BARNEY FORD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:

A Landscape Master Plan for Elementary School Campus Improvements

Prepared For: Denver Public Schools
900 Grant St.
Denver, Colorado

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As part of a course: Finding Common Ground ARCH6290
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BARNEY FORD
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Reviewed
Principal, Columbine Elementary

Reviewed
CSC Representative

Reviewed
F. M., DPS Facility Management

Reviewed
Grounds Supervisor, DPS Facility Management
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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 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 John Hickenlooper’s statement, “As a community, we receive so many benefits from ensuring that children receive a strong well-rounded education… Learning landscapes is a perfect model of what can be accomplished when the private sector, public sector and the nonprofit community are engaged and invested in a common goal.” Interview with Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper for the Learning Landscape Alliance video, conducted by Little Voice Productions, November 2003.

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 playground 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. 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 Elementary 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, maintainability, 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 components 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.

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”

-- Fred Rogers, 1928

“A child reminds us that playtime is an essential part of our daily routine.”

-- Anonymous
PART I: ASSESSING THE PRESENT SITUATION

Section 1: The Location

Barney Ford Elementary is located in northeast Denver at 14500 Maxwell Place, and serves the Montbello neighborhood. The student population lives in the neighborhood which is bounded by I-70 to the southwest and Chambers Road to the east. The school is located a few blocks off of busy Chambers Road and is surrounded by smaller neighborhood parks with Montbello Central Park to the west and Ford Park adjacent to Ford Elementary to the south.

This community is predominantly a single-family residential neighborhood with the majority of the homes owner-occupied. Most of the houses in this neighborhood were built between 1960 and 1970, with newer homes cropping up in the last 2 years or so. The majority of the houses are brick, there are not any apartment complexes in the area. The majority of the neighborhood is comprised of African American families, almost tied with the number of Hispanic families.
Section 2: History of the School and Neighborhood:

Barney Ford Elementary is named for a former slave who, in addition to becoming educated, also became a political and financial “King Maker” in 19th century Colorado territory.

Barney Ford Elementary is located in the very diverse Montbello neighborhood. The Italian word “Montbello” means literally “beautiful mountain”. The spectacular views of Mount Evans, Long’s Peak and the Continental Divide inspired developers to name the new neighborhood area after the picturesque mountain region in the Italian Alps.

Montbello was the first major annexation of privately owned land to the far northeast area of Denver, taking place in September, 1965. Because the area annexed was large, approximately 2,609 acres, the city and developers worked out a master land use plan that addressed mutual obligations in the annexation area. The annexation agreement included plans for the area to develop into a mixed-use community. The agreement dictated the general land use and densities and provided for the necessary public land sites for parks, schools and other public facilities. Montbello started developing in 1966, with the bulk of growth in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

Figure 2: Montbello neighborhood; Source: Ilbret Adeh
The neighborhood and school both inspired the above collage, which comes from five specific words that describe Montbello and Ford Elementary today. Drab, Separated, Enclosed, Uninviting and Expansive. From these words came new possibilities for the site: Lush, Welcoming, Inspired, Inviting and Happy, which in the collage are overcoming what is and showing what can be.

Section 3: Demographics of the Community And School

The Montbello neighborhood is a very distinctive community within Denver, represented by several ethnicities. According to the 2001 Census, the neighborhood consists of 45% African American, 37% Hispanic, 13% White, 0.4% Native American, and 3% Asian/Pacific Islander. There is an increasing number of Hispanics moving into the neighborhood while elderly African Americans are becoming deceased. Currently, 28,873 people live in the Montbello neighborhood with children comprising 38% of the total population. Twenty-five percent of these children live in single parent households; 53% of these children are born to mothers with less than a 12th grade education.

Montbello is a low-income neighborhood, in which the average annual wage is $18,000 and the average home costs $150,000. Twenty-four percent of the jobs held by Montbello community members are service jobs. Property crime at 36% is much higher than violent crime at 4%.

The demographics of the neighborhood closely match that of the school population. There are five hundred eighty-six students enrolled in the school with 30 ECE children, 54 kindergarteners, 252 primary students, and 167 intermediate students. The maximum capacity of Ford is 600 students, and the school is on a year-round
schedule. The Ford student body consists of 21% African-American, 76% Hispanic, 0.7% Asian, 2% White, and 0.2% Native American, reflecting the neighborhood demographics.

