

# Teen and Adult Perceptions of Urban Green Space Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>

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## Comment on This Article

### **Abstract**

*Results from an inner-city teen focus group on parks and urban green space in Los Angeles, California and responses to parallel questions posed to adults from the same area show striking differences. While adults focused on activities and cited a need for additional recreation-oriented parks for teens, teenagers themselves focused on greened spaces suitable for socializing and relaxing. Teens were also keenly interested in local parks, aware of maintenance issues, and concerned about personal safety.*

**Keywords:** youth, participation, urban green space, focus groups, teenagers

## **Introduction**

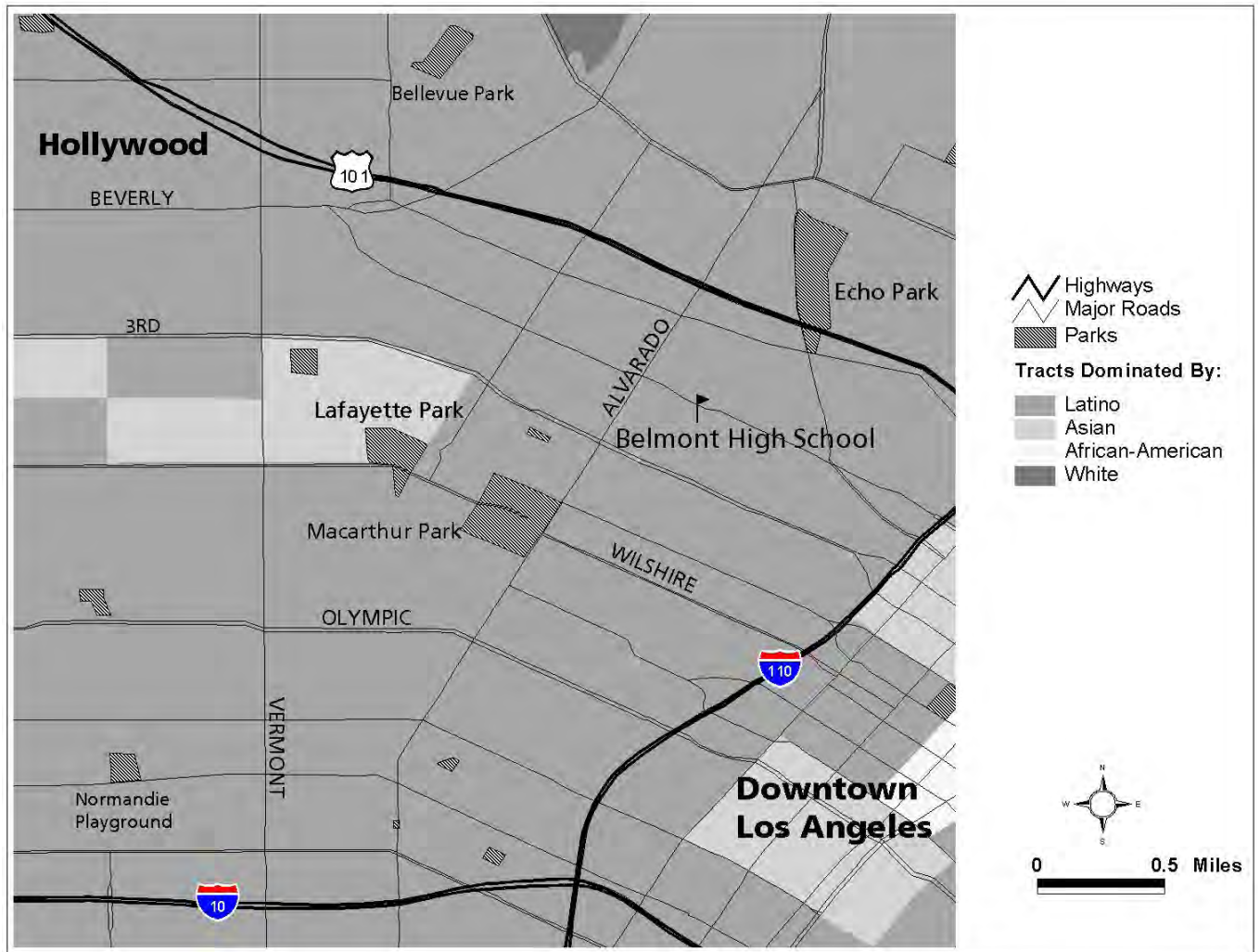
At a June 2002 public meeting about the new Taylor Yard State Park along the Los Angeles River in Los Angeles, California, many adults expressed an urgent need for recreational spaces for youth, especially soccer fields, at the new park. Teenagers and younger children, however, were conspicuously missing from the meeting, except for one young boy who stated to great applause that his neighborhood did need more soccer fields. Both the perception of parks as providing idealized opportunities for youth (Boyer 1978), and the goal of controlling youthful activities through structured recreation (Addams 1912) have a long and continuing tradition in progressive movements in the United States.

