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Stealing Home: A Suburban Public Realm

Roger Sherman



It's accessed off a typical suburban cul-de-sac in Encino, a suburb of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley. Here, where citrus orchards once proliferated, later to be supplanted by tract homes, a homegrown variety of suburban public space has been cultivated. A far cry from the typical developer-sponsored public space of the shopping mall, it has been created through a more grassroots form of entrepreneurship: the deal-making skill of neighboring property owners. Engineered from the very material of the suburbs itself—codes, norms and values—it unwittingly represents a homeopathic solution to the suburbs' ever-increasing privatization.

The perpetrator/instigator is Rick Messina, a successful talent agent for and friend of a number of prominent comedians (Drew Carey and Tim Allen among them). An acknowledged master of the art of negotiation, Messina's

modus operandi is not to craft an intricately worked out contract (plan), but to employ a *protocol* or set of rules or responses largely dependent on the offers and counteroffers of his bargaining partners. In this way, the agreements Messina forges *emerge* from the back-and-forth, give-and-take of negotiation itself, which can as often be cooperative as competitive.

Applied to the suburban landscape, skills such as Messina's may open opportunities in "extra-legal areas"—in this case, outside the margins of zoning laws which stipulate that suburban properties must remain exclusively residential, or that no usable structure may occupy the setbacks inscribed around their perimeter.

A Ballpark Is Born

Though he values his property for its desirable location and privacy, Messina soon also became frustrated with its inefficient pie shape (typical of lots around a cul-de-sac) and its lack of usable open space. Like many suburbanites, he also took to using the driveway down one side yard as a game court—although his passion was not basketball, but wiffleball, a sport his property seemed particularly suited to since it requires a wedge-shaped field.

An inveterate bachelor, wiffleball became an opportunity for Messina to invite over his buddies (many of whom were also clients) on Sunday afternoons to socialize and network. But one day it occurred to him that his neighbor had the *same* problem he did—a lack of usable side-yard space—and that were the two adjacent side yards combined, a larger wedge-shaped space would result that would not only make for a better wiffleball field, but even approach regulation size. Being entrepreneurially oriented, Messina sold his neighbor on the idea with the understanding that the latter would be entitled to equal use of the jointly owned field.

With that basic agreement in place, the project began to acquire a momentum and spatial logic of its own, one that like the bargaining process itself, propelled a sequence of revisions and improvements.

Though the splay of the field was now wide enough, since the rear of both properties ran up a hillside, the outfield was still rather shallow. In a move reminiscent of the building of the Green Monster at Fenway Park (the result of a similarly constrained site), Messina proposed excavating the lower portion of the hillside in both yards. By installing a fifteen-foot-high retaining wall there, he proposed creating a level playing surface extending all the way to the rear property line.

To accomplish this, however, the L.A. Department of Building and Safety told Messina he would have to regrade the hillside immediately behind to create a flat area three feet below the top of the new wall. *That* land belonged to his neighbor to the rear, the L.A. Department of Water and Power (DWP), which owns and manages a reservoir high above. Surprisingly, when Messina approached the DWP, the agency agreed to his plan on the condition that they would have continued access to the hillside above from his property.

This, in turn, gave Messina another idea. He would install bleachers in the newly graded area of DWP land, accessed by a ramp and stairs. As coincidence would have it, his building contractor had a cousin working on a demolition project at the New Jersey Meadowlands (stadium).

The cousin had access to the reuse/resale of the seating there, and within days, several rows arrived in Encino.

The last of Messina's deals was struck with the beer and liquor companies who supplied the commercial drink machines and bar in the "training room" that opened to the field off the left foul line (formerly the garage).¹ In exchange for receiving the wholesale beverage price, Messina agreed to advertise their products (along with the shows of his clients) on the right foul-line wall.

Negotiation is King

The real lesson of "Strawberry Field," as Messina now calls the wiffleball venue (after the street on which it is located), is that its public status was not preordained. Rather, it emerged as a de facto product of entrepreneurship and negotiation. Furthermore, with each new deal struck, another stakeholder was welcomed into the fold, and the web of interests arrayed around the project widened.

It is not so much its final form, then, as the process by which its shape was forged that qualifies it as public. Yet the fact that its formal attributes and qualities are striking and stimulating, rather than banal, *is* still important, because they affirm that such a process is not merely valuable and productive socially, but in terms of the form of the suburban landscape as well. It also allows for continuing revision as other interests and opportunities present themselves.

The latest addition emphatically illustrates this point. Very recently, Messina constructed a narrow, second-story bridge spanning between his own residence and his neighbor's. The bridge both houses an announcer's booth and serves as a more formalized portal to the field.

Every Sunday afternoon the booth is occupied by one of Messina's comedian-friends who treats the neighborhood/audience to a humorous monologue/play-by-play. The booth also possesses a magnificent Louis XIV overview of the field. But the power being celebrated is not the public interest as monarchy, but as represented by the muse of negotiation.

Note

1. Other bells and whistles include a closed-circuit system that televises the action on the field on monitors throughout the house, often side-by-side with major-league baseball games; a left field "dugout"; a "bullpen" in Messina's backyard; and boulders on the hillside that disguise their function as speakers.

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