

**Robert García, Erica S. Flores, Sophia Mei-ling Chang, Elizabeth Pine: Building  
Community and Diversifying Democracy from the Ground Up:  
Strategies from the Urban Park Movement  
[to be published as chapter in forthcoming book by Robert Bullard)**

Los Angeles is park poor, with fewer acres of parks per resident than any major city in the country. All communities suffer from the lack of parks and recreation, but low-income people of color suffer first and worst. There are unfair disparities in access to parks, playgrounds, beaches, and recreation based on race, ethnicity, and class. The urban park movement is greening Los Angeles, inspired by a collective vision: a comprehensive and coherent web of parks, playgrounds, schools, beaches, and transportation that serves the diverse needs of diverse users and reflects the cultural urban landscape...

One of the broadest and most diverse alliances ever behind any issue in Los Angeles stopped warehouses to create the state park in the 32-acre Cornfield, the last vast open space in downtown Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Times called the Cornfield victory "a heroic monument" and "a symbol of hope." The alliance stopped a commercial project to create a 40 acre park as part of a planned 103-acre park in Taylor Yard as part of the greening of the 51 mile Los Angeles River...

**Los Angeles has fewer acres of parks per 1,000 residents compared to any major city in the country. Los Angeles has less than an acre of park per thousand residents, compared to the six to ten acres that is the National Recreation and Park Association standard....**

**The Cornfield, an abandoned rail yard for over 12 years, lies downtown between Chinatown on the west and the River on the east, within walking distance of City Hall, just down the hill from Dodger Stadium. Chinatown until now has had no park, and still has no middle school or high school with playgrounds, playing fields, or green space. The only elementary school there does not have a single blade of grass. ...The people of the Cornfield today are disproportionately people of color who live in poverty, have no access to a car, and have limited education. The community within a five mile radius of the Cornfield is 68% Latino, 14% Asian, 11% non-Hispanic white, and 4% African-American. Thirty percent of the population lives in poverty, compared to 14% for the State of California as a whole, and 18% for Los Angeles County. ...Fully 29% of households have no access to a car – an astonishing figure in Los Angeles, the car capital of the world. ...**

One of the central lessons of the Cornfield is the importance of building a diverse coalition that appeals to a variety of interests while staying focused on unifying goals – here, to create the park and stop the warehouses. ...The Alliance brought together an unprecedented group of over 35 community, civil rights, traditional environmental, environmental justice, religious, business, and civic organizations and leaders. ... The Alliance waged the battle for the Cornfield on multiple fronts for almost a year from November 1999 through September 2000 trying to persuade then-Mayor Richard Riordan, city planners, the City Council, Majestic [the project proponent] and federal authorities to adopt the park alternative, or at a minimum to

prepare a full environmental impact report for the warehouse proposal that would enable the community to decide between a park and the warehouses. [This included state litigation under the California Environmental Quality Act, administrative complaints against federal funding agencies alleging civil rights violations, and pressure on the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to cut off federal subsidies for the project. Eventually the developer agreed to drop its warehouse project in exchange for the state purchasing the site with money made available by a statewide park bond. California Governor Gray Davis and the state legislature state eventually allocated \$35 million to create a park in the Cornfield.]

The day after the Governor's re-election in November 2002, state park officials announced for the first time that there would be no playing fields in the Cornfield or Taylor Yard, but rather, only passive recreation or a historical park. In response, the Center for Law in the Public Interest published *Dreams of Fields*, a report outlining the policy and legal justifications for sports in urban parks, and organized a campaign to support active recreation. State Parks provides fields for soccer, polo, baseball, softball, and other organized sports in wealthy white areas like the Malibu Bluffs, Will Rogers, and Pfeiffer State Parks, as well as golf courses in Lake Tahoe and Moro Bay. Simple justice requires balanced parks with playing fields in the Cornfield and Taylor Yard. ... The State has reached an agreement to have playing fields in Taylor Yard....

People from different racial and ethnic groups use parks differently, constructing meaning for public open space based on their own values, cultures, histories and traditions, according to a UCLA study of cultural differences in the use of urban parks. For Hispanics, the park is primarily a social gathering place. African Americans, more than any other racial group, engage in sports. Non-Hispanic whites tend to value a park solely for its passive qualities – its greenness, landscaping and natural elements. Non-Hispanic whites mostly engage in reclusive, self-oriented uses. Most studies on leisure and urban recreation have delineated the activity patterns of the non-Hispanic white population, rather than non-white park users or the population as a whole...

The lack of parks in communities of color in Los Angeles is not an accident of unplanned growth, but the result of a history and pattern of discriminatory land use planning and discriminatory funding formulas. ... Poorer communities in the inner city have been historically short-changed by City funding formulas for parks and recreation programs, according to former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, a wealthy Republican businessman, in an interview in the Wall Street Journal. Money for parks and recreation is not invested throughout the City based on need, but is distributed equally among the 15 City Council districts regardless of need.