California and Los Angeles voters have approved a variety of funding propositions to provide urban parks in the past few years. In November 1996, City of Los Angeles voters passed Proposition K to increase and enhance city park and recreation space. Prop. K allocated almost \$300 million over 30 years to 183 specific projects; another \$143.7 million was earmarked for competitive grant applicants to fund capital improvements, maintenance, and land acquisition (Wolch, Wilson and Fehrenbach 2002). Also in November 1996, Los Angeles County voters renewed 1992's Proposition A to provide funds for more than 140 specific projects throughout the county, focusing on parks, recreation, at-risk children and teens, community, and natural lands. More recently, in March 2002, voters across California approved a \$2.6 billion bond through state Proposition 40, which specifically targeted urban community park development.

These measures are part of a national movement by voters to endorse the expansion of programs that link urban parks to larger sustainability issues such as water and air quality and coastal zone protection. On Election Day in November of 1998, voters nationwide approved 72 percent of 240 state and local ballot measures—a 50 percent increase from 1996—in 31 states to protect or improve parks, open space, farmlands, historic resources, watersheds, greenways, and biological habitats (Myers 1999).

While demand for urban park space has been increasing, information about the sorts of urban park space preferred by various user groups is uneven. Children and teenagers, for example, constitute a leading group of urban park users, yet are largely ignored in preference surveys. Some exceptions include National Park Service research that found white, middle-class suburban high-school students valued opportunities for active recreation and sociability and the chance to personally experience nature in their visits to national parks (Noe 1978). Ulrich and Addams (1981) confirmed similar attitudes toward parks in a study of college students, who valued the opportunity for sociability and passive relaxation in a nearby park. However, the scarcity of open space (greened or otherwise) opportunities in our study area (Figure 1) and Los Angeles in general (Wolch, Wilson and Fehrenbach 2002), suggest the importance of augmenting these older studies of relatively privileged, suburban, youth with research into the perceptions of green space held by economically and racially diverse adults and youth with irregular, urban access to parks.

**Figure 1. Map indicating the location of the study area**



We used a focus group interview to uncover the attitudes of urban teenagers toward neighborhood urban green space. We also examined the adult perceptions of urban green space in a central city neighborhood of Los Angeles via focus groups and a survey. We posed the same set of questions to 16 high-school seniors and adults of similar socio-economic backgrounds to compare their responses.<sup>2</sup> We examine three interwoven themes: the types of spaces identified as parks and their usage; the role of teens in the planning process; and methodologies for obtaining youth input. We begin with a review of relevant literatures regarding youth participation, benefits of green space, and focus group methodologies for diverse populations; then describe the case study, including research design issues. For purposes of this paper, we limited examples of youth participation to those in Canada and the United States.

Findings reveal that teen responses to the focus group queries varied dramatically from adult responses to similar queries, and they emphasized pragmatic yet innovative approaches to increase local greening. While adults opted for more and new green spaces, especially greening parking lots, teens suggested creating parks out of alleyways and tunnels, and emphasized maintenance over expansion. These results accentuate the importance youth participation in planning, with the goals of increasing inclusion and broadening the knowledge of decision-makers.

### **Benefits of Green Space**

The benefits of access to green space are widely documented. Green space provides opportunities for low-intensity, long-duration activities, such as walking, cycling, and gardening that have been recommended to combat the serious health problems of an increasingly sedentary urban lifestyle (World Health Organization 1997). Moreover, play in green neighborhood settings has been shown to result in post-activity reduction of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) behavior in children who suffer from ADD; and children who typically play in green play areas have less severe ADD symptoms than those in less-green settings (Taylor et al. 2001). Creative play, critical for assimilating new information and developing schemas, is also positively linked to vegetation (Taylor et al. 1998). Other health benefits include improved recovery and mental rejuvenation for patients who can view the natural environment (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Verderber 1986; Ulrich 1984); decreased demand for health care for prisoners with a view of the natural environment compared to those without such a view (Moore 1981); decreased aggression and violence (Kuo and Sullivan 2001) as well as mental fatigue (Kuo 2001) for public housing residents in greened developments; and rejuvenation for persons suffering mental fatigue and overload who viewed nondramatic natural landscapes (Kaplan et al. 1998, 67-78).

