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# Urban Form and Social Context: Cultural Differentiation in the Uses of Urban Parks

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris

Historically, public open spaces within crowded urban areas have been considered an important asset for the citizenry. Parks and urban greens have been valued as physical settings because they fulfill many leisure, recreation, and social needs of the urban resident. Public open spaces offer visual and psychological relief in the stressful surroundings of high-pace urban areas and contribute to the quality of life of urban residents and to their overall sense of well-being. Indeed some consider public open spaces as essential requirements of a good and democratic city form (Lynch 1980; Sennett 1982).

Public parks have a long history in the American urban tradition. By the late 19th century almost all American cities had assured land for open space development or had already developed beautifully landscaped areas in the form of city parks. Frederick Law Olmsted [1870] (1987) and other park advocates praised the potential of such environments to relieve and cure city residents from the stresses of urban life and to inspire moral values in their visitors.

In the first decades of this century, reformist planners and playground movement advocates saw in the creation of neighborhood parks and playgrounds an opportunity for combating urban ills and revitalizing inner city areas. In contrast to the pleasure ground model, which tried to remedy the offenses of industrialization by providing an environment totally antagonistic to that of the industrial city, the neighborhood playground, with its hard paving and symmetrical arrangement of buildings, implied an acceptance of the industrial culture and an effort to rationalize it (Cranz 1978).

Starting in the 1930s, the belief in the importance of active recreation for the promotion of health and physical development had an impact on the urban park. Park suppliers actively sought to accommodate the recreational needs of park users through swimming pools, ball fields, and tennis courts. As Galen Cranz (1982) argues in her book, *The Politics of Park Design*, parks became recreational facilities—single purpose, highly utilitarian establishments for the satisfaction of biological needs.

Past ideas and values about neighborhood parks continue to dominate and determine their present design and programming. In Cranz's (1982) view, park providers tend to combine a hodgepodge of elements from park models of the past, because they do not know what is truly appropriate. The supply of public open space seems to follow the same space standards.<sup>1</sup> Two decades ago, Gold (1972, 371), in a study of neighborhood parks, observed that "there is no significant difference between portions of the country, which is a reflection of the same space standards used by most cities for urban parks and their relatively uniform levels of design, maintenance, and program."

## ABSTRACT

The paper examines four case studies of neighborhood parks in socially and ethnically diverse communities of Los Angeles in order to explore similarities and differences of their uses and assigned meanings. More specifically, the study utilizes structured field observations and surveys of users in order to examine sociocultural patterns of park use, the relevance of past models of park design, and the level of fit between current park form and contemporary user needs.

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More recent studies from the design research field indicate that the contemporary American neighborhood park does not always meet the needs of all segments of the public. Researchers have talked about the urban pathology of the park—crime, vagrancy, and vandalism often present on its grounds (*Los Angeles Times Magazine* 28 May 1989; Hayward and Weitzer 1984; Gobdey 1985). Other studies have blamed these shortcomings on park designers and planners who treat parks as a historic legacy to be maintained rather than remodeled in response to the changing sociophysical contexts and local needs (Karasov and Waryan 1993; Hayward 1989; Burgess et al. 1988; Taylor 1979). It is argued that the time has come to examine carefully the different popular feelings, needs, and values regarding the urban park and to fashion its design and shape its management policies accordingly.

## ■ RESEARCH SCOPE

This study seeks to examine and understand contemporary patterns of park use, as well as the meaning of the American neighborhood park to different user groups. More specifically the study evolves around several research questions and issues.

**Park Usage: Similarities and Differences.** Environment-behavior research indicates that use and perception of space varies dramatically for different user groups. This is due to sociocultural distinctions, gender, age, race, and income differences, as well as life-cycle stages (Rapoport 1977, 1984). While some social values and needs are culture or class specific, others may be commonly shared by all members of society. Most research on open-space recreation has focused on age and gender differences. There is comparatively little empirical work that highlights ethnic/cultural differences. One objective of this research, then, is to identify similarities and differences in the uses and meaning of the urban park among users with different cultural characteristics.

**Park as a melting pot or a battleground?** Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned the park as the premier public realm of the city, where people of different strata would come together. While some of Olmsted's ideas were elitist, since he believed that contact between the upper and the lower classes in the park would have an "elevating" and "civilizing" effect for the latter (Todd 1982), his perception of the park as a ground to be equally shared by all population groups was essentially democratic. Contemporary images, however, present the park not as a melting pot but as a battleground where different social groups fight over territorial turf (*Los Angeles Times Magazine* 28 May 1989). Another objective of this research is, thus, to identify if the urban park of today represents an environment which facilitates social interaction and contact or, conversely, promotes social tension.

**Relevance of Past Park Design Models: Fit or Misfit?** Much of park planning and design has been rooted in a

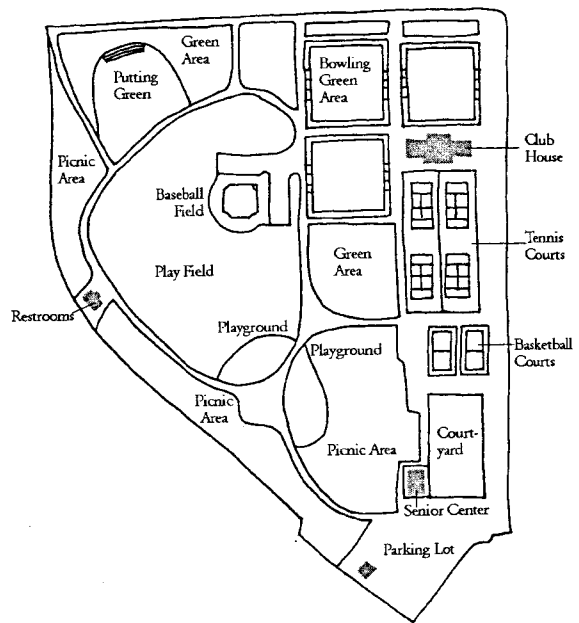


Figure 1. Plan of Roxbury Park, Beverly Hills.

facilities-oriented approach (Hayward 1989), with emphasis on active recreation. Another common rationale of the past was the idea of the park as a form of nature in the city for passive enjoyment. But are the legacies and models of the past still relevant for today's park users? Should neighborhood parks be designed as green oases for peaceful retreat, relaxation, and meditation; as facilities for fervent group play; as social spaces for community involvement and cultural exchange? A third objective of this study is to investigate the degree to which the planning and design of contemporary neighborhood parks satisfies expressed needs and values of their users. Are the physical characteristics of the designed environment congruent with different social values and diverse user needs?

