GILPIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:

A 2001 Landscape Master Plan for Elementary School Campus Improvements

Prepared For: Denver Public Schools
900 Grant Street
Denver, Colorado

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As Part of a Course: Finding Common Ground
Exploring the Urban Experience
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University of Colorado at Denver
College of Architecture and Planning
Denver, Colorado
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Approved: Principal, Gilpin Elementary
Date

Approved: CDM Representative
Date

Approved: P.M., DPS Facility Management
Date

Approved: Grounds Supervisor, DPS
Facilities Management
Date
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Project Description

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 into 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 school, 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 Disabilities Act [ADA] accessibility, and providing an outdoor classroom learning environment. Approximately half of the 75 elementary schools are located within under-served 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.

Location and Background

Project Objective
Denver Public Schools has commissioned this Master Plan to provide a comprehensive design for the Gilpin Elementary campus grounds. The Master Plan consists both of this document as well as a rendered Master Plan Drawing, a reduction of which is included in Appendix A. This plan provides a cohesive design framework such that site improvements may be phased in a logical and economical manner. In addition, it provides a cohesive vision for the entire site.

Project Location
Gilpin Elementary is located at 2949 California Street, Denver Colorado, 80205.

The student body at Gilpin Elementary is composed of children from the surrounding Curtis Park/Five Points neighborhood. One of Denver’s oldest and historic communities, the Five Points neighborhood is bounded by Downing, 38th Street, 20th Avenue, and the South Platte River. Situated several blocks from the northeastern edge of downtown, Gilpin Elementary faces the challenges of urban education. Many Gilpin students are from lower-income households; 82.6% of the students receive free school lunches. According to data collected by the Piton Foundation in 2000, residents of the Five Point neighborhood are a diverse population. Neighborhood demographics describe the population as 42.9% Latino, 27.4% Non-Latino White, 25.4% African American, 1.3% American Indian, and 0.6% Asian/Pacific Islander.
Constituent Groups

Students
Student membership at Gilpin Elementary totals 430 students for the 2001-2002 school year. Gilpin offers educational programs for students of the ECE level to 5th grade. Currently, there are 34 ECE students, 72 kindergartners, 72 first graders, 62 second graders, 58 third graders, 52 fourth graders, and 80 fifth graders. The school also provides an Extended Day Care Center, which offers academically based enrichment classes for children before and after regular school hours. Many Gilpin students are from lower-income households; 82.6% of the students receive free school lunches. The ethnicity of the student population was described as 57.2% Latino, 37.0% African American, 3.4% Non-Latino White, 1.4% American Indian, and 1.0% Asian/Pacific Islander. Approximately 32% of the student population were primarily Spanish speakers and enrolled in an English Language Learners Program.

Faculty
The faculty at Gilpin Elementary is dedicated to academic achievement. During the school years 1999-2001, 54.8% of Gilpin faculty had 11 years or more of teaching experience. The Gilpin faculty also has 24 members with tenure. The Gilpin School Improvement Plan provides staff development strategies for reading, writing, and math. The Gilpin faculty are “proud that we are facing the challenges of raising our CSAP scores head-on” and have “incorporated many programs for students, parents, and staff that foster academic growth.” Some of these programs include Arts/Theatre Partnerships, ESL Parent Classes, Summer Scholars, and the Morning Homework Club. CSAP results for the 2000 school year are as follows:

| Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) 2000 Totals (percent proficient/advanced) |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
|                                               | Grade 3       | Grade 4       | Grade 5        |               |
|                                               | Reading %     | Reading %     | Writing %      | Math %        |
| Gilpin Elementary                             | 29%           | 16%           | 13%            | 9%            |
| Denver Public Schools                         | 47%           | 37%           | 18%            | 20%           |
| Colorado                                     | 69%           | 61%           | 36%            | 47%           |
Neighborhood History

Denver’s Five Points Neighborhood was one of the city’s earliest neighborhoods. Additions to the city were created in anticipation of growth resulting from the completion of railroad systems linking Denver with the East. The first addition within the Five Points Neighborhood, the Case and Ebert Addition, occupied an immense area south of the South Platte River and north of the commercial heart of the city at Fifteenth and Larimer Streets. To make the subdivision more attractive to potential homeowners, developers Case and Ebert created a 2.44 acre park on a block of land near the center of the addition. Case and Ebert donated the park to the city in 1868, becoming the first public park in Denver. The park was named after the early settler, Samuel Curtis.

