CHELTENHAM

ELEMENTARY

SCHOOL

A Master Plan for Elementary School Campus Improvements

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Finding Common Ground
Exploring the Urban Experience
Fall Semester 2001
LA6686
University of Colorado
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Project Introduction

The Challenge

Studies show that a well-planned and equipped exterior play area enhances the learning environment resulting in improved learning and achievement. Such play areas provide physical and mental challenges that translate to improved health and learning attention. Furthermore, with proper design, these areas themselves become outdoor classrooms or learning landscapes. One of the principal secondary goals of all schools, including elementary, is to provide a focus for the community—a place to gather and to meet, a place to enjoy, a place that enhances the community’s appearance. A reflection of this community importance is Denver’s Mayor Wellington Webb’s statement, “As Mayor, I have long recognized that we cannot have a great city and great neighborhoods without great schools.”

Denver Public Schools [DPS] is an urban school district with many of the same challenges of other urban districts. The infrastructure is aging—the average facility age is almost 50 years. The ongoing 1998 General Obligation Bond [GOB] will increase the number of schools to 130 but contains no funding for existing elementary or any other existing school playground. Approximately 75 DPS elementary schools require moderate to extensive renovations or upgrades to meet adequate standards. These include replacing playground equipment, providing irrigation and sod [to eliminate gravel and dirt fields], providing American with Disability Act [ADA] accessibility, and providing an outdoor classroom learning environment. Approximately half of the 75 elementary schools are located within underserved neighborhoods. It is in these neighborhoods where transforming the schoolyard is most pressing. These schools have chronic disciplinary problems that are disruptive to a school’s academic environment. Playgrounds lacking appropriate choices for children become arenas to bully and tease. Recess should be a positive experience that compliments their academic development. A place where children develop their emotional, physical and social skills.

The Solution

The “Learning Landscape” program is an entrepreneurial community-minded alliance of public and private interests that seeks to strengthen Denver Public Schools and their surrounding neighborhoods by designing new multi-dimensional playgrounds and social gathering places. The success of this program is founded on a mutual respect of aesthetic, maintenance, safety, and recreational issues. The University of Colorado at Denver’s Landscape Architecture department offers a seminar course called FINDING COMMON GROUND—EXPLORING THE URBAN EXPERIENCE. Students of landscape architecture, architecture and other disciplines have come together with Professor Lois Brink to research current educational, sociological, and environmental thought regarding urban space in general and elementary school grounds in particular. Each student in the course selects a school from a predetermined pool and uses this knowledge to develop a vision and master plan for each school. The master plan approach will suit a multi-faceted contemporary existence—engaging a child’s educational and recreational experience with that of the community at-large.

The Intent of the Master Plan

The master plan is a written report and plan that sets forth the structure for future campus improvements. Each school has a vision that speaks to the desires of the school and surrounding community. The vision is further delineated into goals that identify the major goals for implementation. These goals are defined through the use of text and imagery. A programmatic list of uses is also developed. Lastly, each master plan sets forth the aesthetic ordering system or systems that will be used on the design phase to organize the programmatic uses. This plan once approved will provide a framework for fund raising and future construction.
...the central purpose is to create a process which integrates values change with physical change. There are two levels of adaptation: the first involves the children's behavioral response to day-to-day changes in the yard environment, and the second relates to long-term changes in the minds and bodies of children leading to a shift in cultural values toward an integrated environmental and childhood ethic.

Robin C. Moore (i.)

Project Description

The intention of this project is to work with students, administrators, neighborhood residents, and other interested individuals to redefine the vision of the outdoor property of the West Colfax elementary school, Cheltenham. Studies have shown a connection between our environment and our psychological well-being and cognitive abilities. The Cheltenham elementary school campus offers a unique opportunity because of its need for the students as well as the surrounding residents.
Location/Background

Cheltenham Elementary school is located in the West Colfax neighborhood of Denver at the corner of Colfax and Julian Streets. Cheltenham is home to six hundred – seventy nine students that attend school for early childhood education through the fifth grade. It also acts as a neighborhood park, for which there are few, and a Community Resource Center for various community programs and continuing education.

