Parks! What are They Good For?

Natural landscapes have been a close part of who we are as a culture since our country’s birth. We as a nation have a proud history for promoting the availability of natural spaces and parks for people to enjoy. Parks have been an important aspect of California life as well, with the creation of Golden Gate Park and others like it. After all, our country has a history of pioneers who dared to venture into wild landscapes and unfamiliar wilderness. People have always had a need to connect with nature, while at the same time try to tame it for their benefit, or at least the illusion of control. Parks then, represent man’s ideal of what nature should and ought to be in its many forms. Parks are constantly being reimagined and recreated into many different forms. The modern urban park tends to be rationalistic in nature, with specified uses throughout its different areas. The city park is meant to serve specific purposes and activities. I will look into the different ways that these parks serve the communities. I want to gain a better understanding of how the layout of a park influences the activities there. In other words, how the design of a park is directly related to how that park is used by people. I will gain a broad understanding of how the parks are used by the people in the community throughout the entire week.

Pomona offers a wide range of options for parks and outdoor recreation throughout the city. Analyzing a layout of all the parks in the city, it seems as if there is a park available to everyone within close range regardless of where you live in the city. That is definitely a good thing to see, given the wide gap of park resources between higher and lower income neighborhoods in other parts of Los Angeles. Pomona’s official website has 27 park sites listed, located throughout the entire city. The parks vary in size and functionality. Some offer fields to play sports, or jungle gyms for children. Others are more simple with a basic design of pathways and benches only. It will be interesting to see how people take advantage of what is available in these different parks. It will also be interesting to discover how the design of the park influences the activities that take place there. My aim is to understand if Pomona’s parks are
indeed rationalistic in every way, or if they incorporate romantic elements as well. Observing the activities that take place at the parks, will reveal exactly what kind of parks they are.

Americans enjoy staying active, and parks or natural landscapes have been characterized as the ideal place to partake in all those different activities. Peter Harnik described city parks as places where Americans most often enjoy open space, and outdoor recreation. (Harnik) It is this fascination with and desire to participate in physical fun activities that has driven the design of parks throughout the entire country. The park that serves to facilitate outdoor activities has been made as the ideal example of what a park should be in the public conscience. Our society has always put importance on being physically fit, and that also extends to our children. People have always emphasised exercising as a means to good health. Urban parks serve the purpose of allowing people to get exercise where they otherwise normally would not have many options for physical activity. A park is perceived as having to be a place that allows people to get exercise. It is necessary for the park to function as such, in order to give the surrounding community the opportunity of staying healthy.

The park is perceived as being an enjoyable and safe haven for various activities, in the middle of a harsh and loud urban landscape. This applies to psychological factors as well. People treat the park as a refuge from their hectic lives, stresses of everyday life, and noise from the bustling city. Perhaps people have differing reasons for visiting a park, however, all people do benefit in some way or another by visiting parks. Pomona’s parks need to provide people with enough options to allow them to get physically active, and escape their mental stresses and issues. The parks need to do this well for all age groups in the community as well. Do Pomona’s parks facilitate all the activities that modern urban-dwellers of all ages like to partake in to improve their physical and mental well being? There should be certain amenities available in all parks, that allow children to play and get exercise. When I was younger, my favorite part of going to a park was playing with other kids on the jungle gyms, so all children should have access to these resources as I did. City parks are very important to urban-dwellers when it comes to physical activity. They represent a low cost option for physical activity that does not require the added expense of transportation.
A study conducted by Kindal Shores and Stephanie West on physical activity in different park settings, concluded certain points that could be observed in Pomona. They found that smaller parks had lower visitation rates throughout the week, when compared to larger parks with long paved footpaths. They also found that the presence of trails had the strongest connection with physical activity by the visitors. Not surprisingly, they observed that youth were the most active age group, and males more so than females. (Shores) I expect to find similar results when observing the demographics visiting Pomona’s parks. There should be an abundance of kids playing in these parks as well. If not, then perhaps the parks design has something to do with it, or the location of the park itself. From reading this research, it is clear that the physical characteristics of a park has a strong influence on the visitors that come out and the activities they participate in. With any park, there should be a balance that caters to people seeking a haven for physical activity, or a refuge to do some deep thinking. The park should provide amenities that appeal to all age groups, especially the younger crowd. I will find out how well Pomona’s parks accomplish this and what, if any, improvements can be made to provide better park resources to the surrounding communities. I will get a sense for how well the parks of the city serve the entire population living there.