A number of factors influenced early development in the Five Points Neighborhood. The city’s first street car system operated a line ending at 27th and Champa in the city’s first streetcar suburb, Curtis Park. During the 1870’s, the area surrounding Curtis Park slowly developed into one of the most fashionable of Denver’s early residential areas. Within the neighborhood, both well-to-do and those of middle class and lesser means were able to purchase lots and erect comfortable homes away from the inner city. The convenient rail access and plentiful water supply in the northeastern portion of the neighborhood attracted industries. The rail yards, smelters, and other industries in turn brought families who sought homes near their employment. Many of the families drawn to these areas were newly arrived immigrants.

In 1881, the name “Five Points” came into popular usage to denote the intersection of Welton Street, 27th Street, Washington Street, and East 26th Avenue. The term was popularized by the Stout Street Herdic Coach Line, which sought an abbreviated designation to put on their cars to identify the five-pointed intersection at the end of the route.

By the mid 1880’s, Capitol Hill had replaced Five Points as the most prestigious residential area of the city and many of the city’s power elite moved from Five Points to Capitol Hill. Following the Panic of 1893, many of the larger homes of the Five Points area were turned into boarding houses or homeowners took in lodgers to make ends meet.
As older residents moved away, new groups found the neighborhood attractive, including many eastern European immigrants, African Americans, and Latinos. Denver’s small African American community grew steadily during the nineteenth century. In 1860, census takers recorded only 15 African American men and 8 women within the city. By 1890, there 3,923 African Americans in Denver, most of them confined by segregation into portions of lower downtown and the Five Points neighborhood. And according to the 1940 census, 46% of all Mexican-American households were located in the Five Points neighborhood.

Existing Site

School History

Gilpin Elementary School first opened its doors on January 6th, 1882. Named for William Gilpin, the first territorial governor of Colorado, the public school became one of Denver’s educational landmarks. Over the next 60 years, the Gilpin school building would undergo three major additions and an expanding curriculum. In 1948 a $21 million bond issue was approved by citizens for the construction of a new school building. The new Gilpin school was completed in September, 1951 and represented a new kind of building for elementary schools. Featuring 26 classrooms, 3 kindergartens, a 309 seat auditorium, an art studio, and an all-purpose room, the new school also provided a gymnasium, a cafeteria, a library, faculty rooms, and general offices. All of which were constructed and located to allow for the maximum of daylight.

Today, nearly 500 children are educated in these same spaces and in the Extended Day Center. Described as “the school that works for people who work”, the Gilpin Extended Day center provides a safe, enriching before and after school day care environment for school age children whose parents work full time. The program offers a variety of activities, including team sports and gymnastics, music and dance classes, computer and science education, photography and drama clubs, free play and study time.
Site Inventory

General Conditions
Gilpin Elementary occupies the two city blocks bounded by 28th Street, Stout, 30th Street, and California. The school building measures approximately 35,215 square feet and sits on a site legally measuring 178,396 square feet. Residential homes surround the site on all four sides and detached side-walks and a tree lawn mark the school’s perimeter. At the southern boundary, an alley separates the school yard from adjacent residential housing. Chain link fencing encloses the school yard and defines the points of entry from Stout and California. The main entrance to the school building is located on California and provides a semi-circular student drop-off area. Faculty parking is located near the southern end of the school yard and is accessible from Stout. Both Stout and California are one way streets and clearly dictate the vehicular movement around the site. The existing surface areas are described below:

