

When There's Nothing to Conserve—Create!



Photo courtesy of Seattle Housing Authority

Parks Can Be Central to a Great Redevelopment Project

by Peter Harnik, Ben Welle, and Albert Pingree

In new or expanding cities, parks are formed through conservation: saving virgin lands like farms, forests, and ranches. In built-out cities, it's just the opposite: parks themselves are a type of development—and they often serve as the anchor for the old and new buildings around them. From Boston to San Francisco, successful parks have been created out of former factories, home sites, office buildings, railyards, parking lots, landfills, and even highways.

As a result, many city parks aren't being created by park and recreation departments but rather by redevelopment authorities. While park departments are frequently strapped for cash and short of influence, many redevelopment agencies have the money and power to paint large on the urban canvas. Their semiautonomous revenue streams and potent negotiating mechanisms allow some of them to create everything from neighborhood parks to downtown gathering places to riverside promenades to reengineered greenways.

A 2008 survey of big cities by the Center for City Park Excellence (CCPE) found 75 parks created by redevelopment and housing authorities. The parks range in size from miniscule Albina Triangle in Portland, Oregon (0.02 acres) to expansive NTC Park in San Diego (46 acres) to the expansion of Frick Park in Pittsburgh (106 acres), and development costs extended from \$130,000 to \$48 million. The “redevelopark” phenomenon is most evident along the West Coast from San Diego and San Jose up to Portland and Seattle, but there are also examples in Denver, Albuquerque, Memphis, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere.

Of many lovely creations, perhaps the most stunning is San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens, five acres of open lawn, specimen trees, flowers, dramatic art, public seating, a café, and a cascade of fountains, all surrounded by museums, performing arts facilities, an underground

Contact:
Peter Harnik
Director, Center for City Park Excellence

The Trust for Public Land
660 Pennsylvania Ave., S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.543.7552
peter.harnik@tpl.org

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convention center, shops, restaurants, and restored buildings filled with technology start-up companies. Once a moribund swath of half-empty office buildings, run-down warehouses, and shoddy housing near the Tenderloin, it is today the center of SoMa (“South of Market Street”), a trendy, vibrant place for residents, workers, and tourists alike. Opened in phases beginning in 1993, the complex, controversial project was created over a 30-year period by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency.

“Yerba Buena Gardens has played a major role in the economic revitalization of a blighted area,” says Catherine Pickering, assistant project manager for the authority. With a diverse clientele that includes 24-hours-a-day residents, five-days-a-week workers, and once-in-a-lifetime tourists, Yerba Buena Gardens posed a tough assignment. The designers created a space both with memorable ingredients—one garden features plants that are native to San Francisco’s 13 sister cities; another pays tribute to the native Ohlone Indians—and with timeless elements, including a waterfall memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr., a hardscape plaza, and a flexible open field.

It’s not only happening downtown. In the Pearl District of Portland, Oregon, the goal was to convert an old railyard into a dense but livable inner-city residential community that appeals to families with children. Parks are key, and the Portland Development Commission has set aside five acres to build three of them. (An acre in the Pearl District is worth about \$8 million.) Jamison Square is two-and-a-half acres of fun, including a lively fountain frequently filled with squealing small children watched over by coffee-sipping parents dipping bare feet in the spray. Tanner Springs Park is almost the polar opposite—a quiet, bucolic area that mimics spring-fed wetlands that existed before the neighborhood’s development. (A third park with trees, lawn, and a dog play area is slated to open soon.) Collectively, the three parks serve as the district’s front yard, back yard, and outdoor living room, and they help support an eco-friendly population density of 36 persons per acre (compared to 6.2 for the city as a whole). The Portland Development Commission invested \$16.9 million for the new parks, and the project has received praise nationally as a model. When referring to Jamison Square in his book *True Urbanism: Living In and Near the Center*, Seattle planner and architect Mark Hinshaw wrote, “These kinds of spaces are what make cities not just livable, but great. They are investments for the long term.”



The task of a redevelopment authority is to improve a city through the reuse of vacant or undesirable land. The task of a housing authority is to create and manage a city’s public housing stock. For years after their establishment under the Federal Housing Act of 1949, redevelopment

and housing agencies incorporated open space in their projects, many of which were designed on the now-discarded “tower-within-a-park” model that ended up neither people-supporting nor nature-enhancing. The spaces rapidly declined, becoming unsafe, ugly, eroded, and depressing. In 1961 Jane Jacobs shocked the planning profession with her book *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, asking sarcastically: “More open space for what? For muggings? For bleak vacuums between buildings?... [P]eople do not use city open space just because it is there and because city planners or designers wish they would.”