The West Colfax neighborhood of Denver is made up of predominantly Latino people of lower incomes. Forty-six percent of the residents are spending more than 30% of their income fulfilling their needs for housing. The population of the neighborhood is 10,825; 3,416 of which are children under the age of 18. Cheltenham’s cross-section is very much like the surrounding neighborhood. eighty-two percent of the student body is Hispanic, 8% non-Latino White, 4% Black, 4% Asian, and 2% American Indian. 96% of the students are eligible for the reduced fee or free lunch program. (ii.)

Many of the student’s primary language is Spanish with english as a second language. Forty-four percent of Cheltenham’s students are english learners. English as a second language Classes are given at the school for the children and for the community as well as GED classes at various non-school hours.

Cheltenham’s Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) scores for 2000 found that 40% of the students are at/above proficiency in reading at 3rd grade and 25% at 4th grade; 11% at/above proficiency in writing at 4th grade; and 10% at/above proficiency in math at 5th grade. (iii.)

Constituent Groups

Administration, Staff, and Faculty
The main contact with the school personnel is with Assistant Principal, Pat Birmingham. Others whose help with this project was invaluable include: Kay Frunzi - Principal, Barb Rishel – PE Teacher, Mark Marquez – Facility Manager, Ron Befus – 3rd Grade Teacher Rep., Gene Plampin – 5th Grade Teacher Rep.

Students
Since the biggest and most obvious impact of this project will be on the students of Cheltenham, considerable time was spent observing their play habits on the school grounds. The play habits of children at various other play grounds, and in discussion with the children on what they would
CURRENT INVENTORY OF ON-SITE USES

USEABLE IRRIGATED TURF: 19,950 sq. ft.
ASPHALT COURT PLAY AREAS: 14,110 sq. ft.
SOFT SURFACE FIELD PLAY AREA: 73,565 sq. ft.
SOFT SURFACE PRIMARY & INTERMEDIATE EQUIPMENT PLAY AREA: 3610 sq. ft.
SOFT SURFACE ECE AND KINDERGARTEN EQUIPMENT PLAY AREA: 5135 sq. ft.
PARKING LOT: 51 spaces, 16,260 sq. ft.

ADEQUACY OF ON-SITE USES

Though it seems through the inventory of on-site uses that there is a reasonable amount of irrigated turf and soft surface field play areas the truth is both are inadequate for their intended purposes. The irrigated turf, lawn area of the site is adjacent to many class rooms and is thus an undesirable play area. The so called soft surface field play area is really just a burnt, hard, desert unforgiving of the scrapes and bruises incurred upon its surface. This area should be torn up and soded with trees along the periphery for shade. The equipment play areas need to be enlarged and widened for better access and to accomodate more children. The parking area is too small and is a very serious danger for the children. It along with a new drop-off lane for the children will be lengthened along Julian street and narrowed along Colfax to allow more room for other uses at the core of the playground and to get rid of a hard to observe corner at Julian and Colfax.

SURROUNDING USES

The uses surrounding Cheltenham are many and varied. Situated at the corner of Julian and Colfax one could to everything from getting a manicure, a bite to eat, an oil change, and an adult video all within a 2.5 minute walk. A hospital and a girls club are nearby, Cheltenham is also in close proximity to Invesco Field.
The motivation to interact with the environment exists in all children as an intrinsic property of life, but the quality of such interactions is dependent upon the possibilities for engagement that the environment provides.  
Olds, (iv.)

Vision Statement

The Cheltenham elementary school campus will become an amenity to the school and a community park for the West Colfax neighborhood of Denver. We will create an environment that while being protective, educational, nurturing, and fun for the students at Cheltenham, is also a place that is a welcome respite from the urban environment of West Colfax.

Examples of some of the children's ideas for their playground.

Typical forms of play at Cheltenham, personal picture.

Goals

- To create a safe place for the children of Cheltenham to learn, grow, and play.
- To provide shade and protection from other elements.
- To improve recreational opportunities
- To create outdoor learning opportunities through play.
- To enlarge parking for elementary employees and visitors.
- To establish community connectedness as a prevalent condition throughout.

