhoods. The central location of these parks encourage heavy use and exploration by residents and visitors alike. The connectivity of this system also encourages pedestrians to walk throughout the neighborhood, rather than drive.

Patterns:

4-Block Radius User Group
People Places states that “few minipark users will walk more than four blocks, and most will come from a one-to-two-block radius. Thus, the design of a pocket park should attempt to serve the needs of this immediately local community.

Frequency:
Ideally, there will be one small park sited within every city block in order to meet the range of user group needs without causing conflict between groups.

Microclimates:
Pocket parks should be appropriately sited and arranged so as to respond to the local microclimate, thereby encouraging use.

User Needs:
Accommodate as many different users as possible, according to neighborhood needs; however be careful not to pack too many uses into such a small space that conflicts are inevitable.

Visibility
Pocket parks should be visible from the street

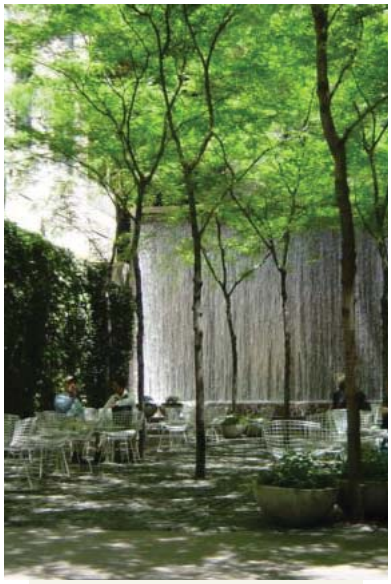
Location:
Parks should be sited in areas of heavy pedestrian traffic so that they are convenient to get to and pass through. They can be sited on block corners, mid block, or may even transect a whole block to create a pedestrian corridor.

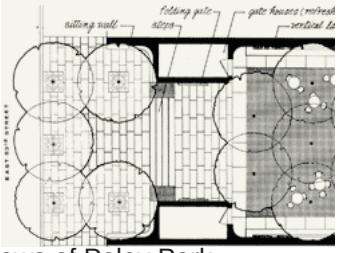
A Midtown Pocket Park: Paley Park

Size: 4,200 square feet .1acre
Location: Midtown Manhattan, New York City, New York
Date created: 1967
Designed by: Zion and Breene Associates
Funded by: William Paley, former Chairman of CBS
(the William S. Paley Foundation)
Uses: Rest & relaxation, lunch area, sight-seeing, meeting spot, etc.
Features: 17 honey locust trees, 20-foot waterfall on back wall, moveable chairs, concession stand, ivy-covered walls.

Paley Park is one of the most widely known and most successful of all pocket parks. It is designed as an oasis away from the bustle of Manhattan while still maintaining clear sight lines and a connection with the street. Unlike some pocket parks, Paley Park does not attempt to be multi-functional. It is primarily a place for sitting and relaxing and, despite catering to a limited user group, is extremely busy and popular because of the high density of workers, shoppers, and tourists in the area.

The midtown park is for adults- office workers, shoppers, tourists, and passerby. Its purpose is for rest- for the office worker who has finished lunch, a place to spend the remainder of the lunch hour; for the shopper, an opportunity to put down parcels, recline in a comfortable chair, and perhaps sip a coffee before continuing; for the tourist or passerby an oppourtunity to be refreshed visually by the scale of the place, by the dense green growth and, hopefully, by the quiet of the tiny space. Zion, p.75





Views of Paley Park
photo credit: Project for Public Space

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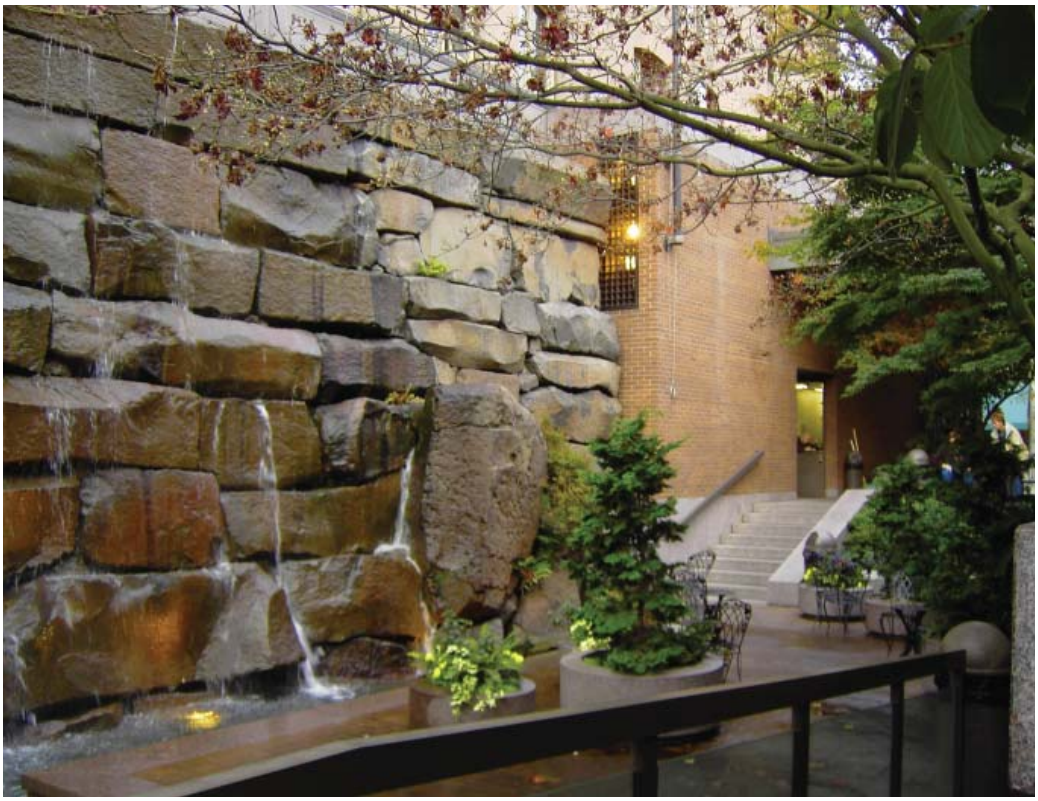