I will categorize all the parks into three different classes, depending on the size by acreage. The smallest class includes parks that are 3 acres or less. These parks are very basic and include, at most, a children’s playground. The next class includes medium sized parks which are under 7 acres. These parks offer more options for activities, and open empty fields. These medium parks also have paved pathways where people can walk or jog. The third class includes all of the larger parks that are 8 acres and above. Pomona’s parks all vary in size, with the vast majority being between 2-10 acres. The largest park, Ganesha, measures at 60 acres, while Centennial park is only half an acre. The sizes of the parks are determined by the surrounding urban development, or lack there of. These parks offer several different options for physical activity, as well as plenty of benches under ample shade. These peaceful places to sit and relax allow residents to get away from their hectic and stressful lives. This is a good way of promoting psychological well being. These large parks provide plenty of options for maintaining physical and mental well being to local residents and those that can get to their locations. It is because
of this, that the large parks are the most ideal and beneficial to have. The fact remains that not all citizens have access to these type of parks, and the communities surrounding them tend to be of higher income. I will observe all the classes of park to see how residents are using them, and figure out if there are any holes in park resources or improvements that can be made.

The smaller parks tend to be located in or around the center core of the city, where urban development is high. These parks are surrounded by residential homes and businesses. Two of the biggest parks in the entire city, Ganesha and Palomares, are located North of the 10 freeway close to city limits. Residents without transportation cannot visit these more ample parks if they live on the other side of Pomona, especially children. Both Washington and Ralph Welch parks are located further inward towards the center of the city. The parks are large and can offer more options to residents who may otherwise only have a small park nearby. It is evident that the areas where there is a higher density of people living are also where you will most likely find a smaller park. The urban sprawl limits the amount of land available for public areas such as parks. The area with the least amount of space available is where the need for robust parks is highest. This is the dilemma that city planners face when deciding where and what kind of park to build. Playgrounds can be found at every park except for Centennial. Picnic tables and benches are in every park, while BBQ grills are in majority of parks. When faced with limited space, designers chose to make the parks appeal and cater to children. Even at the very smallest parks, there are still playgrounds available to give kids a safe place to play. These playgrounds take up a lot of the space available, and they leave little room for anything else within the park. I think that is an important thing to provide to children, and planners were right to design the smaller parks that way. Many parks are located right next to an elementary school or other type of school. These parks provide a safe place for children to play during and after school. These smaller parks are located mostly in or around the high density center of the city, where the lower income families tend to live.

The higher acreage parks are located away from the urban core, on the fringes of the city where there is less human development. These larger parks are able to offer many more amenities to the community, and things that you wouldn’t find in the smaller parks. They include areas for activities such as tennis and basketball. They are able to have long stretching
pathways that encourage people to walk. Some of the largest parks also have expansive swimming pools, and community recreation centers. These large parks offer residents more choices and activities, because of this, they attract more visitors at any given time than their smaller counterparts. All of the parks are designed in a way that is geared toward a specific activity. They are rationalistic in the way they are planned and designed. The parks are made to meet a specific purpose or need of the residents. There are a few large parks which are the perfect example of a rationalistic park, they are Washington and Ralph Welch park. These parks are segmented into different areas designed for specific activities. They have an area with baseball fields, another with basketball courts, a children's playground in another location, and a community center in the middle. All these different segments are meant to provide one type of activity or another, and they are all separate. It is clear to me that city planners approached making the parks from a rationalistic point of view. They wanted to provide as many physical activity options to as many residents as possible.