## ■ THE CONTEXT

In order to address the questions previously posed, this study examines four neighborhood parks in socially and ethnically diverse communities around Los Angeles. Roxbury Park is situated in Beverly Hills, one of the most affluent and exclusive communities in the Los Angeles area where a large majority of the population is Caucasian. Barnes Park is located in Monterey Park. Known as suburban Chinatown because of the recent influx of Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong, this suburban community has witnessed tension between its Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian populations. South Gate Park lies in South Gate, a low-income, working-class Hispanic community. Finally, Will Rogers Park is located in the Watts area of South Central Los Angeles, a long-standing African-American community which has experienced increasing Hispanic migration. Will Rogers Park is the only substantial open-space amenity for a

large community that has been hit by poverty, abandonment, and deterioration of its urban form. Some of the differences in the sociodemographic characteristics of the four communities are shown in Table 1.

The four parks are all multiuse settings, which combine facilities for both active and passive recreation (see figures 1 through 4). They were selected to meet the criteria of being 20 to 100 acres in size and having an intended service radius of only a few miles.<sup>2</sup> All four parks are the most popular and highly utilized open spaces in their respective communities.

■ THE METHOD

Two complementary research methods were used for this study: observations using a behavioral mapping procedure and surveys of systematic random samples of park users. Each park was divided into subareas (e.g., playground, open field, barbecue, etc.). Thirty-minute observation sessions recorded all activities taking place within the boundaries of each subarea of the park.<sup>3</sup> Research personnel consisted of graduate students who were trained during visits to the park sites. Trial observations were conducted to check the appropriateness and validity of the observation forms and interobserver reliability. Observations were designed to provide information on park users and park use: how many people were using the different park areas during weekdays and weekends, which were the peak use periods, what sorts of activities were taking place in the parks, in what types of activities did different user groups participate. For each observation the age category, sex composition, and race characteristic of users were recorded. All observations were conducted during May 1992 and June 1992, when the weather was sunny and pleasant (72–78°F).

A systematic random sample of 80 park users (40 on a weekday and 40 on a weekend) was surveyed in each park during peak use periods. The number of persons found in each subarea of the park was counted for a 15-minute period and the sum of all subareas was calculated. The proportion of each park section's tally to the total number

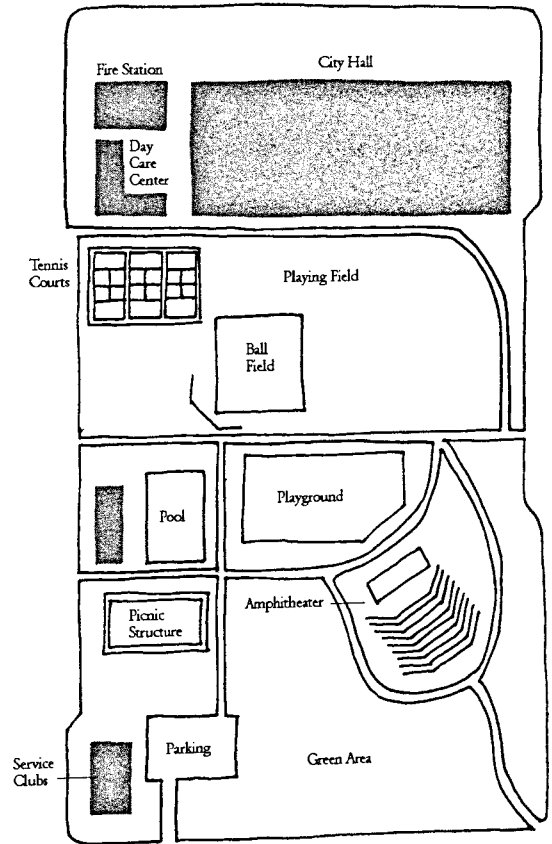


Figure 2. Plan of Barnes Park, Monterey Park.

of persons counted was used to determine the number of surveys that were to be given in each subarea of the park.<sup>4</sup> Within each subarea systematic random sampling was used, that is interviewers were instructed to select the *m*th person they met to be interviewed, until the appropriate number of surveys had been distributed within the subarea. Surveys questioned users about their activities in the park, social groupings (individual, couple, peers, family, etc.), their likes and dislikes, their level of satisfaction, and their sociodemographic characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

	Beverly Hills	Monterey Park	Watts*	South Gate
Median Age	42.2	34.0	26.2	25.7
Over 18 years old	83%	77%	64%	65%
Persons per household	2.19	3.10	3.64	3.84
White	87.0%	12.0%	<1.0%	14.0%
African American	2.0%	<1.0%	60.4%	1.0%
Hispanic	5.0%	31.0%	38.6%	83.0%
Asian	5.0%	56.0%	<1.0%	1.0%
Total Population	31,971	60,738	19,127	86,284

\* Census tracts 5352, 2407, 2408, 2420, 2423, which surround the park

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the four communities (US Census 1991).

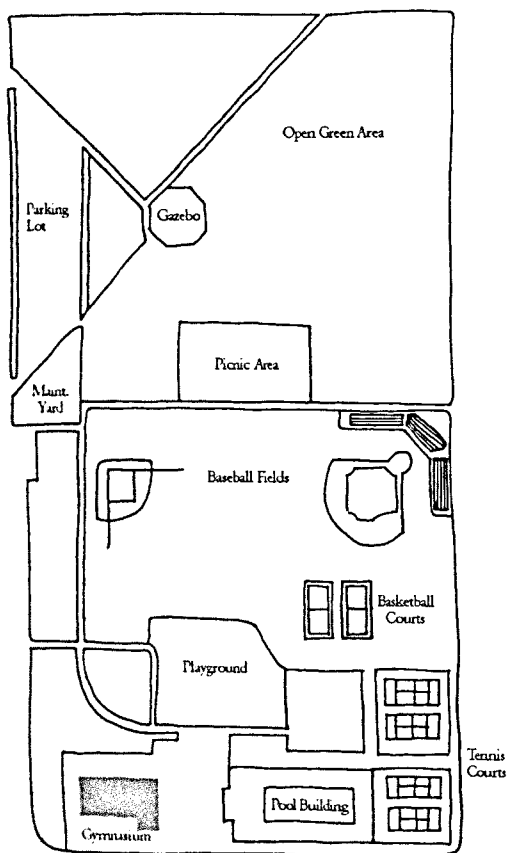


Figure 3. Plan of Will Rogers Park, Watts.