**Table 1. Ford Elementary Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Students per teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 1</strong></td>
<td>586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 3</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade 5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Teachers           | 23                   |
| Paraprofessionals  | 18                   |
| Administrators     | 2                    |
| Other Professionals| 10.5                 |
| School Support     | 6                    |

**Ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student Attendance 2002-2003**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of school year</th>
<th>Year round</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average daily attendance</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total safety and discipline reports</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Percent of students who are English Language Learners 2002-2003**

| Total                  | 46.1%       |
| Native language is Spanish | 46%        |
| Native language other than Spanish | 0.2% |

*Figure 4: Demographics; Source: Ford Elementary*
Section 4: The Constituents

Students

Approximately 95% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches. A child on free and reduced lunch has an 11 times greater risk of not going to college. Poverty can often be associated with acts of rebellion and low test scores. During the 2001-2002 school year, twenty-three students were suspended. Special programs offered at Ford include a Transitional Native Language Instruction Program, Reading Recovery, Success in Early Reading and Six-Trait Writing. Less than 26% of the students scored proficient or advanced on the CSAP tests, and there was a significant decline in CSAP scores from 2001 and 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSAP Trend At Ford (percent proficient)</th>
<th>Grade 3 Reading</th>
<th>Grade 4 Reading</th>
<th>Grade 4 Writing</th>
<th>Grade 5 Math</th>
<th>Grade 5 Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change: 1999 to 2003</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>-8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** = Test not given  x = Information unavailable

Figure 5: CSAP Scores; Source: DPS website on Ford

Figure 6: Students in class; Source: Google.com
The children that I have met are creative, curious, and energetic. Their individual personalities shine on the playground and in the classroom as they play and learn. They are very accepting of each other and willing to cooperate and assist their teachers.

**Teachers & Administrators:**
Wanda Lenox has been a principal for the last five years and a principal at Ford for the past two years. Forty-seven percent of the teachers have three years or less experience, 28% have 4-10 years of experience, and 26% have 11 years or more experience. Also, thirty percent of the teachers have a Masters degree.

The teachers and administrators that I have met are easy-going, great with children, and excited about the improvements that will be made to their playground.

**Community & Parents:**
Although there are many apathetic and under-educated parents in the community, the majority of them are involved in their child’s education. Ford has a Parent Involvement Program, which offers four parent education programs in the area of literacy. The focus is building the academic base and increasing student achievement through both parents and teachers.

A large number of parents only speak Spanish. The school created a program to teach English to the Spanish-speaking parents and participation is high.
Section 5: Site Inventory And Safety Assessment

Safety Issues

The playground is visible from the street on all sides and is relatively safe at night with minimal lighting surrounding the basketball court. However, there is still minor graffiti occurring on occasion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surface</th>
<th>Area (square feet)</th>
<th>Percentage of Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asphalt</td>
<td>68,426 (includes half court and parking lot)</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground soft surface</td>
<td>19,851</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass</td>
<td>149,137</td>
<td>50.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>62,706</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc. (walkways, landscaping, right-of-way)</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>302,620</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Site Surface Areas; Source: DPS

General Surface Area

The current parking lot is sufficient for the amount of teachers and staff at Ford, but it is not large enough for the amount of visitors that stop by each day. Also, the delivery and trash pick-up areas are located on the far end of the parking lot and do not have a specific drive, therefore they are forced to drive right through and take up some of the parking area. More handicapped spaces need to be added as well, as there is only one allotted.

Figure 9: Parking Lot/Delivery/Trash Pick-up Area; Source: Ilbret Adeh
After completing the site inventory (see appendix) the playground can only accommodate 22% of the children at a given time. This large under serving of the school population causes many children not to participate and with a minimal recess period of 15 minutes, have no time to play and enjoy themselves. A large bleak field of pea gravel (soft surface) and old steel playground equipment dominates the intermediate/primary playground. This has caused a huge under-use of the playground equipment which is sufficient for the amount of students at recess time.

“Children deserve the same diversity and richness in their outdoor play environments as they have indoors.”

--Esbensen, 1987
Figure 11: Surface Areas; Ford Elementary; Source: DPS modified by Ilbret Adeh

The blocks of orange represent soft surface, or pea gravel. The blocks of gray represent asphalt, and the green represents turf.
Asphalt and turf cover the largest amount of surface area on the site. The playground suffers from an outdoor environment and athletic fields dominated by little or non-existent turf, chain link fences and very few trees – along with playground equipment considered unsafe to use. The playground is inadequate - accommodating only 22% of the students that are enrolled at Ford Elementary.
Asphalt
Ford has one small and one large asphalt area. Two basketball half courts share a small square in the northwest corner of the lot and are located away from the street. The large asphalt area is marked heavily with four-square areas, about 11 to be exact, and all crowded into each other leaving little room for free asphalt play. All asphalt surfaces have been patched, however, they are cracking through the patches as well as other places.

Concrete
The majority of the school’s circulation is handled by a very narrow concrete path that runs all along the building, there are no stairs on the site. The concrete path is very narrow and unusable. The orientation of the building results in problems with ice and snow.