I visited several small parks throughout the city, and at different times. One time frame during which, I observed park goers, was on a weekday around 3pm. This is an important time because children are out of school but many parents are still at work. I expected to find only school aged kids in the parks at this time because most adults are at work. I visited Cesar Chavez Park at this time. When I visited, I only found a few teenagers sitting on the benches talking. I didn’t see any children playing in the playground. Soon afterward, I arrived at Hamilton Park. There were no kids playing here either. I only observed some adults sitting on a bench. There was also some people laying on the grass taking naps. It was warm that day, so these parks were being used by older people as a place to escape the heat. Centennial park is interesting because it is the smallest park and only has trees and benches. When I visited during the afternoon, there was a group of students sitting and talking. After a few minutes, they walked into the nearby Western University of Health Sciences. I also saw another group of business people gathering in the park. Small parks like these serve exactly that purpose, which is to offer a pleasant place to take a break. The park is a peaceful haven meant to offer mental relaxation and a break from stressful daily lives. These types of small parks are only active during the day when nearby businesses are open. It did surprise me that I didn’t see any kids at
this time. I would expect that the playgrounds would be filled after kids get out of school, but none were present at this time.
I arrived at a couple of other small parks on different weekdays, at or around 6:30pm each day. The first park I observed was Tony Cerda, a small to medium plot at 4 acres. What made this park different is that it had a large empty field. This opens up the possibilities of the activities that park visitors can engage in there. Although the playground was empty, there was still other activities going on. I observed a group of young males playing a friendly game of soccer. I also saw two younger boys playing their own soccer match. There was also a group of older adults, which looked to be like a family. They were having some sort of serious conversation. Tony Cerda was different from the other small parks I visited, in the fact that it has an empty grass field. Soccer is just one of the many examples of how people take
advantage of this open green space. This field attracts broader types of visitors, more so than smaller parks with only playgrounds can. I then visited Powers Park. I expected to find some local kids from the nearby neighborhood playing but it was empty. I thought it was odd that there was nobody there, given that I had visited larger parks on a different day at this same time and there was still plenty of people in them.

Tony Cerda Park (above)
An interesting fact I observed at all the small parks I visited, is the lack of kids using the playgrounds. The visitors that I observed were of an older age group. Additionally, I saw many more males in these parks than females. During the day, these parks are used as places to relax under shade, and take a break from hectic schedules. I mainly saw these parks being used as a quiet place where people can converse with each other. I also observed how the addition of a grassy field can impact who visits the park and what they do during their visit there.

Medium parks I thought were the most interesting, because they had a nice blend of different elements and designs. I visited Kellogg Park at 2:45 on a weekday afternoon. This park is located right next to an elementary school. I did observe kids playing in the jungle gym and running around on the grass. This park also had a round building with benches around it. There were some younger adults wearing badges with the kids. I saw them taking things out of this building. It was a storage facility for several games and activities for the children. They had an after school program for all the kids waiting for their parents to pick them up. This is something positive for children that is afforded to them because of the extra space available. I then arrived at Kiwanis Park shortly afterward. I observed some kids in the playground being watched by their parent. There was also two older business people who were having lunch on a bench. I also saw two young school girls walking in the park. The increased activity I witnessed here could be because of nearby Arroyo elementary school a few blocks to the West. My next stop was at Memorial Park. I again saw a lot more activity going on than at any of the small ones. I observed some teenagers skateboarding in and around the park. There were also many more young adolescents sitting on benches talking. There were people talking in the many different
areas of the park. The park has a good mix of green spaces, as well as playground areas and basketball courts. The extra space attracts people because it gives a sense of isolation and privacy that’s great for having conversations.
I visited some other medium sized parks at a different time. These visits occurred beginning at 6pm, which is when I arrived at Ralph Welch Park. The park was buzzing with activity, and there were plenty of visitors everywhere. This park reminded me of what a typical rationalistic park would look like. The park was segmented into different areas with designated uses. There are basketball courts in one corner, a baseball field adjacent to the courts, a kids playground area, and an open field. There were plenty of children and adults participating in many different activities. There were some kids taking advantage of the open green space by chasing a dog around. I also observed people using the long pathways to walk their dogs, and kids were riding their bikes. It was nice to see the entire park being used in all of these interesting ways at once. I then went to another similarly sized park, Washington. The park also had a lot of visitors, many of them children. Most of the people were in or around the sand playground. There were also some boys playing basketball. It was around 7pm at this time and the parks were still busy with visitors. Lastly, I visited Martin Luther King Jr Park. At this time, I only observed a family at the playground. This park is located next to an elementary school, so it is likely that it is busiest right after kids get out of school. The medium sized parks have many more visitors than the small parks I observed. The extra space allows for more people to be there at the same time, and it opens up the possibilities of what visitors can do there. The children at these parks were all of equal gender, but the older visitors all tended to be male. I did not observe any young women at these parks, sitting in the benches or being physically active. This was similar to the demographics I observed in the small parks as well.
Ralph Welch Park (3 previous photos)
Pomona also has some very large parks on the fringes of the city. The first large park I visited was John F. Kennedy. I arrived shortly after 3pm. The park is near a middle and high school. I saw teenagers relaxing and conversating in the park. People were seeking shade to escape the heat. The vastness of the park provided plenty of space for people to pick their isolated spot away from anyone else. At this time, the park was being used as a place for peaceful tranquility. A place where you can be alone with your thoughts or have a conversation with friends. It seems to me that during the day, parks are used as places to relax and unwind. These uses meet the mental needs of people, and gives them a place where they can escape the stresses of everyday life. In this sense, these parks act as calming natural sanctuaries that provide an escape and not a rationalistic landscape meant for physical activity.
My next visit was at Phillips Ranch Park, I arrived at 7pm. This park has a very large open field and a playground. I observed a woman playing with her dog and letting it roam around. There was also a family at the playground and a little girl riding her bike. I only observed kids riding bikes in the larger parks which had lengthy paved walkways. I then visited another large park called Country Crossing. This park is unique in its shape and design. It is very long and narrow so the shape restricts what can be put on the park. There are no playgrounds or benches. The park has only long paved pathways. When I was there, I saw many people walking walking these paths. These people were all adults and a good mix between women and men.
This was the only park where the visitors weren’t all male. It was obvious that this park is used exclusively as a place for physical exercise. The park sees it’s majority of visitors in late afternoon once adults are home from work. It was interesting to see how this design influences the type of visitors that come out.
The city of Pomona has an interesting blend of parks spread throughout its many areas. The parks are similar to the kinds you would find in a typical urban city. The parks in Pomona are rationalistic by design. That is, they are designed with specific uses in mind. These uses are something physical in nature. The parks are broken up into sections, which serve a specific purpose. The parks’ main purpose is to provide a safe and pleasant area in the middle of urban sprawl, that allows nearby residents to get physical exercise. The availability of children’s playgrounds in all the parks, even the small ones, shows the necessity of physical activity.

