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Lafayette Square



Lafayette Square, central
hillock, located on the site
of a historic observatory
Photo: Walter Hood

Location: Oakland, California

Sponsors: Oakland Office of Parks and Recreation,
The Downtown Gateway Neighborhood Collaborative,
Berkeley-Oakland Support Services, First Unitarian Church
of Oakland, and Gateway Center for Art and Social Change

Design: Walter Hood, of Hood Design, Oakland, Calif.,
in collaboration with Willie Pettus (architect, community
facilitator) and Rich Seyfarth (landscape architect).



Historic oak tree and newly built public restroom

Photos: Lewis Watts



Horseshoe pit and trellis for new plantings

Lafayette Square is located near downtown Oakland at the confluence of residential, office, convention and historic districts. Its redesign and reconstruction have created a common ground for its diverse users—from residents of newly built condominiums to jobless and homeless people who have frequented the park since the Great Depression—while addressing the park’s historic roots.

Lafayette Square’s history goes back more than a century, when it was one of five blocks set aside as a park in the city’s original plan.

A decade ago the park was beset by maintenance problems, unsanitary conditions and drug use; at one point police tried to forcibly evict its homeless users. Community and social service groups protested and persuaded the city to launch a redesign that involved park regulars, as well as businesses, public safety officials and social agencies.

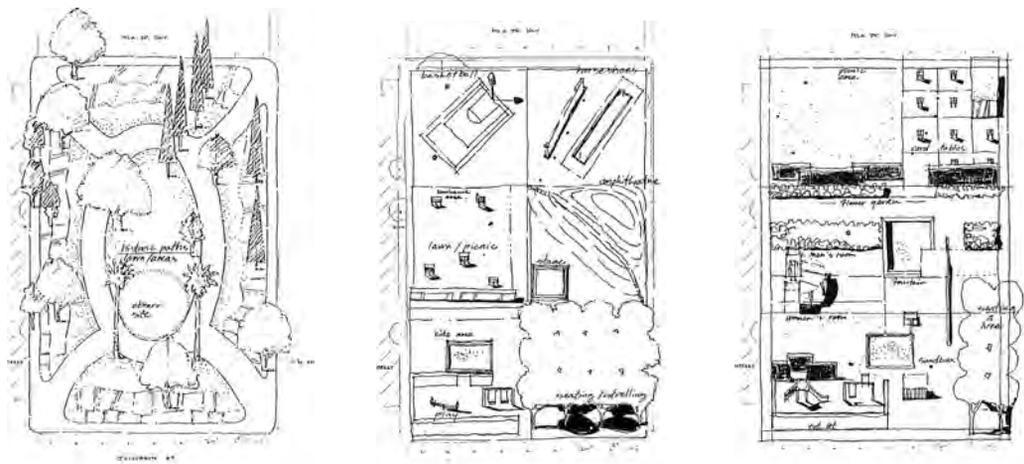
Now Lafayette Square plays several roles at once, civic square, green space and community gathering place. It includes a quiet hillock, lawn and picnic area; game tables, horseshoe pits and barbeque areas; a performance area, playground and restroom. A subsequent phase will include a

small facility for employment and social service programs. The design also borrows from the park’s original layout and functions, recalling historic patterns of vegetation, use, physical movement and form, and re-interpreting historical lighting, ironwork and benches.

Since the first phase was completed in summer, 1999, a wider range of people are using the park without displacing the transient community. Various groups are also exercising stewardship: some transients have been employed to assist with keeping up the space, and condominium residents have organized a community group to assist with programming and events.

The designers noted that archival research and interviews were critical to developing the program and conveying the importance of the park’s rehabilitation to residents and users. The \$1.8 million project has received city and state open space funding and a grant from the National Park Service; the master plan was funded by the Center for Urban and Family Life with a grant from the LEF Foundation.

—Todd W. Bressi



A Bold Act of Faith: Inclusive Design at Lafayette Square

A place new and old.

The interplay between new and old is the essence of downtown Oakland, where a sense of a decaying urbanity mingles with glimpses of an opulent, optimistic past.

Lafayette Square sits in a historic district just a few steps away from this decaying beauty. The park's graceful layout appears as a melancholic vision of past and future. New and old layers interact playfully: a low seating wall curves elegantly around two old iconic palm trees; four dawn red-woods, remnants of an old diagonal path, when the square was oriented around a central space, now connect a historic oak tree with a corner plaza that will soon feature game tables and chairs.

A park, a square, a lawn, a mound, a chess ground, a playground, a barbecue area.

Lafayette Square's patiently crafted landscape speaks of many people, functions and activities. The park's design invites a diverse group of users, but instead of addressing their different needs by creating a homogenous setting, it accepts their diversity by offering a complex array of features, woven together in time and place.

Children run and bike over the mound, experimenting with the thrill of its topography. A Mexican boy sits alone on the sensuous, curvilinear wall, contemplating his just-received paycheck; not far away, a group of downtown workers enjoy their camaraderie over lunch. Transients find their niches under the trees.

A place to rest, eat, work, play and think; a place to find each other tomorrow and the day after.

