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11.308/4.213 Ecological Urbanism
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Title: Shady Lane Park Revitalization

Location: Houston, TX

Dates of Operation: Park reopened October 10, 2013¹

Abstract:

Before its redevelopment, Shady Lane had damages from Tropical Storm Allison in 2001^{2,3}. The area hosted a small community center, but would regularly flood, leaving it unavailable for outdoor enjoyment. Because of its need for an update, the park became part of the Parks Build Community (PBC) initiative through the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). The initiative selects communities through a detailed application process which checks for things like the need, but also the ability of the community to sustain the project after it's built⁴. Multiple city departments collaborated with the residents and a variety of partner organizations through 12 months of community engagement and participatory design in order to be ready to apply for the support of the initiative⁵. The update fixed the structural problem of flooding in the area by rerouting the water to the nearby Bretshire Basin, leaving the area open for sports fields and other amenities. Since the revitalization, the park has been able to better serve the needs and interests of all ages of community members.

Keywords: park, flood relief, community engagement, community center, education, collaboration, mobility, accessibility, sustainability, green infrastructure

Philosophy/Mission/Values:

NRPA Mission: "To advance parks, recreation and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people⁶."

Houston Parks and Recreation Director Values: "When we upgrade parks, we can change neighborhoods...part of what we are trying to do with our urban kids is get them to nature to learn about conservation. We are planting seeds for kids to take an interest in the world beyond the concrete they see every day⁷..."

PBC values: "to build and revitalize urban parks as thriving gathering places for youth, families and adults⁸."

Community Size and Scale of Geographic Focus:

The community is designated as a super neighborhood in Houston⁹ with just over 35,000 residents currently¹⁰. The park is 12.4 acres and connects to the 68 acre Bretshire Stormwater Basin².

Timeline:

1958- Shady Lane Park established as 12.4 acres with small community center, basketball court, soccer fields, and small playground¹¹.

June 2001- Tropical Storm Allison killed 23 and caused \$5.5 billion in damages by flooding park and many nearby homes¹¹. Park continued to be heavily used despite damages¹².

October 2001- First buyout transaction completed for homes in the floodplain. The Harris County Flood Control District combined funds with FEMA to purchase houses at their pre-flood value. Program continued for several months and purchased land later used for drainage basin³.

2009- NRPA started PBC to revitalize one park serving an underserved community each year. Intense application includes details of communities' ability to sustain the park and demonstrated need⁴.

Leading up to 2012- City agencies worked with community members to apply for PBC.

October 2012- Planning began with community, public agencies, and partners through PBC².

October 2013- Shady Lane Park Revitalization complete¹.

Now- Park can better support people of all ages and the flooding is relieved by the basin.

Gentrification Status at Time of Intervention:

In 2000, before Tropical Storm Allison, the area had 28,196 people and was 67% Hispanic and 22% Black⁹. In 2015, about 2 years after the revitalization, there were 25,724 people and the area was 74% Hispanic, 20% Black⁹. Now in 2021, the population of 35,107 is 79% Hispanic and 14% Black¹⁰. These numbers do not explain the details of the situation, but they also do not correlate with gentrification. There are many factors that could have contributed to the population loss between 2000 and 2015, Tropical Storm Allison being a major one. The population stays majority Hispanic and Black well after the park updates, and the changes in the percentages of each line up with the changes in the population. There is not a strong relationship with the revitalization of the park and gentrification.

Organization and Operation:

Many public agencies including the Harris County Flood Control District, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD), and the Houston Public Works and Engineering Department worked to connect the community with NRPA and partner organizations⁷. "12 months of community engagement, participatory design and sustained effort..." by all involved went into making the park what it is. The HPARD director held design discussions so that those making technical decisions could hear directly from the community about what they wanted¹¹. Merrie Talley of Talley Landscape Architects worked with M2L Associates Landscape Architects to turn the feedback into an engaging play area¹ and Kraftsman Commercial Playgrounds and Water Parks designed the water play spaces⁸. The Houston Parks Board provided their support to the

project and many partners of the NRPA provided funding, supplies, or programming for the development of the park.

Programs and Amenities:

The new park provides a variety of programs to engage the community and different spaces for community members to make their own.