■ PARK USERS AND USES: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Sociologists and psychologists have investigated extensively the general topics of leisure and recreation. A considerable number of studies (mostly published in professional journals) has examined urban parks, but comparatively little empirical work has been published on the differences in park usage. In general, variables that appear to influence recreational behavior include race, age, sex, social class, and family status (Hendon 1981). In the section that follows I will concentrate mostly on race/ethnicity, summarizing the small existing body of literature and reporting the findings of this study. I will give only a brief account of the effects of age and gender on park use as observed in the four parks.

Race/Ethnicity

Literature Review

Starting mostly after the mid-1970s a number of studies on leisure and recreation behavior focused on ethnicity. These studies are based on the premise that,

An identifiable set of activities results from a distinctive subculture—a set of cultural patterns

which are somehow different from that of the majority. This is a cultural explanation for intergroup differences, and involves a complex interplay of social values, social organization, and normative elements passed from one generation to the next through the socialization process of the family, local schools, and community. (Hutchison 1988, 15)

Most studies on leisure and urban recreation have delineated the activity patterns of the white population. A small number of studies has examined the recreation patterns of African Americans, or has compared white-black differences. An even smaller segment has looked into white-Hispanic differences, while studies on the recreational patterns of Asian Americans are almost nonexistent.

The few empirical studies that have examined the recreational patterns of African Americans have provided some sparse information. Kronus (1971) sampled 80 black, urban, middle-class males and found that their recreation tended to be culturally-oriented, with an emphasis on participatory and spectator sports and on travel. Craig (1972) studied 300 Southern black suburbanites and found that rural leisure patterns persisted in urban black communities. He argued that, historically, the recreational experiences of blacks were extremely meager due to a series of constraints, such as limited income and mobility, lack of leisure time, and segregation policies. Craig (1972) found an

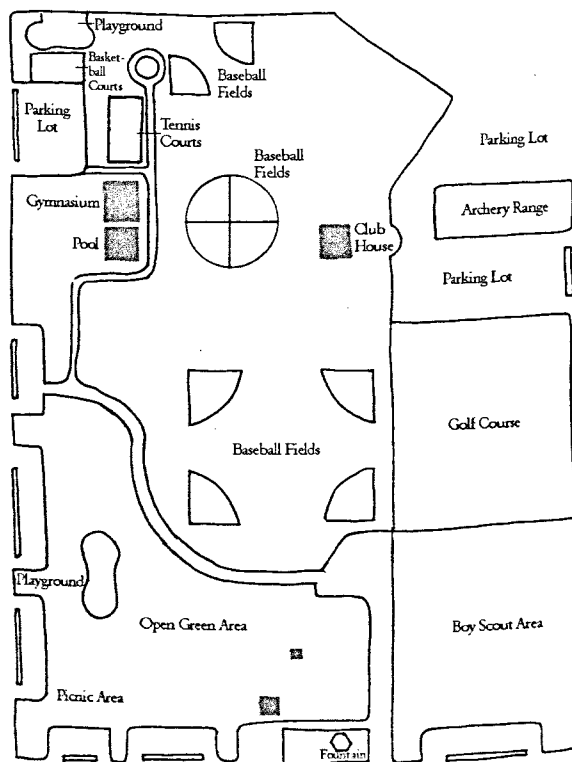


Figure 4. Plan of South Gate Park, South Gate.

"apparent carry over" of these historical restraints to the present recreational patterns of African Americans. Thus, most individuals in his sample tended to participate in inexpensive leisure activities that centered mostly around indoor personal (television watching, visiting friends and relatives, playing cards, reading) or outdoor personal (yard work, fishing) recreational activities. From the outdoor public activities he found only spectator sports receiving a high participation rate. Craig's argument on the constraints faced by blacks regarding recreation was supported by Washburne (1978), who compared low-income white and black families and found significant differences in their recreation patterns, noting that blacks in general had more limited access to leisure. In another comparative study, Meeker et al. (1973) found African Americans to be more group oriented in their leisure activities than whites, who tended to be more individualistic. The same researchers, as well as Kelly (1980), found that African Americans tended to utilize more urban recreational facilities than whites, who tended to participate more in wildlife recreation. Stamps and Stamps (1985), using a sample of 750 urban residents, investigated the relationship of race and class to participation in leisure activities. They found race to be more important than class, noting some significant differences between blacks and whites in the participation rates of certain leisure activities.<sup>6</sup>

Although most empirical data points to differences in recreational activities, a few studies have produced contradictory results. Cheek et al. (1976) did not find major variation in outdoor recreation patterns between central city blacks and whites, while Edwards (1981) found only small differences, which he attributed to social class. In a study which focused attention on neighborhood and regional parks, Hutchinson (1987) observed and compared white, black, and Hispanic activity groups, and noted significant differences in their age, sex, size, and social composition. He found more similarities between black and white activity groups and more systematic differences in the activities of Hispanics vis-a-vis white and black groups. Hutchinson argued that a complex interplay of social forces (race/ethnicity, social class, residential patterns, periods of settlement for each group, etc.) may be responsible for the observed differences.

Another body of literature, based on ethnographic research, gives some interesting insights into the type of appropriation of public space by African Americans. Although no anthropological study has focused on parks, numerous works have documented black alley and street-corner life (Anderson 1978; Borchert 1980; Rose 1987). According to anthropologist Dan Rose (1987, 94, 180), who studied black street life in South Philadelphia,

Black everyday life was consummately public and verbal. White cultural life was conducted more in private, behind closed doors.... Private and

public domains cross-cut one another and crosscut endlessly inter-connected households in processes of continuous reformation. The street was a locus of exchanges between acquaintances and strangers, and it was the legitimate theater for lesser or greater public arrangements.

As Rose and other anthropologists have noted, the most common unit observed in black street life was the peer group. "Triads were the smallest unit of street performance.... Male-male and female-female groupings were more common. Against the house fronts people stood or sat" (Rose 1987, 176, 178).