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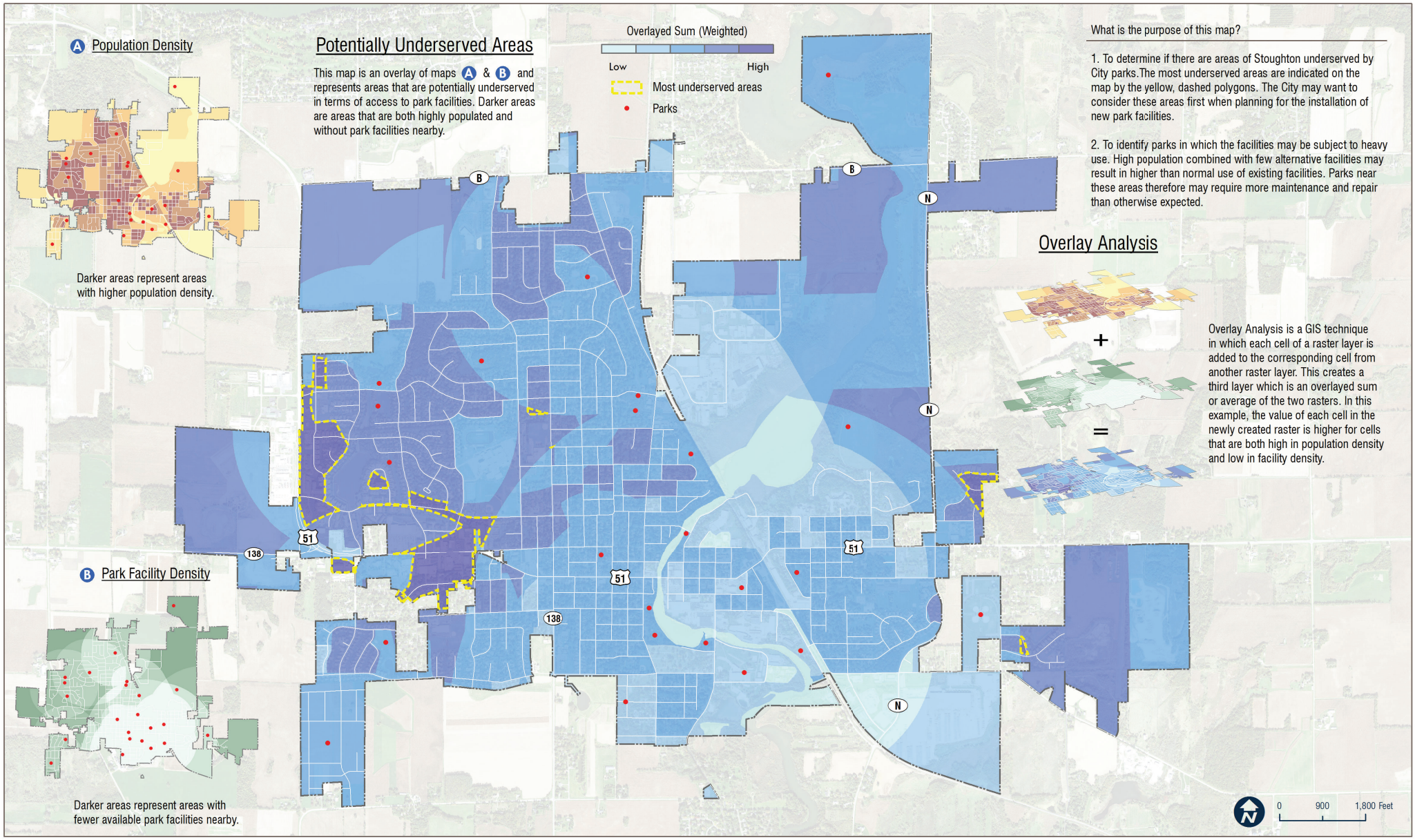

AYRES ASSOCIATES

Potentially Underserved Areas

Stoughton Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

Stoughton PARKS & RECREATION

CITY OF STOUGHTON
381 E. Main St.
Stoughton, WI 53589
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MAP 8

NORDIC RIDGE
FINAL PLAT

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