The City's Recreation and Parks Department has long recognized the inequities in park funding. "It's a pattern we all understand," according to the then-director of planning and development for the Department. "The urban areas of Los Angeles have less park facilities than the new areas or outer lying areas, where ordinances require that parks be developed when housing developments go in." Because there has been little new construction in poorer neighborhoods, those areas benefit little from the state Quimby Act, which requires developers to put money into parks near their new projects. New projects are disproportionately built in disproportionately wealthy white communities, which benefit from the Quimby funds... The

City also encourages parks to operate as businesses based on user fees. People pay to play. Since the wealthier and whiter areas of the city have disproportionate shares of park space and fee-generating facilities and programs such as tennis courts, racquetball courts, golf courses, Little League, and other organized team sports, this has created a regressive redistribution of park resources. Inner city communities do not have fee-generating amenities, and could not afford to pay for them even if they did.

The lack of access to parks in inner-city communities is aggravated by the disappearance of schoolyards as a place for children to play and join recreation programs. Due to the epic overcrowding at public schools in Los Angeles and the concomitant use of portable classrooms that devour playground space, school yards at existing schools are disappearing. Ill-served by an overburdened school system, low income youth fare even worse after school in the absence of school yards and parks....

People of color did not simply choose to live in ethnic enclaves in Los Angeles – Latinos in Sonoratown, Chinese in Old and New Chinatown, Japanese in Little Tokyo, African Americans in South Central – they were forbidden from living other places.

Chavez Ravine exemplifies the struggle by low income people of color for livable communities with parks, playgrounds, schools, and recreation. Chavez Ravine was a bucolic Latino community through the 1950s. The Olmsted Report ["Parks, Playgrounds & Beaches for the Los Angeles Region, prepared in 1930 by the sons of Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted] stressed that the Cornfield vicinity was ideal for large athletic fields: "The bottom of Chavez Ravine near the easterly end is easily accessible from the city and would make an ideal place for athletic fields of large size to serve large crowds." The Report recommended that the City of Los Angeles acquire Chavez Ravine so that the area "can be devoted to recreation and made a part of the park." The City instead forcibly evicted the residents with promises to build affordable housing there. The City razed the community and destroyed their way of life, then broke its promises to the people and sold the land to the Dodgers. The Dodgers drowned Chavez Ravine in a sea of asphalt to build Dodger Stadium and a parking lot for 50,000 cars with not a single place for children to play. ...

Creating parks and school yards instead of warehouses, power plants, and industrial projects can present win-win solutions that bring people together across racial, ethnic, income, social and political lines to improve the region...But despite the shared heroic moment in greening Los Angeles, the very issue that brought diverse advocates together has highlighted deep-seated tensions. At the surface, the struggle appears as a difference over whether the park will be used for passive or active recreation. Traditional environmental advocates believe that the park should be preserved as an area for passive appreciation of the outdoors, such as hiking on nature trails or bird watching. Social justice advocates, in contrast, insist that there should be a balanced park that includes playing fields for active recreation, such as soccer. The tension reflects cultural definitions of what a park is, and what it should be, and between which group decides and whose values prevail. ....

Further, social justice advocates were initially praised as heroes among traditional environmentalists for helping to create the park and stop the warehouses in the Cornfield by

developing the environmental justice claims. Those same advocates were then demonized by their former allies for raising those same equal justice claims to support active recreation in the park. In this power struggle, the social justice advocates were criticized as merely “playing the race card” or being insensitive to environmental needs...

Some people believe race no longer matters in contemporary society, that racial discrimination is a thing of the past. Whatever vestiges of racism remain should be adequately addressed – if at all – through protections against invidious intentional discrimination against insular minorities. Some acknowledged that the decision to build warehouses without full environmental review in the Cornfield, for example, might violate environmental laws, but refused to recognize that such policies were racially and ethnically discriminatory, despite the adverse impact the policies had on people of color and low income communities. Similarly, cutting off public access to the beach in Malibu is ostensibly justified based on concerns about traffic congestion and the lack of parking and bathrooms. It is not about keeping "those people" – people of color – off the beach...

Issues of racial and ethnic justice continue to be among the most intractable problems in our society. Among the lessons of the urban park movement are the need to revive the forgotten history of Los Angeles -- not to be confrontational and divisive -- but on the contrary to transcend interracial differences. As the victories in Prop 40, the Cornfield, Taylor Yard, and Baldwin Hills demonstrate, however, understanding and championing equal justice like creating great urban parks is a greater win for all of Los Angeles.