Research on the recreational patterns of Hispanic groups is very limited, with very few studies that compare the recreation activities of Mexican Americans to those of other racial groups. McMillen (1983), using a sample of 130 households, found no significant differences in the leisure behavior patterns of Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans. However, later studies by Hutchison and Fidel (1984) and Hutchison (1987) refuted these results, finding "substantive and systematic" differences between the two groups. More specifically, they found Mexican Americans participating more in social activities that involved larger groups. In contrast to Anglos, most of whom got involved in mobile activities (especially jogging, walking, and bicycling), most Mexican Americans participated in stationary activities (particularly lounging in the park, watching children at the playground, and watching sport activities).

Scholarly work has documented the significance of public space (plazas, parks, and streets) for Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Impressed by the importance of squares and parks in Mexico, Charles Flaundrau (1964) wrote,

There are city parks and squares in other countries, but in none do they play the same intimate and important part in the national domestic life that they do in Mexico.... The Plaza is in constant use from morning until late at night.... By eleven o'clock the whole town will, at various hours, have passed through it, strolled in it, played, sat, rested, or thought in it.

James Rochas (1991, 25), writing on the experiences of growing up in East Los Angeles, noted,

Like a plaza, the street acted as a focus in our everyday life where we would gather daily.... Driveways, front yards and streets create the space for people to interact.... Residents activate and connect both the public and private spaces.

Although peer groups are common in the Mexican-American culture, it is the family (nuclear and extended)

that acquires the primary importance in the social organization of Mexican-American private and public life.

Unfortunately, no empirical studies have yet focused on the public space usage and recreation patterns of Asian Americans, a dynamic and quite diverse group that is becoming increasingly present in many American cities.

#### Findings of this Study

The American urban context is a collection of different social groups whose needs, values, and symbol systems are sometimes overlapping and sometimes rigidly separated. The way neighborhood parks are used by different groups gives us some clues as to the similarities or differences in social meanings and values. The study found significant differences between racial groups in the way each group comes to the park (Table 2), the type of group association at the park (Table 3), the type of activities engaged in at the park (Table 4), and the most liked park qualities (Table 5).<sup>7</sup>

Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned a rich mixture of people visiting the park's grounds: wealthy and poor, young and old, male and female, natives and immigrants. In public parks today, one can find people from different walks of life. However, some groups are more represented than others. The surveys showed that Hispanics were the most frequent users of the four parks. Their representation typically exceeded their percentages in each of the studied communities. Although it was not uncommon for many Hispanic users to visit their neighborhood park every day, Caucasians were rather infrequent users. Most survey respondents in this group stated that they utilized the park less than once a week. However, it should be noted that frequency of use may be also related to income. A plausible hypothesis (that was not tested in this study) is that lower income groups may be more dependent on their local park for recreation than are more affluent groups, who have higher mobility and could also utilize more private open space.

In general, users come to the park because it offers greenery, recreational opportunities for them and their children, and chances for social encounters. More careful observation of patterns of use and behavior in parks shows, however, clear differentiation between social groups. Based on find-

ings from the four case studies I would argue the following.

Hispanics are the most enthusiastic users of parks. The survey showed that Hispanic users pay many more visits to the park than the other three racial groups.<sup>8</sup> Most Hispanics come to the park accompanied by family members (Table 2) and are typically encountered in groups (Table 3). When at the park, they are likely to get involved in gregarious uses including parties, celebrations of birthdays and wedding anniversaries, and picnics. Large groups usually sit in circular configurations having food at the very center. Each family group clearly distinguishes its territory in a variety of ways that often include balloons, streamers, colorful pinatas, and music. Less stringent borders are created by the edges of blankets and the invisible lines drawn between group members and their belongings. Group behavior consists of talking while sitting or standing, eating, breaking pinatas, and keeping an eye on the children. Even though the family group (nuclear or extended) was the most common type of association for Hispanic park users, peer groups (mostly male teenagers and young adults), parent-child groups (mostly mothers with young children), and young couples were also observed (Table 3).

Like Hutchinson (1987), we also found Hispanics to be mostly engaged in stationary activities (59.4%), but, contrary to his findings, we observed this to be the pattern for all the racial groups we studied (Table 4). The most prominent activities observed for Hispanics were watching children playing (18.8%), picnicking and family gatherings (14.7%), watching sports (11.1%), and walking (11.1%). The most popular sporting activities were baseball (7.6%) and soccer (7.6%).

Hispanics, in contrast to other racial groups, were observed to actively appropriate the park space, changing it and adding to it in order to serve their needs. When no soccer fields were present in the park, players typically would adjust the space to their needs, bringing their own goal posts with them. Most family groups accommodated their visits to the park with many items from home. These helped to claim the territory, mark the turf, and in some way privatize public space.

For Hispanics the park is primarily a social space. Using

Association	White		Hispanic		African American		Asian	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
alone	21	30.4%	15	8.8%	5	9.8%	8	26.6%
with family	29	42.0%	132	77.6%	15	29.4%	11	36.7%
with friends	14	20.3%	21	12.4%	30	58.8%	11	36.7%
other	5	7.3%	2	1.2%	1	2.0%	0	0.0%
TOTAL	69	100.0%	170	100.0%	51	100.0%	30	100.0%

$\chi^2=80.34$ ;  $df=6$ ;  $p<.05$

Table 2. Accompaniment to the park (from park users' survey).

Association	White		Hispanic		African American		Asian	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Individual	18	26.1%	14	8.2%	8	15.7%	5	16.7%
Couple	5	7.3%	15	8.8%	5	9.8%	3	10.0%
Peers	9	13.1%	25	14.7%	17	33.3%	9	30.0%
Parent/Child	23	33.3%	34	20.0%	13	25.5%	9	30.0%
Family	14	20.2%	82	48.3%	8	15.7%	3	10.0%
TOTAL	69	100.0%	170	100.0%	51	100.0%	30	100.0%

$\chi^2=49.10$ ;  $df=12$ ;  $p<.05$

Table 3. Type of association in the park (from park users' survey).

the classification proposed by Beard and Ragheb (1980) for leisure satisfaction, we classified the survey responses for the most liked quality/element of the park into six broad categories: aesthetic, perceptual/psychological, social, relaxational, educational, and physiological (Table 5). Hispanics, more than other groups, found the park's social qualities to be its most liked asset. The neighborhood parks seem to provide a substitute for the lost plaza—the focal point of the built environment in Central America. The importance of public space over private space leads to a very intensive use of the park by Hispanic groups. Young males bring their dates to the park, families celebrate on its grounds, men fix and wax their cars in the parking lot (a common scene in South Gate and Will Rogers). Men and women dance and drink beer under the park's gazebo (at Will Rogers) and brew coffee in portable pots (in South Gate). Hispanic vendors come to the park to sell colorful merchandise and exotic fruit.