- Community garden with demonstrations on gardening and healthy cooking including free samples¹⁴.
- Outdoor classroom for up to 30 students with educational programming².
- Bayou-themed play spaces with blue colored walkways representing a stream flowing through the park. Signs along the simulated stream explain the swamp and the importance of the basin. The “waterway” leads to a sheltered overlook of the basin².
- Sprayground with water moving on to irrigate a garden of native plants².
- Hiking and biking rails attach to a park 3 miles north with plans to connect to different bayou segments and the city center 30 miles away¹¹.
- Weight rooms and exercise equipment in the new community center and in an outside space to encourage healthy lifestyles¹⁴.
- Covered basketball court¹¹ and multipurpose sports field².
- Expanded sidewalks along the major road and new bus shelter to increase safety and accessibility⁷.

Financing and Resources:

Some large grants provided the funding basis for the update.

- A \$220,000 Urban Outdoor Recreation grant by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department provided a strong foundation of funding¹
- \$100,000 came from GameTime for the play equipment².

Over \$500,000 was donated by NRPA partner organizations to PBC for this project⁵. Various partners contributed specific materials to the revitalization. Below is a list with the types of donations made. It is not fully representative, however.

- Greenfields Outdoor Fitness provided outdoor fitness equipment¹
- UnitedHealthcare, as part of the Do Good. Live Well. initiative, provided the community garden and worked with community members to build it¹⁵.
- Trees for Houston, Sustainable Growth Texas, Tree Stake Solutions and Nature's Way provided many trees and other landscaping improvements⁸.
- Musco Lighting and the 2011 United States Soccer Foundation Field product credit grant funded lighting for multipurpose field².
- The Student Conservation Association work to involve youth in park maintenance².

Assessment:

There is not very much published assessment about the status and effect of the park. The main judgement of outcomes from the HPARD Director was from perceived popularity of the park with the statement “It’s booming every morning. You can barely find a place to park⁷.” The City of Houston Park Program Manager shared a similar sentiment about the standard of success being that “Every time we have a community meeting, the center is packed.” They did also put significance in the attitude of the community toward the redevelopment of the park. “Based on the response before the park is even built out, there’s little doubt [the community] will continue to take ownership of it and be good stewards of the park’s resources.” The attitude and participation of the surrounding community seems to indicate that the park is serving them well, but there has not been a specific measurement of outcomes.

SWOT:

Strengths:

- The city needed to fix the flooding problem and turned it into a redevelopment of the area, grounded in the community⁷.
- The community was engaged early on in the design process so they could get the programs and amenities at the park that would serve them best.

Weaknesses:

- In some cases, the project was referred to with ownership going to people with titled positions of influence instead of to the community as a whole. In one case, it was said that “Shady Lane Park is Joe Turner’s project,” referring to Houston’s Parks Director¹¹. That statement neglects the human impact of the park and the fact that it will continue to be adapted and built upon by the members of the community around it.
- There is little to no assessment of the impact of the park available. Assessment or measurements of some kind would be helpful in order to track the effects of the park on the surrounding community and allow for adjustments to the park plan, or insight for future parks.

Opportunities:

- There are many different amenities available for residents to take advantage of, build upon, and make their own. This allows for the park to be rooted in the community and for community members to feel connected and empowered with ownership of the site.
- The city will be connected by the trail system between parks. This increases accessibility to different areas of the city and provides opportunities in places that were previously more difficult to reach.

Threats:

- With plans to connect the whole city, the accessibility could increase demand for the area and drive up house prices if the city doesn’t plan ahead. The groundedness of this

park in the community will help partially, but other anti-gentrification techniques should be considered.

Lessons for West Philadelphia:

- Multiple city departments came together in different ways and were able to help coordinate partners and connections with their combined resources. It may be helpful to leverage the reach of multiple city departments in Philadelphia.
- The project took advantage of partners throughout which kept costs low. There are many grants available or organizations willing to donate materials or services that we should connect with as needed.
- The community was engaged in making initial decisions and partners added their knowledge for the technical aspects. It's important to get community thoughts from the beginning and build the ideas around their input.
- This project was able to alleviate the environmental issue of flooding and also adds to the usable greenspace. We should consider how we can make our proposals multifaceted to be as effective as possible.
- Education is implemented throughout the park and also with specific education spaces. There is much room to incorporate education in our proposals for the West Mill Creek Playground.

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