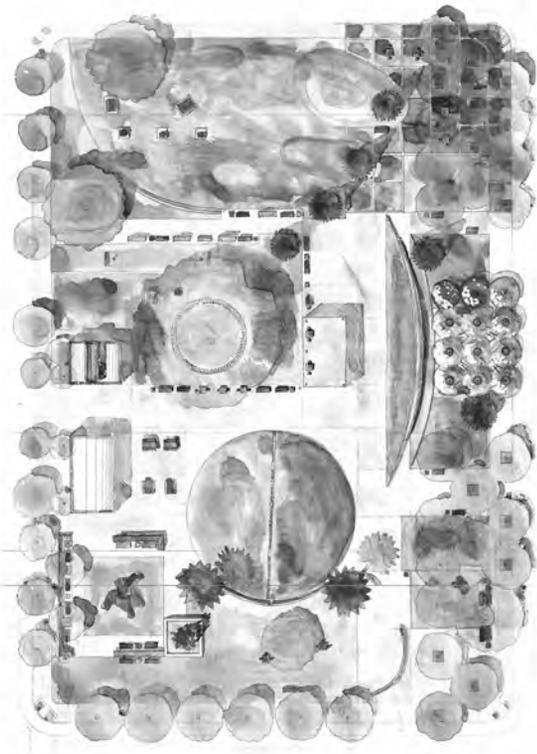
The sense of community one experiences in the park springs from the everyday activities that take place here, enacted without inhibition, constraint or excessive control.

Gathering here means to play, to meet again tomorrow and the day after, for another round. Chess and domino boards, mounted on steel tables, bring together old and new players. Many of them gather between the hillock and the oak; the tables and the benches, disposed in an informal manner, make this the most intensely used space of all.

People meet here to play, hang out, talk or read, creating new rituals or reinterpreting old ones, such as the horseshoe game, now played on an adjacent rectangular dirt field, designed as an homage to a local African-American cultural practice.

The game area and a public restroom nearby act together as an outdoor living room for the community. The restroom's architecture is the opposite of what one might typically expect from such a building; it is elegantly designed, with a vocabulary reminiscent of Ricardo Legoretta and Luis Barragan's metaphysical landscapes. This is therefore a space that speaks to everybody—clean and dignified; colorful with purple and yellow walls; interesting with clocks and bulletin boards outside; useful.

The character of this highly used area is enhanced by the park regulars, people who come to the park every day. One of them opens up the tap outside the restroom to fill up his water bottle, then rejoins the crowd hanging out at the tables. Inside one of the restrooms, somebody set up a small barbershop. The doors are always open, so activities can be monitored from outside.



Lafayette Park, master plan

Somebody sets up a stereo system by one of the entrance doors. Music fills the air, a great soul song. The wind is blowing, the palm fronds sway. Somebody starts a dance, many repeat the words of the refrain, singing its irresistible tune. Once in a while a D.J.'s voice reminds us that this is Soul Radio, 99.3 FM, in the city of Oakland.

A park, a square.

Although parts of the park completed so far are used very successfully, they act as separate pieces, each with a life of its own, not really linked to the park as a whole. "The different parts are floating," explains designer Walter Hood. "It will be interesting how the dynamics change when the edges encroach the spaces inside."

Yet it is precisely along the edges that the park's character is revealed. The critical line between the park and the more unpredictable public space of the street, a line that in so many other places fences and excludes, speaks elegantly about inclusion. Flexible and open, complex and interesting, the edge invites you, and before you know it you are in the park. This edge speaks most clearly about the park's character, an act of faith in social design and a bold act of inclusion.

—Ilaria Salvadori

Jury Comments

FRANCK: I like what they were intending to do, not shipping the homeless people out but providing them with some kind of liaison to social services.

OLIN: I could never have done this design, it goes against my formal training and background. It's not how I see things, draw things, imagine things, so I didn't go for it initially. When I saw this project presented by the designer before it was built, I didn't know how it was going to work, but I was intrigued by what he said he was intending to do, how he was working with the community and what the community would get out of it. Now people are using it exactly as the designer thought they would; he said it would succeed if they worked with each other to make places for each other. So I learned something. The process was exemplary. The product is surprising, and you can learn a lot about how people can cohabit and use space in a multiple set of ways.

HESTER: I would have said this space needed to be simplified, not made more complex, that there really needs to be a central feature that everyone uses. However, the designer said, the only way this park is going to work for the most marginal people, is to create something that's not central, the little hillock area; and then allow all these different and maybe incompatible activities to happen along the street edges.

FRANCK: Everyone has a kind of a niche.

GRIFFITH: So do kids romp all over the playground structure?

HESTER: Yes. The kids are coming from Taiwanese and Hong Kong families who live nearby. Their parents really don't like these old men.

OLIN: This part of Oakland was once a kind of seedy blue-collar white place, which was taken over by blacks after the Korean War. Then they struggled and struggled, and now you've got these different ethnic groups who are all disadvantaged, all contesting the space. This designer and his process found a way to give them their space and to coexist. You want social process, this is social process.

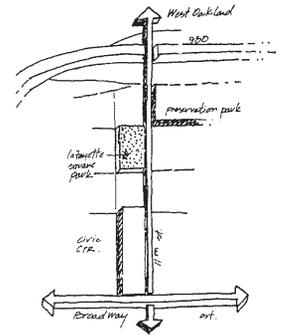
HESTER: They're all coexisting, and it's precisely because the designer did what Laurie and I would not have done.

GRIFFITH: I wonder whether designing something so specifically for a certain set of circumstances, for a certain moment in time, is the way to go? Suppose the nearby residents are Japanese instead of Chinese, is the microdesign too specific? Do you design in this way, or do you design for mutability and flexibility over time?

HESTER: The argument is that the inhabited edge is all that matters.

KLEIN: I should also point out that it was done on a shoestring budget.

OLIN: And a lot of other people with shoestring budgets would give up, or they would give you something that doesn't work socially.



Location of Lafayette Park in relation to downtown Oakland

Graphics: Walter Hood