For African Americans it is the peer group that seems to be the most visible form of association. More than half of the African Americans surveyed stated that they come to the park accompanied by friends (Table 2). Peer groups observed usually consisted of male-only members, even though the sight of a group of young males with a few girlfriends, as well as all-female groupings was not uncommon. Young males would either hang out at the periphery of the park (usually near the street corner), in the parking lot (near their cars), or in and around athletic facilities. Their group behavior consisted mostly of animated talk (often resembling a performance), joking and laughing, and girl watching. Another very common type of association was that of parent/child. Mostly females, sometimes in small groups, were spotted watching one or more toddlers in the playground area.

Appropriation of space by African-American groups was more passive. Unlike Hispanics, African Americans used park space as it was, without seeking to change it. In addition to being a place for socializing with friends, the park seemed to be a space for organized group sports for African

Americans. They, more than any other racial group, engaged in sports (Table 4). The baseball fields, basketball courts, and swimming pool at Will Rogers Park were the most popular areas for African-American males. Sport facilities and equipment (the physiological aspect of the park) were listed as the most liked elements by most African-American respondents. The social qualities of the park and its relaxing environment were also praised (Table 5).

Caucasian user-groups were mostly encountered engaged in reclusive, self-oriented uses. A notable exception was white elderly users who were often in small groups playing croquet, bridge, or other card games. In proportion to other racial groups, a larger number of Caucasians (30.4%) came to the park alone (Table 2) to pursue often passive recreational activities (watching their children, sitting, sunbathing, reading, people watching). More common active uses among Caucasians included walking, jogging, baseball, tennis, and dog walking (Table 4).

Other than the solo individual a very common form of association for Caucasians was that of parent/child (33.3%). There were a few family gatherings (15.9%), mostly for the celebration of a child's birthday, and a limited number of peer groups (13.1%) consisting of either teenagers involved in sport activities or elderly men and women at the senior citizen center.

As the surveys revealed, Caucasians, more than other groups, tended to value the park for its aesthetic qualities—its greenness, landscaping, and natural elements. As shown in Table 5, there was a dramatic difference in the responses of this racial group as compared to other groups, with almost half of the Caucasian respondents listing the park's aesthetic qualities as its most liked attribute.

Asians (Chinese) represented the smallest sample in this study. Barnes Park in Monterey Park was the least utilized of all the four parks (Table 6). Even though the majority of Monterey Park residents are Chinese, relatively few Chinese were found using the park. They were mostly older men that were observed relaxing, socializing with one another, and performing Tai-chi. Other Chinese users included some

mothers with young children at the playground, and a few teenagers and young adult males playing tennis or swimming in the pool. Chinese families were rarities in the park.

The underrepresentation of Chinese users triggered our interest and led us to conduct some in-depth interviews with five elderly Chinese users. These revealed some large discrepancies between their open space needs and aspirations and the existing park's design and programming, which may explain the underrepresentation of Chinese in neighborhood parks. According to our interviewees, the Chinese perceive the ideal park as an aesthetic element of gorgeous design, "an outdoor garden filled with colorful flowers, ponds, pavilions, and tea houses for passive enjoyment, sightseeing, and relaxation." The concept of the American park as an expanse of green space for active recreation, sports, and picnicking is unknown in China and Taiwan.

According to the people interviewed, not many Chinese would want to visit an American neighborhood park

because they would find it "too structured" and "poorly landscaped." They themselves come to the park mostly for companionship and to escape their small apartments, where many people of several generations are living in close proximity.

### Effect of Other Variables on Park Usage

This study has predominantly focused on the ethnic/cultural differentiation in the uses of neighborhood parks. Still other variables (age, gender, income, education, life cycle stage, occupational background) can also be very important in determining park use and recreation patterns. An extensive analysis of such variables is beyond the scope of this research work. In what follows we will only present some empirical findings from our field observation and survey research that imply age and gender differentiation in park use.

A first difference seems to be in the rates of park use and

Activity	White		Hispanic		African American		Asian (Chinese)	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Stationary	32	46.4%	101	59.4%	23	45.1%	17	56.7%
Watch children play	13	18.9%	32	18.8%	6	11.7%	5	16.7%
Watch sports	3	4.35%	19	11.1%	3	5.9%	2	6.7%
Watch people	2	2.9%	3	1.8%	4	7.8%	2	6.7%
Picnic/family gathering	3	4.35%	25	14.7%	2	3.9%	1	3.3%
Sunbathing	2	2.9%	3	1.8%	3	5.9%	1	3.3%
Playing cards/chess	3	4.35%	0	0.0%	1	2.0%	0	0.0%
Sitting/relaxing	3	4.35%	13	7.6%	3	5.9%	3	10.0%
Reading	2	2.9%	0	0.0%	1	2.0%	2	6.7%
Vendors	0	0.0%	3	1.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Other	1	1.4%	3	1.8%	0	0.0%	1	3.3%
Mobile	23	33.3%	25	14.7%	11	21.6%	5	16.6%
Walking	9	13.0%	19	11.1%	4	7.8%	2	6.7%
Jogging	7	10.15%	3	1.8%	4	7.8%	1	3.3%
Walking dog	3	4.35%	0	0.0%	1	2.0%	1	3.3%
Bicycling	2	2.9%	0	0.0%	1	2.0%	1	3.3%
Other	2	2.9%	3	1.8%	1	2.0%	0	0.0%
Sports	14	20.3%	44	25.9%	17	33.3%	8	26.7%
Basketball	2	2.9%	6	3.55%	3	5.9%	1	3.3%
Baseball/softball	4	5.9%	13	7.6%	4	7.8%	0	0.0%
Soccer	0	0.0%	13	7.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Tennis	2	2.9%	3	1.8%	2	3.9%	2	6.7%
Golf	1	1.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Football	2	2.9%	0	0.0%	4	7.8%	0	0.0%
Swimming	2	2.9%	6	3.55%	4	7.8%	2	6.7%
Tai-chi	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	10.0%
Other	1	1.4%	3	1.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
TOTAL	69		170		51		30	

$\chi^2 = 13.13$ ;  $df = 6$ ;  $p < .05$

Table 4. Type of activity (from park users' survey).