Existing Site Conditions: Surface Area Square Footages (sf)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surface Type</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>% of Total Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irrigated Turf</td>
<td>57,842 sf</td>
<td>32.42 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asphalt</td>
<td>40,860 sf</td>
<td>22.90 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Surface</td>
<td>22,569 sf</td>
<td>12.65 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>12,132 sf</td>
<td>6.80 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Irrigated Turf</td>
<td>7,431 sf</td>
<td>4.17 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscaping</td>
<td>2,345 sf</td>
<td>1.32 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Irrigated Turf
Irrigated turf areas are scattered throughout the site with a major portion of the turf dedicated to the playing field. Measuring approximately 49,555 square feet, the playing field accommodates physical education activities and group sports like soccer and baseball. There is adequate space for two 30x50 yard soccer fields and two baseball backstops are currently in place at the southwestern and southeastern corners of the field. The existing playing field is in need of repair. It is an un-even, dimpled surface covered with large patches of dirt and unmanageable weeds.
Asphalt
There are three asphalt areas at the Gilpin school yard. The first is a 17,454 square foot piece of asphalt that sits adjacent to the southern exterior of the school building and serves as a hard surface play area and gathering space. This area includes four tetherball poles, four four-square games, and a colorful map of the United States. The area is also bound by a short concrete wall where students, parents, and faculty can sit, talk, and watch others at play. This area is also used as a ‘staging area’, where students are lined up by class before entering the building. The primary access to the school yard from the building runs directly through this space, as do the entry paths from Stout and California. The second asphalt area is located between the intermediate play equipment and Stout. It currently supports one full-court and two half-court basketball courts. This area measures 4,773 square feet and is bound by chain link fencing on two sides. The third asphalt area is dedicated to faculty parking. It measures 8,834 square feet and provides 29 parking spaces. It can be accessed from Stout and is enclosed by chain link fencing that is locked during school hours.

Soft Surface
The soft surface area defines the space devoted to traditional play equipment. The soft surface area is divided into two parts. The larger part, measuring 13,238 square feet, serves the intermediate play equipment. The smaller part, measuring 6,004 square feet, serves the primary play equipment. The material currently used to fill both of these areas is pea gravel.

Concrete
As a surface material, concrete is primarily found at the school yard’s western point of entry on Stout. A concrete pad and pathway measuring 5,372 square feet brings students, parents, neighbors, and faculty from the city sidewalk to the interior of the school yard. The pathway continues through the site and connects to the secondary point of entry on California.
Non-Irrigated Turf
There are two relatively small areas of non-irrigated turf. One is located at the southern end of the site and is adjacent to the faculty parking lot and alley. It measures 4,118 square feet and is currently unused. The other area of non-irrigated turf sits between the existing basketball courts and the traditional play equipment areas. It measures 2,980 square feet and holds several of the site’s mature, shade providing trees.

Landscaping
Landscaped areas are minimal at Gilpin Elementary. Small areas of plant material can be found throughout the site, varying in size from 40 to 250 square feet. However, two significant pieces of landscaping mark the entry points at both Stout and California, each measuring 229 square feet and 837 square feet respectively. A third piece, measuring 661 square feet, marks the connection of pathway and play area at the interior of the school yard.

Traditional Play Equipment
Gilpin currently has two areas of traditional play equipment, an intermediate play area and a primary play area. The intermediate play equipment consists of three slides, two horizontal ladders, three sets of horizontal bars, three fire poles, two sets of travel rings, one nine-seat swing set, and a small physical education obstacle course. This equipment is intended to be used by third, fourth, and fifth graders. The primary play area consists of four slides, one horizontal ladder, one set of horizontal bars, one fire pole, one two-seat swing set, one play house, and one climbing dome. This equipment is intended to be used by ECE, kindergartners, first graders, and second graders. A series of graduated wood logs and a concrete pathway partially separate the two areas. For some students, the two play areas are interchangeable and there is no distinction between the user groups. For others, the primary play area does not offer interesting play experiences and the user groups are segregated. According to physical education teacher Mr. Bob Mantooth, all play equipment was newly installed during a 1995 renovation.
Seating Areas
Picnic tables and park benches are important elements to the Gilpin school yard. They provide students, parents, neighbors, and faculty a place to stop and passively interact with others and with their surroundings. The existing tables and benches are used frequently by neighborhood residents and students as a place to gather and socialize. Colorado’s intense summer sun makes shade a key component to these seating areas, while the occasional graffiti tag requires that the elements are easily repaintable.

