CHAPTER TWO: STUDY SITE AND RESEARCH METHODS

Riverside Park as a Research Setting

Riverside Park is a lost gem among public spaces in Southwest Detroit. To understand what makes this park unique, it is useful to look at the history of land use in the area. Beginning in the early 1900’s, the land surrounding what eventually became the park was developed for industrial purposes such as tobacco processing and automotive parts manufacturing (Sauer, 1916). By the mid-1900’s, the natural gas utility Michigan Consolidated established a coal gasification plant adjacent to the park (United States Geological Survey, 1953). Although each of these operations has since left, the area remains primarily industrial, marked by warehouses, abandoned buildings, and a few operating businesses.

Beyond this industrial landscape, however, Riverside Park also neighbors some of Detroit’s most exceptional riverfront features. The J.W. Westcott Company, which borders the park at its southeast corner, operates one of the country’s only mail boats. The company began in 1874 and since 1895 has been delivering mail to passing Great Lakes freighters (Pollack, 2001). A branch of the Detroit Fire Department sits on the other side of J.W. Westcott and is home to the city’s fireboat. Both of these boats can be seen from the park’s promenade as they venture into the river. They are just two examples of the many vessels to travel past the park. Within Southwest Detroit, Riverside Park also offers one of the few uninterrupted views of one of the city’s most prominent landmarks – the Ambassador Bridge. Completed in 1929, this 9,200-foot suspension bridge is the most heavily used border crossing for truck traffic in North America (I-94 International Trade Alliance, 2005). In addition to the views it affords, the park offers one of the few public access points to the riverfront.

In the 85 years since its establishment, Riverside Park has undergone many changes. These include the construction of a concession stand and bathrooms, as well as a public boat launch and fishing pier (T. Karl, personal interview, December 8, 2004). In the 1980’s, repeated vandalism brought the demolition of the bathrooms and concession stand. Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, significant portions of the park, including the boat launch, were closed in order to protect the Ambassador Bridge. This reduced the current park from approximately 21 to 9 acres. Despite these setbacks, the City of Detroit in 2002, with support from the Great Lakes Fishery Trust, rebuilt the seawall and added a promenade to improve fishing access.
The area surrounding Riverside Park has also seen major changes in recent decades. While adjoining properties are used for commercial and industrial purposes, several residential neighborhoods are within a one-mile radius. According to census tract data for the past three decades (1980 – 2000), these neighborhoods have become more diverse and transient, yet population density has declined. Figure 2.1 illustrates the sharp decline in population during the 1980’s, a decrease that was reversed somewhat in the 1990’s as more Latinos moved into the area (United States Census Bureau, 1980-2000).

![Figure 2.1 Changes in population, racial and ethnic make-up of nearby neighborhoods.](image)

This study considers the approximately nine acres of Riverside Park still open to the public (see Figure 2.2). With its southern edge delineated by the Detroit River, the park is bounded to the west by a newspaper warehouse and to the east by a Homeland Security fence associated with the Ambassador Bridge. Railroad tracks and a tree-lined embankment form most of the northern boundary. The tree line prevents passers-by from obtaining a clear view of much of the park until they have approached its entrance. The majority of the park, aside from the promenade, is either grass or paved parking lot. A handful of trees, a small habitat garden installed by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), and an old playscape are the exceptions to this linear landscape. The northwest corner of the parking lot leads out of the park, across the railroad line to the end of West Grand Boulevard. Only five households are within two blocks of the park. Most of the
**Figure 2.2** Map of Riverside Park and surrounding land use
Figure 2.3 Diagram of Riverside Park
nearby community lies more than 0.3 mile north of the park on the other side of an interstate freeway and a major thoroughfare for trucks entering and exiting the Ambassador Bridge.

The location of Riverside Park appears to be both a blessing and a curse. While the park’s public fishing access and views of the riverfront are enough to draw some Southwest Detroiter, its isolation from the local community may be a deterrent to others. Recognizing these challenges and the park’s potential to become an important community asset, several organizations have devised extensive plans to revitalize Riverside Park. Proposals range from merely modifying the existing layout of the park to connecting it to other portions of the riverfront by means of a greenway or river walk. What has not been done, though, is an assessment of how current users and the nearby community would like to see the park improved.

In undertaking this task, we were faced with several immediate challenges. Guided by the belief that park revitalization would be successful only when backed by strong community support, we felt it was vital to understand the community’s perceptions of the park, not simply which of the proposed plans was most favored. If the latter had been the intent of our study, we might simply have sent a survey “cold” in the mail. But to understand how the park could better serve community needs, it was necessary to first gain insight into the dynamics of the nearby community by developing a positive, trusting relationship with its members.