Park Quality	White		Hispanic		African American		Asian (Chinese)	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Aesthetic	31	44.9%	23	13.5%	6	11.8%	9	30.0%
Good design	10	14.5%	6	3.5%	2	3.9%	1	3.3%
Landscaping/trees	16	23.2%	12	7.0%	3	5.9%	2	6.7%
Scenery	5	7.2%	0	0.0%	1	2.0%	2	6.7%
Cleanliness	0	0.0%	5	3.0%	0	0.0%	4	13.3%
Psychological/Perceptual	5	7.3%	12	7.1%	6	11.8%	3	10.0%
Free Environment	0	0.0%	4	2.36%	1	2.0%	0	0.0%
Safe Environment	4	5.8%	4	2.36%	3	5.9%	2	6.7%
Open/Accessible	1	1.5%	4	2.36%	2	3.9%	1	3.3%
Social	11	15.95%	53	31.1%	12	23.5%	6	20.0%
Social Place	5	7.25%	21	12.3%	5	9.8%	3	10.0%
Family Environment	4	5.8%	27	15.9%	3	5.9%	3	10.0%
People	2	2.9%	5	2.9%	4	7.8%	0	0.0%
Relaxation	9	13.0%	42	24.7%	12	23.5%	9	30.0%
Peaceful Place	4	5.8%	18	10.6%	6	11.75%	5	16.7%
Quiet Place	4	5.8%	22	12.9%	0	0.0%	1	3.3%
Relaxing atmosphere	1	1.4%	2	1.2%	6	11.75%	3	10.0%
Educational	2	2.9%	3	1.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Programs/Activities	2	2.9%	3	1.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Physiological	11	15.95%	37	21.8%	15	29.4%	3	10.0%
Sport Facilities/Equip.	11	15.95%	37	21.8%	15	29.4%	3	10.0%
TOTAL	69		170		51		30	

$\chi^2=40.36$ ;  $df=12$ ;  $p<.05$

Table 5. Most liked quality/element of the park (from park users' survey).

participation. In our field work we found that some age groups used the park more than others. This may be partly a reflection of what the neighborhood park has to offer to the different age groups. Children and teenagers are quite visible in parks, with playgrounds (realm of the younger children) and basketball courts (mostly occupied by teenagers) among the most popular facilities. Parks have always been regarded as very important for children. Public intervention in services and programs for the young dates from the early days of the twentieth century. In our surveys, many parents emphasized the significance of the park for their youngsters. Parents in rough city areas, like Watts, were critical of the lack of appropriate and adequate play equipment, but praised the importance of the park for "keeping children off the streets." In contrast to popular perception that parks are dangerous places to be avoided, these parents perceived the park as safer than the streets, at least during the daytime.

The proportion of teenagers and young adults was particularly high in the two "poorer" parks. Almost 65% of the people surveyed in Will Rogers Park, and 52% of those surveyed in South Gate Park were less than 30 years old. In contrast, middle-aged people do not seem to be frequent

park users. The surveys showed that in all four parks a very small percentage of users belonged to the 40- to 64-year-old age group. It seems as if the neighborhood park does not have much to offer people who have raised their children and are not particularly interested in active recreation. Roxbury Park, with an active senior citizen center, was able to attract the elderly, with 27.6% of those surveyed over 65 years old. The percentage of elderly in the other three parks that do not have organized activities for senior citizens was quite low.

A second difference between age categories had to do with the preferred patterns of park use. As expected, the surveys showed that sports and mobile activities decline with age, in contrast to stationary activities which increase with age. It is, thus, the physiological component of a park that is mostly appreciated by teenage groups. Teenagers particularly enjoy a park's playing fields and sports facilities. For them the park represents more spatial freedom when compared to the more structured environment of home, school, or a mall. Even so, many teenagers expressed their frustration with the many park regulations. More than half the teenagers observed were with others of the same age, yet

only a small percentage (12.9%) indicated that they valued the social aspects of the park more than its other attributes.

Younger adults (19–39) seemed to divide their preferences among the aesthetic, social, relaxational, and physiological qualities of the park. Most middle-aged groups ranked relaxation as the most important quality of the park, stressing that they come “to sit and relax, to find some peace and quiet.” Elderly users, more than any other group, stressed the importance of the park for social contact. Even though half of the elderly respondents stated that they come to the park on their own, most of them got involved in some activity with others. The elderly seemed to particularly appreciate the opportunities that a park can offer for people watching, casual conversations, and card playing.

Women were a minority in the parks studied. With the exception of the park in South Gate, which enjoyed slightly higher levels of utilization by women on weekdays, all other parks had more male users (Table 6). Will Rogers Park in particular was mostly dominated by men. While one-quarter of the male survey respondents indicated that they came to the park alone, a very small percentage of women (6.8%) did so. Indeed, the vast majority of female respondents (74.4%) visited the park accompanied by one or more family members. These empirical findings are consistent with other research that reveals the underrepresentation of women in public spaces (Cranz 1980; Cooper Marcus and Francis 1990)—a fact attributed to women’s greater fear of victimization, as well as to obstacles and constraints that reduce women’s mobility and accessibility to public spaces (Kanes Weisman 1992). Also, researchers have emphasized the physical and psychological vulnerability of women when they are alone in public spaces (Wekerle 1981; Hayden 1984). Constraints that hinder women’s equal representation in urban parks include the reduction in their discretionary time (particularly for working mothers) and

restrictions on the types of activities likely to be pursued in public spaces by women. Being often accompanied by young children, women are more likely to engage in activities related to their domestic role than in discretionary activities (Franck and Paxson 1989). Women’s underrepresentation in parks may also be partly in response to a general lack of activities that specifically target women users. Women’s needs for outdoor recreation have never been fully understood by park administrators and planners. Their needs are assumed to be satisfied simply by providing facilities and programs for men and children and placing benches near playgrounds and athletic fields (Daves 1989).

In our study we found many women users in the outer spheres of playgrounds. Some of them voiced dissatisfaction that parks do not provide many opportunities for them, other than being passive observers of their children’s play. Still, contrary to public perception that sees women as passive users of a park, a significant amount of younger female users (18.2%) were observed engaged in sport activities (tennis, basketball, soccer). Male participation in sports was much higher (31.8%).