Within a few decades, Jacobs’s observations became accepted truths; today most redevelopment and housing authorities have reversed course and are investing in more traditional parks for “ordinary people to use and enjoy,” as Jacobs wrote. The best of the designs concentrate on walkability, mixed uses, economic development, environmental benefits, and contributions to quality of life.

Part of the effort to keep neighborhoods healthy is to energize them with parks. San Jose’s redevelopment agency, after a period of focusing on downtown, shifted to a struggling enclave just outside the city core where it spent \$6.8 million to tear down some old buildings and create 1.75-acre Bellevue Park. The new amenity has helped spur investment.

“Even in San Jose there is very little raw land,” says Bill Ekern, director of project management for the San Jose Redevelopment Agency, which has spent over \$22 million on parks in the last five years. “We take land that is nonperforming and turn it into something that generates more wealth. That definitely includes parks.”

Beyond the West Coast, Denver is emerging as a leader in redevelopment parks. Largest and most famous is the transformation of old Stapleton Airport into a 4,700-acre walkable, mixed-use community with 1,100 acres of parks. Thus far the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) has spent \$48 million to construct 250 acres of parks, including the project’s centerpiece, 80-acre Central Park at Stapleton. A few miles south a similar effort is under way at the decommissioned Lowry Air Force Base, with DURA dedicating nearly \$50 million for parks and natural areas in the new neighborhood.

Redevelopment can also improve urban water quality. When the Seattle Housing Authority decided to transform the distressed High Point public housing site into a new mixed-income community, it was required to create an extensive 130-acre drainage system rather than funnel water unfiltered into a nearby salmon-bearing stream. Questioning the aesthetics of a cheap, ugly, fenced stormwater pond, the authority instead

invested in a four-acre park with a quarter-mile path, a boulder-filled stream, benches, a lawn, a playground, and gardens. Today Viewpoint Park is full of dog walkers, stroller pushers, kids, and families—and it is a real feather in the cap of the authority. “What could’ve been a huge liability is instead an incredible community asset,” says Tom Phillips, High Point project manager.

Selected Redevelopment Agencies and Their Parks

Redevelopment Agency	Number of Parks Created	Total Park Acreage	Total Spending on Parks
Portland Development Commission	26	92	\$84,000,000
Seattle Housing Authority	19	107	n.a.
Denver Urban Renewal Authority	11	480	\$98,000,000
Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority	5	114	n.a.
San Jose Redevelopment Agency	7	36.6	\$22,573,000
San Francisco Redevelopment Agency	5	78	n.a.

n.a. = not available

Most redevelopment agencies are powerhouses. They have to be—the big-league economics and politics of urban areas require it. They are generally able to do their own planning, harness public and private resources, sell bonds, receive dedicated revenue streams, condemn property, contract with architects and builders, make transportation decisions, and much more. This gives them the ability to do something that many city park departments are intimidated to try—to create new parks in expensive markets or in areas with fierce political cross-currents.

Not all redevelopment and housing agencies are interested in parks. In the CCPE survey, 20 agencies were unable to identify a single park that they had created or renovated. Many are still of the mind that developing every acre of land with “ratables”—rentable or sellable space—is the way to maximize their returns, even though much research shows this attitude to be wrong.

“Parks can clearly capture enough value to make up for the loss of land,” says John Crompton, a Texas A&M professor who’s written several books on what he calls the “proximate principle.”

“And the value even goes beyond the buildings near the park,” he adds. Crompton notes that parks, festivals, and events can bring tourists and everyday visitors who spark a quality-of-life buzz as well as economic

activity. “If the effect on property values covers half the cost, these other factors will pay for the rest.”