MASTER PLAN
Program Elements

Learning Areas

- To create a safe place for the children of Cheltenham to learn, grow, & play.
- To create outdoor learning opportunities through play.

The master plan will allow children to learn basic fundamentals of language, geography, geometry, and other disciplines through games and play provided through play equipment, art, and sculpture. Simple painted maps of the world and of the United States could provide fun through hopscotch type play while the children learn about geography. Murals done by the students and/or community could give the children a sense of place and heritage while learning about history. An arboretum, xeriscape garden, or simply an addition to the Butterfly Hope Garden could teach the kids valuable lessons in biology and ecology. A place for an outdoor classroom/amphitheater is also a very strong consideration. Issues of cultural history and heritage are also hopefully to be addressed in the design of some play equipment. This could possibly be implemented as a Mayan pyramid design for a climbing apparatus.

Field Play Areas

- To create a safe place for the children of Cheltenham to learn, grow, and play.
- To provide shade and protection from other elements.
- To improve recreational opportunities

The fact is Cheltenham has no areas of play during school hours that are covered with grass. Through discussions with instructors and students this is one of the most important aspects of the revitalization of Cheltenham. Many of the students voiced their wishes for a safe place to play soccer, baseball, and field hockey. Another of the important features that needs to be addressed is the utter lack of shade on the playground. The importance of which becomes brutally apparent during the hot days of the beginning and end of the school year on the south facing lot.

Court Play Areas

- To improve recreational opportunities.

Although the schoolyard is abundant in asphalt, only a small portion can be used as intended for play. An area adjacent to an existing drainage way could be expanded just a little bit to double the court play areas on the playground.

Parking

- To enlarge parking for employees and visitors.

There have been past feasibility inspections of the inadequacies of the parking and drop off areas at Cheltenham. Using one of the solutions for the addition of 19 spaces for a total of 70 spaces is thought to be the best solution by the consensus of the group of instructors and community members involved in the focus group for Cheltenham. The site has more than adequate space for this to happen and not infringe upon the improvements to the playground. A student drop off lane should also be added adjacent to the parking lot.

Colfax Buffer

- To create a safe place for the children of Cheltenham to learn, grow, and play.
- To establish community connectedness as a prevalent condition throughout considerations of each
Cheltenham is located directly on Colfax Avenue; this presents issues for safe play of the elementary school students. The design of a buffer between Colfax and the elementary school should consider the surrounding community in its implementation. The buffer could possibly be a long hill or series of hills along Colfax that acts as a barrier close to the school and allows a prominent vista over the school grounds as well as the surrounding community. This will allow for more community connectedness than a harder barrier such as a large fence.

Mayan Temple, unknown internet source

Ceasar Chavez, unknown internet source

Chief Sitting Bull, unknown internet source

Anglo Settlers on their way west, unknown internet source

Ideas for possible themes for areas of learning through play, Mayan Cultural Identities and History of Colorado.
Appendix


Photo Survey

A photo survey of a sample group of students and faculty was taken to determine the desires for a new playground. This information as well as the desires inferred from conversation and student drawings is as follows:

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<th># students female</th>
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<th>% m</th>
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CONCEPT PLAN 1 - PROXIMATE RANDOM ORDERING SYSTEM

This concept is least obtrusive to the site as it exists today by taking advantage of the existing site conditions when possible, and by keeping the most often used areas closest to the school. The main impact is from the addition of parking, expansion of equipment play areas, court play areas, & ripping up most of the asphalt in the core of the playground. All excavation materials are to be used as infill for a hill type spine along Colfax Avenue. Educational nodes such as maps, geometrical and/or culturally relevant sculpture, and linguistic games are interspersed among the other site elements.
CONCEPT PLAN 2 - EDUCATIONAL SPINE UNIFIER

The concept of this plan is to have the educational elements centralized in the plan to unify all of the disperate playground elements. Parking moves to the periphery of the lot, and the court play areas move into the area left from the moved parking to take advantage of the existing asphalt. The outdoor classroom stays in the same place as concept 1 due to its proximity to the classrooms on the east side of the building. Placing anything else there may be a distraction to on going classes.