Some differences were also noted between sexes in regards to the park’s most liked elements. More men than women seemed to enjoy the social role of the park. This is consistent with other research that finds men more prone to intense and public social activities than women (Mozingo 1989).<sup>9</sup> The physiological aspects of the park were almost equally valued by men and women. But most women in this category indicated playground equipment as the most liked park element, while most men chose the sports facilities. The aesthetic and relaxational qualities of a park were stressed by both sexes, while the psychological and educational qualities received low priorities.

Other variables are certainly influential in shaping park use and space appropriation. For example, income differ-

	Roxbury Park		Barnes Park		Will Rogers Park		South Gate Park	
	Weekend	Weekday	Weekend	Weekday	Weekend	Weekday	Weekend	Weekday
Peak Use	Sa 1:30pm	Tu 12:30pm	Su 2:30pm	Tu 5:00pm	Su 12:00pm	M 6:15pm	Su 2:00pm	Tu 3:00pm
Users	386	302	133	99	700	363	3085	703
Peak Density (users/acre)	27.9	21.9	7.8	5.8	25.5	13.2	33.5	7.6
Male	53.4%	53.5%	53.6%	52.0%	55.2%	58.3%	53.6%	48.3%
Female	46.6%	46.5%	46.4%	48.0%	44.8%	41.7%	46.4%	51.7
White	83.5%	78.5%	6.9%	12.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	10.3%
African American	3.3%	7.2%	0.0%	4.0%	44.8%	58.3%	3.6%	3.5%
Hispanic	6.6%	10.7%	86.2%	60.0%	55.2%	41.7%	89.3%	86.2%
Asian	6.6%	3.6%	6.9%	24.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0

Table 6. Weekend and weekday peak use and sociodemographic characteristics of users (based on field observations).



*Photograph 1. Roxbury Park, Beverly Hills, California.*

tiation is likely to influence patterns of recreation behavior for the main reason that increased purchasing power gives more access to a variety of leisure activities. However, in this study we were not able to observe and examine the possible effects of this or other variables. It is also quite probable that some observed differences are due to the combined effects of certain variables, an issue that this study has not explored. Another weakness of this analysis is that it is based on the assumption of homogeneous racial groups. The possible internal differentiations among members of Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic, or Chinese groups was not considered. Finally, it should be stressed that the study focused on park users. Thus, the perspective of non-users was not reflected in the survey results.

So far we have focused on the different variables that can affect park use and have reported and compared the findings of this research with other known work. We now address two other concerns: the issue of turf in urban parks and the relevance or appropriateness of park design for contemporary user needs.

#### ■ MELTING POT OR BATTLEGROUND?

Field observations in the four parks showed that they are neither melting pots nor battle grounds for neighborhoods. Different social groups typically coexist in the parks, but they do not tend to mix. They rather keep their own spatial

turfs or park territories. This was particularly evident in Will Rogers and Barnes Park, which both lie within socially mixed areas. There was also a specific turf for the elderly at Roxbury Park, for African-American teenagers at Will Rogers Park, and for Hispanic families in South Gate Park.<sup>10</sup> Usually coexistence is rather peaceful, one group does not mingle with others, nor does it bother the others. However, this sensitive balance is sometimes tested by the design of the park setting or by practices of park administrators. Then clashes between groups are inevitable. Some of these conflicts were discovered in the survey research. For example, the proximity of the playground to play fields (as in Roxbury Park) has been an issue of concern for parents and has occasionally resulted in fights with teenagers and young adults engaged in sports. The absence of a particular facility (e.g., soccer field in South Gate) has often forced one group (teenage soccer players) to invade the space of others (picnicking families). The discrimination against soccer in favor of more American sports has caused resentment by Hispanic soccer players. The lack of outreach programs for Spanish- or Chinese-speaking individuals has resulted in grievances and tension in two parks (Will Rogers and Monterey Park). Very recently, the imposition of fees for the use of the swimming pool at Will Rogers has generated anger in the community and clashes between teenagers and lifeguards (*Los Angeles Times* 30 June 1994). Thus, the American neighborhood park is used and

appreciated by different social groups. Its microenvironments, however, remain segregated, with different territories occupied by different groups. Field observations showed that only one park facility invariably draws people of diverse sociocultural strata. The children's playground is the closest thing to a melting pot a neighborhood can have. People of different races and ages were spotted engaging in friendly conversations in the playground area. The joys and agonies of raising children provide some common experiences that all parents can relate to and often want to share.

### ■ RELEVANCE OF PAST PARK DESIGN MODELS: FIT OR MISFIT?

The design of neighborhood parks is still in some ways reminiscent of the great Olmstedian model of bucolic landscape in an urban context, a model still followed, but with its elements often reduced to trivial size and cut up by recreational facilities (Karasov and Waryan 1993). The large, centrally located pleasure ground with its expansive greenery is a product of a bygone era. Today, public open space is often perceived as an unproductive allocation of resources by city councils and municipal governments. Identifying even small pieces of land and converting them into parks is often a challenge for parks and recreation departments. The neighborhood park of the late twentieth century is more likely a few acres of land that is expected to serve myriad purposes and satisfy a multicultural clientele.

Park suppliers seek to satisfy these diverse needs by following well-known prescriptions of park design and providing greenery, athletic and play fields, and picnic areas. As seen in the case studies, park administrators direct most of their budgets for organized sports to the traditional American games of football, basketball, baseball, golf, and tennis, even in areas heavily populated by ethnic minorities who favor other sports (such as soccer and fishing) (*Los Angeles Times* 11 October 1987). Following the norm of the average user, park suppliers tend to satisfy some universally shared needs, but cannot respond to some group-specific needs and cannot satisfy cultural patterns of park use. Contemporary neighborhood parks do not offer effective group settings that take into account the different use patterns of men, women, children, young adults, the elderly, different ethnic groups, or the homeless.

A visual survey of the physical form of the four parks studied revealed more similarities than differences. These parks were designed to read as a whole composed of distinct elements (grass, trees, paths, benches, buildings). Activities and facilities were organized to make the most of the park area. The athletic facilities were usually grouped together and were defined by surrounding walls, fences, or a change in the pavement. Playground areas were marked by low concrete or brick walls and were rather unimaginative and sterile, featuring metal play equipment. The Roxbury Park

playground was the exception, with a pleasing composition of wooden play elements. In all four parks, green open areas were ringed with mature trees, and picnic grounds were equipped with stable wooden tables and benches anchored on a patch of cement. Even though all parks displayed elements of picturesque design, with meandering walkways and foliage, their design was mostly concerned with issues of functionality rather than aesthetics. A few elements that deviated from this norm of utilitarian design, such as decorative, turn-of-the-century lampposts and wooden pergolas, were found only at Roxbury Park.