Adequacy of On-Site Uses

Safety
Parents and Gilpin faculty members discussed their concerns about safety during a September 2001 Parent Advisory Council Meeting. Minutes from the meeting state, “Many parents expressed their concern about the playground not being full fenced and unsafe for their children. Too many strangers walk through the school grounds during school hours and children are unsafe. Large rocks on the playground make it unsafe for children to play.” Other safety concerns include adequate exterior lighting, minor vandalism and graffiti, and the cleanup of various types of dangerous debris found on school grounds.

Equipment
New play equipment was installed at the Gilpin Elementary school yard within the last five years. Issues of maintenance and adherence to safety regulations are vital to keeping the school yard safely functioning. The nine-seat swing set located in the intermediate play area and the climbing dome in the primary play area may be the only pieces of equipment requiring replacement. Soft surface material under the play equipment must be modified to meet the DPS and Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) minimum depth of 12 inches. A complete DPS Playground Safety Site Assessment is included in Appendix B.

Handicapped Accessibility
Existing and additional play equipment must be made accessible.
Parking
Based on the 1 space/classroom standard, the existing 29 parking spaces located at the southern end of the school yard are sufficient. Their proximity to the school building is less than desirable, but generally accepted by the faculty. On-street parking is occasionally used by faculty and parents.

Master Plan

Conceptual Plan
Redesign of the playground will stimulate play as well as catalyze learning in the landscape: both are afforded through traditional play equipment and non-traditional, pluralistic elements. Inclusion of outdoor learning activities encourages observation and creative thinking. The redesign seeks to accommodate differences in gender, learning style, and personality through the creation of various kinds and sizes of spaces. The design strives to include math, science, language, and art within a hands-on outdoor environment. The naturalized site improvements promote knowledge of, and respect for, nature, biology, and ecology through increased visitation, understanding, and interaction with wildlife, plants, and natural processes.

The larger community will benefit not only through the gains of its children, but also through the site’s design as a community focal point. The redesign mitigates functional deficiencies of the grounds. In addition, the increased respect shown to the school grounds reflects the value of Gilpin Elementary as a whole. Eileen Adams described this concept best by saying, “the need to create an environment which not only provides for the developing child’s educational needs, but where a special ambiance is created which signifies that young people are cherished, respected, and considered.” (1993)

Master Plan Vision Statement
The Gilpin Elementary School Master Plan will instill a sense of place for the Curtis Park and Five Points neighborhood by realizing the school yard as a neighborhood park that celebrates its place within the city and foster positive relationships among and between students and neighbors.
Master Plan Goals
This vision can be realized through the following set of goals:
Create a sense of place.
   Improve conditions on site.
   Visual and functional unification of elements
   Improve safety.

Celebrating Gilpin Elementary’s place in the city.
   Create a gateway or defined point of entry.
   Establish the school and its playground as a neighborhood landmark.

Foster positive relationships among and between Gilpin students and neighbors.
   Create non-programmed spaces.
   Provide interactive learning elements that inspire creativity.
   Redesign ECE play area to encourage self-directed learning.
   Develop educational spaces that compliment the school’s curriculum.

Master Plan Program Elements
The playground redesign will create an exciting learning landscape through the development of new programmatic spaces. These spaces will include:
   Outdoor Classroom
   Science Garden
   Community Plaza
   Welcome Arch/Gateway
   Shade Pavilion
   Game Courts
   Traditional Play Equipment:
      Primary and Intermediate
   Multi-Purpose Play Field
   Running Track

Master Plan Aesthetic Ordering System
Maps of the city of Denver reveal the interaction of two grid systems of varying orientation. With Gilpin Elementary’s rich historical legacy and close proximity to both Denver’s historical downtown and modern urban center, the link between time and place is strong. An abstraction of these Denver based grid systems will serve as the aesthetic ordering system by which the new playground design will be led.