Soft Surface
Pea gravel is considered a soft surface and covers the playground areas. The playground equipment is located in two areas, the west for ECE and the east for the remainder of the school population.
**Irrigated Turf And Trees**

Irrigated turf hugs the school building. The grounds of the school on the western and southern ends are well landscaped and the trees are in good condition. A large lawn exists between the street and the main entrance. The adjacent park is small but has plenty of grass area with only a couple of large trees at the perimeter for shade.

![Figure 15: Trees on east side of building; Source: Ilbret Adeh](image)

**Play equipment**

The school has two levels of traditional play equipment: ECE/Kindergarten and primary/intermediate. The ECE and Kindergarten playground is located toward the front of Ford and accommodates 18 out of 84 students.

![Figure 16: ECE play equipment; Source: Ilbret Adeh](image)

The ECE and Kindergarten playground consists of one piece of play equipment that is less than 10 years old and has one slide, a climber, horizontal bars, and a horizontal ladder. The playground is minimal and unimaginative. According to one of the teachers, a soft rubber mat was installed around the immediate area of the play structure about two years ago that cost $3,000. It is already in pieces.
The primary/intermediate play equipment is older than 10 years. Everything is made out of steel, and can get dangerously hot in warmer weather.

![Primary/Intermediate Play Equipment](image)

Figure 17: Primary/Intermediate Play Equipment; Source: Ilbret Adeh

The swings are located adjacent to Ford Park, but extremely close to the fence that separates them, possibly causing an injury if someone were to walk behind while the swings are in play. There are three tetherball courts, two basketball courts, eleven four-square courts, and one baseball/soccer field. The playground offers too many competitive games and not enough cooperative play opportunities. Other equipment includes one slide, two swings, five climbers, one horizontal ladder, and five horizontal bars accommodating 129 out of 419 students. The great lack of shade means that children in the summer months are at risk for burning themselves using slides or metal grab rings.
Figure 18: Intermediate/Primary Play Area; Source: Ilbret Adeh
Drainage:

The playgrounds are too flat and do not drain adequately. Water pools underneath the play equipment and on the asphalt play areas after rain or snow melt.

Vehicular & Pedestrian Access/ Parking

Parents drop-off and pick-up their children either directly in front of the school, which is right off of the street or in the school’s parking lot, either situation is unsafe as children run all over and cars are speeding by. School staff and the public uses the northern lot with its 65 spaces, including designated spaces for the principal, nurse, etc. The amount of parking does not seem adequate enough for the needs of the school. Per DPS standards, there should be 1 parking space for every classroom plus .5 for every ECE through 3rd grade classroom, an additional 15 spaces for support and supplemental staff and 5 for visitors. Ford meets the required amount with its 65 spaces, however with so many visitors coming and going each day as well as the delivery and trash pick-up traffic, additional parking is needed. There is also parking along Maxwell Place.
Figure 20: Circulation; Source: Ilbret Adeh
Section 6: Survey of Constituent Needs And Desires

Ford’s Beliefs:

“It is our goal to continue to pursue in the spirit of Barney Ford, the man who never let obstacles keep him from a superior performance, we know we can and must push our line of development and improve achievement. Goals for Ford are to attain a rating of at least average on the State Accountability Reports, and to reduce the number of students scoring below proficient on the CSAP test. Ford believes that many students will score “proficient” or “advanced” this year.

Students:

These images show the many options/opportunities the children and the school have for adding new playground components. With all the choices presented to the kids, they were quite excited and carefully chose what they want on their new playground.
**Teachers/ Administration:**

The teachers and administration want to expand the existing parking lot and create a specific drive for the delivery and trash pick-up trucks. They would also like to create a one-way in and one-way out driveway on either end of the lot, to minimize traffic congestion. The principal would like to highlight the entrance to the school and create a safer pick-up and drop-off area for the parents and kids. One suggestion was to create a round-about at the entrance, taking the children traffic off of the street. The teachers and administration want topographic changes and various surfaces throughout the playground. They want walkways with educational “imprints” such as letters, numbers and maps. A shady outdoor classroom, a shade structure, and shaded seating with tables are requested.

The principal would like to work with the City to possibly open up the use of Ford Park to the school, and combine it with the existing playground for more grass area and a nicer look as well.

The staff wants to see more “kid friendly” tetherball courts rather than having them climb on each other to hang the ball on the pole. When asked about possibly reducing the number of competitive games like tetherball, one teacher replied, “The kids love tetherball and four-square.” The staff requested a full basketball court on even and clean asphalt. The principal wants to keep the existing ECE play equipment as it is only a few years old, but would maybe want to add some other age appropriate elements. The principal and teachers would like to see new grass on the soccer/baseball fields, stating that the kids love to play soccer.