Selected Parks Created by Urban Redevelopment Agencies

City	Park	Completed	Acres	Cost	Agency
Denver	Stapleton Parks	2007	244	\$48,000,000	Denver Urban Renewal Authority
Las Vegas	Centennial Plaza	2005	0.8	\$350,000	Las Vegas Redevelopment Agency
Memphis	(unnamed park)	2005	0.8	\$400,000	Memphis/Shelby County Comm Redev. Agency
Portland	Albina Triangle	2007	0.02	\$130,000	Portland Development Commission
Portland	Jamison Square	2006	1	\$3,900,000	Portland Development Commission
Portland	River Place Esplanade & Marina	1985	5.7	\$4,000,000	Portland Development Commission
Portland	Tanner Springs & The Fields	2008	4	\$13,000,000	Portland Development Commission
Pittsburgh	Expansion of Frick Park	2005	106	n.a.	Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority
Pittsburgh	Summerset Parks	2005	8	n.a.	Pittsburgh Urban Redevelopment Authority
San Francisco	Yerba Buena Park	1993	2	n.a.	San Francisco Redevelopment Agency
San Diego	NTC Park	2008	46	\$15,000,000	San Diego Redevelopment Agency
San Jose	Backesto Park	2007	13	\$298,000	San Jose Redevelopment Agency
San Jose	Bellevue Park	2006	1.8	\$6,500,000	San Jose Redevelopment Agency
Seattle	High Point Parks	2008	21	n.a.	Seattle Housing Authority

n.a. = not available

Most redevelopment agencies that build parks pay for them through a mechanism called tax increment financing. This technique, which is widely used for infrastructure projects that are expected to result in rising property value and taxes, retains certain tax monies from the city at large and focuses it in a specific neighborhood for a period of time. Tax increment financing can be extremely effective; however, since it is potentially subject to abuse, it normally requires approval by the legislature and is not legal in every state.

Such notable “redeveloparks” as Bellevue Park in San Jose, Stapleton Central Park in Denver, and all the new center-city parks in San Diego have benefited from tax increment financing. San Francisco’s Yerba Buena was funded partly through tax increment financing and also from the sale of some agency-owned land. Seattle used federal housing funds for Viewpoint Park.

Another possible source of revenue is from a parking garage under a park. This strategy was used with the 1950s redevelopment that created Mellon Square in Pittsburgh. Currently, the Baltimore Development Corporation is exploring building a parking garage underneath Rash Field, a seven-acre park near the Inner Harbor. The corporation would issue bonds to build the garage and rebuild the park, then use the parking proceeds to repay the bonds.

Paying for parks comes in two installments: first building, then operating. Naturally, there are numerous models. For Portland's Jamison Square, the city's park department handled the design and construction with the redevelopment agency picking up the bill; from then on, the park department pays for maintenance through its city council appropriation. In San Jose, the redevelopment agency acquired the property, selected a design and paid for construction, with the parks department administering the contracts; now the park department handles the upkeep. At High Point in Seattle, the housing authority was fully responsible for development, then created a special assessment district made up of neighborhood property owners to maintain and program the public park. At Yerba Buena Gardens, the redevelopment authority handled the entire project; for park upkeep, the authority uses revenue it receives from leasing land to the adjacent Marriott Hotel.

Many beautiful and successful parks have been created by redevelopment agencies, but the trend is by no means yet a movement. Too many redevelopment and housing agencies are constrained by lack of staffing, lack of resources, lack of statutory authority, or lack of imagination to add a park to their normal portfolios of housing, offices, hotels, or convention centers. Too many are still of the old mind-set that parks should be placed only on scraps of otherwise unusable land—instead of conceptualizing the public space first, front and center, and using it to animate (and add value to) the surrounding buildings. Conversely, too many city park and recreation departments are intimidated by the prospect of creating and managing a park in the middle of downtown or within a dense housing development a few blocks from center city—the kind of challenge to which redevelopment agencies are accustomed.

“Redeveloparks” are high-profile, high-value, high-risk parks. They haven't all been successful (Denver is currently rebuilding its Skyline Plaza, designed by Lawrence Halprin and opened with fanfare in 1973), but those that are—Millennium Park in Chicago, Yerba Buena in San Francisco, Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, and the parks of Portland's Pearl District—have contributed mightily to a new city image and even significantly affected its real estate market. As with all complex urban projects, these parks usually need multiple public and private partners and innovative financing mechanisms, but they may well be a critical component of America's new back-to-the-city movement.

Peter Harnik is director and Ben Welle is assistant director of the Center for City Park Excellence of The Trust for Public Land, located in Washington, D.C. Albert Pingree was an intern at the center. Additional research was provided by Julia Penn.