Complicating this task was the reality that Riverside’s community was far from homogenous. NWF had told us that the park was predominantly used by African Americans; the nearby residents, however, are mostly Latino and Caucasian. This diverse population has added another layer of richness to the complex forces already affecting Riverside Park. As outsiders to this community, we have consequently taken a feedback-driven approach to our research, looking to the community as much as possible to help guide our data collection and interpret our results.
Methods

Observations

To get a sense of the park, its current usage, and its surroundings, we visited Riverside Park and the neighboring community at various times of the day and week in the spring and early summer of 2004. Notes were taken on the proximity and character of homes, the cultural and community institutions nearby, as well as the number of people using the park and the activities taking place. In addition, we spoke informally with anglers and asked several to fill out a short questionnaire about their use of the park and what they would like to see changed. Based on these observations, we identified several issues that seemed worthy of further investigation.

Interviews

In the summer of 2004 we conducted interviews with staff and leaders of community organizations in the area near Riverside Park. The purpose of interviews was to deepen our knowledge of the community, develop lines of communication with community leaders, and explore what organizations and their constituents thought about the park. In addition we hoped that by including these organizations in our research, we could encourage their interest in future revitalization efforts.

Our list of potential interviewees was derived through the following ways:

- NWF provided names of groups and individuals that it had worked with in Riverside Park and its surrounding community;
- Team members explored surrounding neighborhoods and scanned local media for organizations active in the community;
- One group member, having worked in Southwest Detroit, provided information and contacts; and
- In the course of interviews we asked for suggestions of additional organizations to contact.

Based on observations of park users and our conversations with NWF, an interview guide was developed that addressed five main subject areas:

- Perception of the park by individuals and organizations in the community;
- Reasons people might not use the park and changes that could increase use;
• Infrastructural improvements, activities, and events that could occur in the park, particularly those that might meet a community need or match an organization’s goals;
• Willingness of the organization to support revitalization efforts; and
• General impressions of the community.

A list of interviewed organizations appears in Appendix B. These organizations include housing development groups, churches, and cultural, environmental and business associations. Throughout the summer of 2004 a total of 22 individuals were interviewed, generally individually and in a few instances in groups of two or three.

Each of the 17 interviews lasted approximately one hour and was conducted by at least two members of the project team. The informal nature of the interviews and the variety of groups that were included required flexibility in this process. Although interviewers made efforts to address the five subject areas, interviews sometimes focused on only a few topics or on a more general discussion of the community, depending on the interests of the interviewee.

During the interviews, notes were taken and, with participant permission, interviews were recorded. Notes and recordings were then used to summarize interviews for future use. The interview guide and consent form are provided in Appendix C.

Surveys

Based on the results of our observations and interviews, the team composed a four-page, 13-question survey for distribution to community residents and park users. The survey was produced in both English and Spanish as was the cover letter. Nine participants, two of whom speak Spanish, test-piloted the draft survey. In the final version, questions measured five aspects of participants’ use, perceptions, and visions of Riverside Park:

1. Awareness and use of the park. This section asked about the frequency of visits and of specific types of activities (such as fishing, picnicking, and relaxing and getting away). It also asked participants to rate the current condition of the park. Items in this section, like most of the survey, used a five-point Likert scale.
2. **Interpretive material.** The next section asked questions to assess how well NWF-sponsored signs at the park were received. The purpose of the signs is to illustrate the connection between Great Lakes ecosystem health and public health.¹

3. **Potential barriers to park use.** The third section asked whether the respondent felt discouraged from going to the park because of things like litter, people sitting in cars in the parking lot (a complaint heard in several interviews), and illegal activities happening in the park.

4. **Potential park improvements.** This section asked participants to rate how important each of several potential park improvements were to them. Since many improvements might be seen as very important, we asked participants in a subsequent question to circle the three improvements that they would most like to see happen.

5. **Community activities.** In this section participants were asked to rate how likely they would be to participate in activities such as a church picnic, an arts or cultural fair, or an activity on Great Lakes wildlife. Participants were also asked to rate how likely they would be to encourage children they knew to attend similar events. This last section also included a question about respondents’ interest in volunteering at Riverside Park.

Finally, the survey asked a series of demographic questions including age, gender, zip code, length of residence in the area, ethnicity, ages of children in one’s household, and how often the respondent visits Detroit parks. Space was provided in multiple locations on the survey for additional comments. The survey and cover letter are provided in Appendix D.

---

**Survey Distribution and Returns**

Our goal was to distribute the survey as widely as possible given our limited resources, but to do so in a way that would encourage recipients to fill it out. The following considerations were important in devising our distribution plan: (1) a considerable portion of the neighborhood speaks Spanish; (2) much of this population is comprised of illegal immigrants who might be afraid to fill out a survey from a faceless source; (3) the low-income status of the neighborhood meant that residents were likely to be transient and therefore mailing addresses would be quickly

---

¹ Though we did seek input on the value of NWF’s interpretive signs, we did not emphasize these findings in later chapters. It is important to note that these signs were appreciated by some participants. Approximately 27% of participants noticed the signs. The vast majority of those who did notice the signs (90% or greater) thought they were interesting, understandable, and important.
out of date; and (4) beyond these concerns, the potential success of a mailed survey would be questionable given that we were outsiders to the community.