It seems as if parks and recreation departments respond to the needs of the average user by providing the average park. This is a generic type of park, an archetypal model which guides the design of new neighborhood parks and the restoration of older ones. The four parks studied do not deviate from this model. Their layout is formed by the typical park areas: specialized sport facilities, playgrounds with mostly standardized play equipment, picnic areas with barbecue grills, sitting areas often under kiosks or gazebos. The parks have stable benches and meandering walkways. They all feature large green open fields, in an effort to satisfy the users' needs for greenery.

The typical park design mixes elements from past design models in order to create an easily reproducible, standardized milieu, one which seeks to be multiuse, but is also acontextual and may be insensitive or indifferent to cultural and social specificities. The supply of the typical neighborhood park rests on the assumption that the mixing of physical elements (greenery, play fields, sitting areas, play equipment) in accordance with professional design standards can address the different needs of the users.

Standardization is particularly evident in the playground areas. The playgrounds studied were mostly equipped with the same kinds of play items.<sup>11</sup> Many survey respondents asked for better play equipment that offers educational and developmental opportunities. According to child psychologists and educators, children benefit more if the play environment provides challenges and opportunities to learn; encourages adventurous, but not dangerous, play; and facilitates interaction, excitement, and challenge. In Barnes Park the most popular playground piece was not a standardized swing or slide, but a fire truck. Mothers reported that their children asked to come to the park specifically to play on it.

### ■ REINVENTING NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS: SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In order to respond to cultural needs, park design should be location and context specific. Instead of replicating the same standardized spatial model in different parts of the city, park providers should give some thought to the type of park activities and programming which better suit the needs of different user groups in the community and the design

settings which can better accommodate them. As the surveys have shown, different park user-groups have different needs and expectations.

Because of the lack of space and the multiplicity of groups a park is expected to serve, designing contemporary parks is challenging. Claire Cooper Marcus (Cooper Marcus and Francis 1990, 73-74) talks about "layering and separation"—the formation of time and activity zones in the park that allow different groups to use the same space. She argues for a park design that "permits regular groups of users to lay claim to certain areas." A regular group of users distinguishable by race, age, gender, or recreation interest, should have the opportunity to claim a subsetting within the park, for example a particular sitting area, a group of tables, or portion of a beach.

Park design should not cause tension between different groups, but rather should promote their peaceful coexistence. If the specific needs of groups are accommodated by the provision of appropriate settings (e.g., places for car washing and waxing, places for vending, etc.) one group is not forced to invade the territory of others.

A whole range of new activities supported by innovative design and experimentation can complement (or sometimes replace) other more traditional patterns of use. It was quite revealing that no group surveyed emphasized the educational/developmental potential of open space. Currently, most parks score very low on this attribute. Yet, one could imagine programs offered in the park that would complement schools and educational television for the young.

Finally, the ever-changing urban form and social ecology of neighborhoods calls for a flexible rather than rigid park design and for spatial layouts that can be easily changed in response to future needs. One can even think of mobile parks—spaces whose equipment and furniture can be transported to other parts of the city if the need arises.

Clearly, more research is needed for the identification of the cultural patterns of park use. This study has found that neighborhood parks are still highly valued amenities for urban residents. However, their potential as vital parts of a city's public realm is often not fully explored. The thrust of this study is that park design and planning should be user specific. It should seek to identify the sociocultural and behavioral characteristics of users and their conventional and unconventional patterns of use and respond by providing appropriate settings and activities.

*Author's Note: I would like to acknowledge the help of my research assistant, Jean Gilbert, who helped in the data collection and the statistical analysis of the survey findings.*

#### ■ NOTES

1. The National Recreation and Park Association (1971) has published open space and facility standards for parks. Open spaces are classified into play lots, vest pocket parks, neighborhood parks,

district parks, large urban parks, regional parks, and special areas and facilities (such as beaches, plazas, floodplains, parkways, downtown malls, etc.). Two and one-half acres of neighborhood or district park space are projected per 1,000 people. Neighborhood parks (5 to 20 acres) are serving a population of 2,000 to 10,000 coming from a service area of  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile. District parks (20 to 100 acres) are serving a population of 10,000 to 50,000 from a service area of  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 miles.

2. According to the National Park Recreation and Open Space Standards (1971) all four parks are classified as district parks.
3. The 30-minute observation sessions took place during midday (12:30 to 1:00 PM) and in the late afternoon (5:00 to 5:30 PM) on a Monday, Tuesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Also, park users were counted every half hour for three hours during midday (12:00 to 3:00 PM) and for two hours during the end of the day (4:30 to 6:30 PM).
4. This stratified random sampling technique was used because some park areas displayed high utilization, while others were only moderately used at peak times.
5. In order to avoid communication problems Spanish-speaking interviewers were sent to South Gate and Will Rogers parks, and a Chinese graduate student surveyed Monterey Park.
6. Stamps and Stamps (1985) found the most popular leisure activities for blacks to be socializing/partying, TV/radio, participation in sports, reading, listening to music, resting/relaxation. For whites the most popular activities included reading, TV/radio, outdoor recreation, participation in sports, sewing/needlework, socializing/partying.
7. In order to test the statistical significance of these differences, chi-square tests were employed using the .05 significance level. In all four cases the null hypothesis was rejected (see tables 2 through 5).
8. Eighty-six percent of the Hispanic respondents stated that they visit the park at least two to three times per week.
9. In an empirical study that examined the behavior and activities of women in downtown open spaces, Mazingo (1989, 46) concluded that men and women may have "different concepts of optimum open space experiences." She found that men were more likely to seek environments that provide intensity, publicness, unpredictable social interactions, while women preferred spaces that provide familiarity, comfort, socialization with friends, and spatial control. She compared these two different attitudes with front-yard versus backyard experiences.
10. Studies conducted by students in my class, Seminar on Public Space, found that in some Los Angeles parks one can find distinct spatial turfs for the homeless and for drug addicts peacefully coexisting in the same park with turfs of other groups.
11. In many Los Angeles parks the Pepsi Cola Company has donated standardized orange and blue equipment.

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