The size available for a park is crucial in determining what can be accomplished within the park. Priority is given to creating a play area that appeals to young kids. When faced with limited space, planners ensured the availability of pleasant areas where people could sit under
shade. I believe that observing the small parks, allowed me to gain a better understanding of the thought process that goes behind designing city parks. For it is in small parks, with restricted space, that show what the bare minimum necessities of a park are. At least, what the park planners thought the basic components of a park ought to be. In Pomona, planners felt that every resident should have nearby access to children’s playgrounds and benches with shade. This is what every park should provide, because those things can be enjoyed by all age groups male or female. Adults who wish to exercise in the park have fewer options. Parks that have more space, and therefore offer more possibilities for exercise, attract a more diverse group of visitors. Many of these larger parks are located on the edges of Pomona city limits. The fact that these parks do attract many visitors, indicates that people are willing to travel further to use more spacious parks. The small parks surrounded by densely populated neighborhoods have far fewer visitors because they do not attract people other than children. Adults are able, and willing, to find and travel to the larger parks where they can carry out the physical activity of their choice.

During my time in these parks, I noticed certain trends with the visitors of them. The larger parks seem to attract more visitors than the smaller ones. This seems to be the case at different times and days. Many of the small parks I visited were very lonely, while the larger ones were buzzing with activity. During a weekday afternoon, parks that are in close proximity to a school receive the most visitors. Many students teenage students use the parks as a meeting place with their friends. I observed students arriving in the park, talking with their friends, then walking off somewhere else. In my experience, I witnessed more males than females in the parks on average. The females I observed were in the larger parks jogging, or walking their dogs. Late afternoons are when parks get the most visitors. Parents take their children to the park once they get home from work, and most families prefer to visit the larger parks. This could be because the large parks are able to cater to all age groups, not just the young kids.

Grassfields offer several possibilities for recreation, and can attract different types of people. Parks that have specific uses such as basketball or tennis courts, use up space meant just for people that play those sports. An empty grassfield acts as an empty canvas where
people are free to use their imaginations to come up with an activity they enjoy doing. This includes a group of guys and a ball, a person playing with their dog, or a kid riding a bike. Few of Pomona’s parks have green fields, most use their allotted space for specific physical activities. It is important to have places to play those sports, but people also need these green empty spaces. I would like to see more of these grassfields available in more parks, especially in the densely populated center of the city.

Pomona’s parks are rationalistic in their design and purpose. They are there not so much as a place where you can be one with nature, but rather a place where you can get some physical exercise for free. There are interesting and unique parks scattered throughout the city. These parks offer visitors different options, and people have found interesting ways of using them. The residents of Pomona have a good selection of park resources in their city. They need only to have means of getting to these places. It is clear to me that residents of all ages enjoy their parks, and find them useful in many ways. They serve physical exercise needs in many ways, but people also use these parks to fulfill mental and psychological needs. A good park has to fulfill both, and for the most part, the city's parks do a good job of that.

Bibliography