Based on these concerns and the recommendations of interviewees, we focused our efforts on in-person distribution whenever possible and offered bilingual survey packets. Each packet contained a cover letter, two copies of the survey (one English, one Spanish), a self-addressed stamped envelope, and a pen. The cover letter appeared in English on one side of a sheet and in Spanish on the reverse. The outer envelope was printed with a graphic of a park bench beside a river with the heading of “Riverside Park.” Across the bottom of the envelope, a tagline read (in both languages) “Survey about community views enclosed!”

A total of 1,144 surveys were distributed between July and September 2004; 411 of these were distributed in person at places like a community-wide sidewalk sale, religious services at two churches, and during community events at Riverside Park and nearby Clark Park. We targeted the religious services in particular in an attempt to reach the greatest concentration of Spanish speakers and immigrants.

The format for distributing the surveys depended on the setting. At the churches, packets were given to participants as they exited the service. At community events and in the park, we asked attendees to fill out surveys on the spot, and provided packets to those who indicated they would fill out the survey later. To capture the opinions of residents living closest to the park, we distributed 500 survey packets by hanging them on door knobs.

We also mailed 233 packets first-class to a random selection of addresses generated by a local business association. These households were in proximity to the park, but not as close as the door-to-door sample. Of the packets mailed, 27 were returned as undeliverable.

The response rate across the entire sample was 21.8%. Table 2.1 shows the individual return rates for each of the distribution points. For the community-wide sidewalk sale and the church services, the return rates are also reported according to the language of the surveys returned. Such values could not be calculated for surveys distributed by mail or door-to-door as we cannot say which language non-respondents would have chosen.

As Table 2.1 shows, in those places where we distributed English and Spanish surveys separately (rather than packaged together, as in the mailing and door-to-door distribution), the return rate for the Spanish surveys was far lower. This marked
difference underscores the difficulty of including new immigrant voices in neighborhood planning.

### Table 2.1 Return Rate for Survey (excluding mailed surveys returned as undeliverable).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Distributed</th>
<th>Total Returned</th>
<th>Percent Returned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Return Rate</strong></td>
<td>1117</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Distribution Points</strong></td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-wide Sidewalk Sale</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Service 1</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Service 2</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing List, delivered</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door-to-door</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed at Parks</td>
<td><strong>48</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>98.0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>98.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

Interview notes and the accompanying audio recordings were used to generate interview summaries. Analysis of this material focused on two themes: barriers to park use and suggestions for improvements. For each of these, we identified a number of sub-themes (e.g. safety, access and location, restrooms) and tabulated how often they were mentioned. Although this analysis allowed us to better identify general perceptions about the park, it is important to note that several interviews addressed these topics only briefly.

While most of the survey data involved structured items, participants also included many comments on the surveys. These were typed into a separate document and, if necessary, translated. Comments were then organized into the following seven themes: (1) current park use, (2) discouraging aspects, (3) desired improvements, (4) community events and activities for
children, (5) volunteering, (6) encouragement and positive feelings, and (7) other. Comments within each theme were then grouped into sub-themes (e.g. for discouraging aspects, sub-themes included condition and safety, and access and greenways). If a comment addressed multiple themes, it was placed into each theme that was appropriate.

We used factor analysis as a data reduction technique to identify sub-themes among banks of survey items. For each bank of items, we used principal axis factoring with varimax rotation (SPSS for Windows, Version 11.5). In each case, two analyses were run to determine the final number of factors created. For the initial analysis, all factors with Eigenvalues greater than one were created. Based on the number of main factors apparent in the scree plot, the creation of the same number of factors was forced in a second analysis. Double-loading items were excluded from factors as were items with factor loadings less than 0.40. Only factors with Cronbach reliability (alpha) scores of 0.70 or greater were used for further analysis.

Survey responses were also compared between groups of individuals based on differences in background variables and how often participants used the park. Where two groups were compared, independent samples t-tests were used. Where three or more groups were compared, one-way analysis of variance was used, followed by a Bonferroni multiple comparisons test. Acceptable significance values for all analyses were those with $p = 0.05$.

Community Meeting

In November 2004, NWF sponsored a community meeting where we presented our preliminary survey findings and solicited input about the study and next steps. Community organizations represented at the meeting included 15 groups, many of which were part of the interview process (see Appendix E for a listing of community meeting participants). Outcomes of this meeting are described in Chapter Five.