McMeen Elementary
1000 S. Holly St
Denver CO 80218

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Learning Landscapes Studio
Site Location:
1000 S. Holly St.
Denver CO 80218

A total of around 615 kids attend the school.
Around 80% of the children qualify for or receive free or reduced lunch.
The former playground was described as dilapidated, worn, insufficient, dry, contained, unimaginative, tired, barren, divided, and bleak. The emotive qualities of the teachers were described as frustrated, wary, overwhelmed, and disbelieving. The community was described as rooted, responsible, cautious, diverse, and eager.

Of the 327,200 square feet the breakdown includes

- 21% of the site was asphalt
- 16% of the site was building
- 1% of the site was concrete
- 13% of the site was irrigated turf
- 49% of the site was soft surface

The field area contained nothing but packed dirt. No grass grew in the area and contrasted sharply from the park on the other side.

GOALS

1. To provide a comfortable, secure environment for community gathering and different academic, physical and social learning styles.
2. To create a landscape that represents and celebrates the diversity of McMen Elementary and instills a sense of pride in the students, teachers, faculty and community.
3. To promote positive interactions through improved circulation and defensible space.

List of Programmatic Elements

- ECE Play Area
- Creative Play Areas
- Gathering Spaces
- Solitary Spaces
- Participatory Learning
- Community Sports/Team Related Play Areas
- Gardens
- Aesthetic Variety
- Visual Interest
The student plan stays very diagrammatic while still providing main circulation strategies and the locations of key elements. The circulation laid out assumes that each areas elements would be of equal or similar size. The spaces in reality are of great variance and should look to an alternative in path layout. Some of the paths lead to nowhere or have elements placed at the end of them arbitrarily. The contoured landscape and gardens flanking both sides of it could benefit from being in different locations.
The educational elements of the site are a great addition. Mostly the pieces are used by the younger students in learning about regional geography and ecology. The youngest students learn numbers and basic addition and subtraction through the use of the number grid. The four square courts give everything from native Coloradan animals to the larger context of how McMeen Elementary fits into the United States. The amphitheatre is occasionally used by classes as a point for group discussion. It was discussed with a few different students about using the educational elements in ways other than how they were intended. The students came up with very creative ways at using the different elements of the playground.

Some missed opportunities happened with the plantings on the site. Currently they are quite bare either never having been planted or trampled by the students. More than likely it looks as though the beds were cut as costs began to increase.
The illustrative plan much more comprehensively articulates proper space within the site than did the student masterplan. Now we see very defined shapes of space and their actual size. The pathways are laid and the trees are placed.
Chevo Studios has a very good handle on how space is actually used by people. Their hands-on approach in the design development phase is a great way to develop such a skill. A missed opportunity however for this part of the overall design is in the shade structure. Similar to how the shadows show in the pictures below the shade from the shade structure doesn’t fall to the seating in any way. What might have worked a little better could have been to switch the location of the trees and the shade structure around. Eventually the seating area will be shaded but that will take 30 years for the trees to mature enough to do any good at shading. Re-locating the shade structure would provide for instant shading of the gathering space.
Elements such as the line of banners stuck with the design all the way through from the beginning. The original circulation patterns of the site from the student masterplan can still be seen in the final product. It was however taken and tweaked to much better suit the site.

Added elements to the site that add to and complement other existing details are;

- A “riverwalk” experience starts at the center of the gathering space and radiates out spiraling back to the parking lot, student artwork on the banner poles that go along with the riverwalk starting at McMeen and going all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico, and other student artwork themed blockouts set into the concrete.

- Larger elements added include planter boxes that were intended to be planted by the school (which hasn’t been followed through with), the amphitheatre (outdoor classroom) as the focal point, musical nodes, small boulders, & bright treatments to the asphalt.
Children learn quite a bit experimenting with creativity and imagination and learning how to interact socially. I would like to see with many of these Learning Landscapes already completed the ability for unstructured play. The imaginative process is a huge part of creating one's own entertainment and being self-sufficient, socially adept. It helps in coping with stress, and building cognitive skills such as problem solving.

Games with rules are fun and sources of learning experiences, and they may foster better social skills and group cohesion. But, games have a priori rules—set up in advance and followed. Play, on the other hand, does not have priori rules, so it affords more creative responses. This creative aspect is key because it challenges the developing brain more than following predetermined rules does. In free play, kids use their imagination and try out new activities and roles.

What are some ways in which the students can continue to create artwork and continue to evolve the site year after year? These elements that were created seem to be one-shot attempts and don’t look at how the students can manipulate the space and create their own identity and connection to it.