The most important and emphasized request from all staff is a shade structure with seating that everyone can use, it was stated that it gets too hot in the summer and the kids and teachers are miserable.

**Community:**

The community members want a place to gather with the children on the weekends. They expressed interest in a major shade structure with minor structures around, as well as good grass for playing soccer and a well-maintained basketball court.
INTRODUCTION

There are 5 components to this master plan that are intimately intertwined in the development of the playground:

- The vision and goals;
- The list of programmatic elements;
- The spatial concept; and,
- The organizational concept.

The vision and goals were created in response to the needs and desires of the school and the surrounding community. The vision concisely states the overall objective of the playground design. The goals lay out more specifically how the vision will be fulfilled. The list of programmatic elements quantifies the physical elements and games that will occupy various spaces on the playground. The spatial concept diagrammatically describes how the programmatic elements spatially relate to one another and to the surrounding context. Finally, the organizational concept sets up a method for organizing the programmatic elements on the grounds.

Together, these five components become the driving force for the actual design of the playground. Since these components are derived from the initial research and analysis, they powerfully address the needs and concerns of the school and surrounding community. And, as such, they are the seeds and the soil from which a fruitful, thoughtful design grows.

THE COMPONENTS:

VISION:
The Ford campus will be the stitch that pulls together all aspects of education (academic, physical, social, and cultural) revealing and celebrating the context of the Montbello neighborhood.

GOALS:
1) To design a landscape that facilitates learning through interactive and creative play.
2) To create spaces that accommodates multiple uses.
3) To provide a gathering place for the Montbello neighborhood.
List of Programmatic Elements:

Play Equipment
Primary playground equipment area (40’x 50’)
Intermediate playground equipment area (40’x 60’)
Existing equipment to remain for ECE and Kindergarten
Four swings

Hard Surface Play
Four four-square courts
Three hopscotch courts
Four tetherball courts
Two full size basketball courts

Soft Surface Play
Grassy playing field

Gathering Areas
An outdoor classroom – 25’x 25’
(2) Shade structures – 400 square feet each
Picnic tables and benches

Interactive Hills/ Boulder Areas

Gateway

Banner Poles

Habitat Landscape

There are three separate cost estimates for Ford Elementary, one summarizes improvements to the front entrance, one summarizes improvements to the parking and one summarizes improvements to the learning landscape area. These can be found in the appendix.
The Spatial Diagram:

Figure 22: Spatial Diagram; Source: Ilbret Adeh
The Organizational Concept:

How the Goals Will Be Fulfilled:

The vision states that the Ford campus will be the stitch that pulls together all aspects of education (academic, physical, social, and cultural) revealing and celebrating the context of the Montbello neighborhood. One of the goals is to design a landscape that facilitates learning through interactive and creative play. Other goals are to create spaces that accommodate multiple uses, and provide a gathering place for the Montbello community.

Goal #1:

The spatial diagram, including programmatic elements and the organizational concept, work to fulfill the vision and the goals. Physical education opportunities are combined with creative interactive areas that promote academics. For example court games, including basketball, tetherball, and four-square, encourage physical activity.
The playground facilitates movement, like running, walking, and climbing with the court games, swings, field, and interactive areas.
Goal #2:

Spaces in the playground accommodate multiple uses. For example the field can be used for ball games such as soccer, baseball, or kickball.

Figure 27: Soccer; Source: Google images.com

Another space that accommodates multiple uses is the asphalt court game area located near the shade structure. The raised shade structure can be a stage for ceremonies and large group events, such as graduations or concerts, while the audience congregates on the courts.

Figure 28: Community gathering; Source: Google images.com
Goal #3:

“Places are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centers of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties.” (The Resurgence of Place, Don Alexander).

The playground of Ford Elementary, which is currently uninspiring and ignored, has the opportunity to become a very special place that impacts children in a positive way, along with the Montbello neighborhood which is a dynamic community.

Figure 29: Collage; Source: Ilbret Adeh
The changing seasons are an aesthetic ordering device. They are guided by the concept of change and growth as with the Montbello neighborhood and Ford Elementary. The dynamics of the seasons relate metaphorically to the dynamics of the neighborhood. Like seasons that are constantly changing and growing, the Montbello neighborhood is and has been changing and growing since the 1960’s, with its design and architecture of the buildings. The same thing has been happening within Ford Elementary, and the intent is to create a playground that flows with the changes and growth of not only the community, but the school as well, keeping the identity of the neighborhood and school constant through the change. A tangible example would be the flow of a river around the existing rocks that jut out from the bottom. The water is constantly moving over and around the rocks, never staying in one place. I see the learning landscape for Ford Elementary in much the same way, with many different experiences all throughout, creating an environment where the children are constantly moving and flowing from one area to another experiencing new things each time.