CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Parks can play an important role in the urban landscape. Beyond typical recreational uses, urban parks offer people a refuge from city life, a place where they can relax and get away, socialize, and be in contact with nature. At the same time, urban parks can be the focal point of their surrounding community. Whether a venue for stewardship activities or cultural fairs, a park can help bring a community together and strengthen its identity.

The contribution a park makes to its community, however, is only as great as the community’s willingness to use it. A variety of factors – from safety issues to design elements – can make a park incompatible with visitors’ needs, resulting in a space that becomes undervalued and scarcely used. Nowhere are the consequences of this greater than in urban areas where access to green space is limited.

This study examines the issues of the existing and potential role of a particular park at the riverfront in Southwest Detroit. The park does not currently serve the community effectively, providing both challenges and opportunities that are the focus of this document. The remainder of this chapter provides a brief overview of the importance of green space, the features that make a park successful, and the challenges faced by urban parks.

Benefits of parks

Numerous studies have demonstrated the ability of natural places to positively influence individual well-being. Even brief views of nature have been found to speed recovery from surgery (Ulrich, 1984), reduce anxiety (Heerwagen, 1990), and enhance one’s ability to function effectively (Kaplan, 2001). Exposure to natural environments has also been linked to the restoration of attentional resources (Kaplan, 1995) and reductions in crime and aggression (Kuo, 2001).

Green space can also lead to greater social cohesiveness. According to Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, and Brunson (1998), settings with park-like elements not only are used more often, but also strengthen neighborhood social ties. In addition, these settings can encourage a sense of ownership and empowerment in the community, leading to better monitoring of outdoor areas and supervision of children (Coley, Kuo, & Sullivan, 1997).
What makes a park successful?

In order for an urban park to flourish, it must meet the needs of its users. According to Carr, et al. (1992), public spaces that are highly used and valued by individuals have several features in common. Most importantly, valued parks are able to meet visitor's basic needs, which include access to water, seating, shelter and bathrooms, and a sense that the park is safe.

Successful parks also allow the user to relax and get away from daily life while providing engaging elements such as vegetation and scenic views (Carr, et al. 1992). In addition, these parks provide opportunities for more active uses, such as picnics, community events, and general recreation. And, finally, successful parks allow people to explore their surroundings.

The challenge of urban parks

Meeting these needs can be more challenging when an urban park caters to culturally diverse populations. There is some evidence that parks can act as a boundary between neighborhoods of different races, resulting in lack of ownership and use (Solecki and Welch, 1995). However, in some cases parks can foster appreciation of different cultures and lifestyles (Gobster, 1998). Literature on park use also demonstrates that different ethnic groups want to use park space in different ways. For instance, Latinos tend to prefer group-oriented, as opposed to individual, recreational activities often favored by Caucasians (Hutchinson, 1987; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995).

Despite the vital role parks often play within their community, meeting the variety of needs we have mentioned can be a daunting task. Faced with limited budgets and increasing demands, many city agencies barely have the financial resources to maintain parks, let alone invest in improvements. While these agencies await funding, however, other important resources go untapped. Residents and community organizations represent an overlooked asset in park revitalization efforts. When included as partners in decision-making and park upkeep, community members can bring an incredible amount of insight and energy to bear on these situations.
Riverside Park faces many of the challenges typical to urban parks. While the park has many positive features, including its riverfront location, it has become an undervalued and neglected public space. Our research set out to determine community perceptions of the park, including perceived barriers to use, suggested improvements, and how community ownership can be promoted and sustained.