Numerous studies indicate that green cover in neighborhoods increases property values (Garvin and Berens 1997; Brabec 1992; Myers 1997), as does close proximity to parks and even deciduous trees (Woolley 2003). Other economic benefits of urban open space include the employment opportunities associated with the creation and long-term maintenance of these spaces, as well as tourism dollars of visitors to the resultant parks, gardens, and civic areas (Woolley 2003).

There are also environmental benefits offered by open and green spaces. Such urban spaces provide not only opportunities to view attractive undeveloped spaces and/or wildlife, but also open wildlife corridors, thus increasing their available habitat (Woolley 2003). Urban greening in particular can improve air quality by reducing air pollution (as plants absorb carbon dioxide and other materials), ameliorate the urban heat island effect with shade and cooling, act as a noise barrier, and reduce urban runoff (Longcore et al. under review; Morris 2003; Pincetti et al. 2003; Woolley 2003; Miller 1995).

Urban open space can strengthen the social fabric in cities, providing opportunities for residents and visitors to participate in activities and socialize with one another, and possibly forming a geographical focus for a community (Woolley 2003). Moreover, while the rest of the landscape changes, parks may provide a permanent

link to a community's history. Further, urban residents appreciate the aesthetic value of open spaces proximate to their homes (Woolley 2003). Access to green space by urban residents has been shown to afford a sense of escape from fast-paced urban life and a place for solitude and contemplation, especially among residents who often have very little private space to themselves (Everheart 1983; Wolch, Wilson and Fehrenbach 2002).

### **Urban Green Space and the Teen Population**

Recent efforts to correct the shortage of green space in California cities are bearing fruit, but there is little research on how to integrate green space into existing urban fabric (Bentley 2000; Hough 1995; Spirn 1984). Moreover, there has been little investigation of urban youth perspectives on green space. This project begins to address both the substantive question about the attitudes of urban teens toward neighborhood green space, and the methodological question of how to best design and implement focus groups for diverse youth overall.

We were interested in querying teens because they are active users of green and open space. Historically, adults have dictated that green space and/or recreational opportunities be used to produce healthful youth behavior (MacLeod 1987; Cranz 1982; Cavallo 1981; Addams 1912). In the past, parks and playgrounds were praised for countering concerns of youth frailty, as fewer American children came from sturdy farming backgrounds; and for providing a necessary outlet for the sexual and other energies of adolescents (MacLeod 1987). The Boy Scouts of America introduced a regimen of wholesome activities including hiking, camping, drills, and games (MacLeod 1998). Further, the bacteriological revolution shifted the focus of environmental sanitation from sewerage to community-oriented public health, emphasizing the relationship between a positive physical environment and robust urban health. Tenement reformers consequently argued that residents needed more space, air, and sunlight than typical tenement units provided (Cranz 1982).

However, the ability of urban children and teens to access green space has diminished over time due to increased restrictions, such as locking parking lots which served as play areas, housing authority police enforcing antiplay rules on public housing grounds, and police prohibition on street stickball games for fear the broom handles would be used as weapons (Gaster 1991). The spatial change of play over time, from streets, to playgrounds, to home and community centers is characterized by a parallel evolution in supervision—neighbors, play leaders, technology (Wridt 2004).

### **Planning Processes and Youth**

Land use practitioners and theorists have come to recognize that preferences come from individuals' own interpretations of community, which vary with the person and the place. Partly as a result of this expanding recognition of multiple viewpoints, over the last few decades planning theory has embraced a broadened scope in terms of whom and what contributes knowledge. Postmodern theorists have demanded greater inclusion (Sandercock 1998; Friedmann 1987) and methodological consideration of multiple viewpoints (Scharfstein 1989), including

those of children and youth (Urban Places Project 2000; Matthews and Limb 1999; Mullahey et al. 1999).

Urban geographers, in particular, have explored the position of children in society, focusing especially on relationships between time, space, and power. Early work that investigated the spatial oppression of inner-city youth and recognized children's situated knowledge (Bunge 1973) as well as their wayfinding abilities and other environmental understanding (Blaut and Stea 1974; Downs 1985; Biel 1986; Allen et al. 1979; Golledge et al. 1985; Golledge 1999) highlighted an apparent epistemology of youth. This understanding that youth have a different way of knowing and understanding created a foundation for future study. Subsequent geographical research focused on the role of the physical environment in the creation and socialization of children and teens, as well as cultural reproduction, largely via ethnographic studies (Moore 1986; Hart 1979; Ward 1978) and cognitive mapping (Lynch 1977; Torell 1990). Studies of children's place knowledge have also emphasized the importance of familiarity with physical environment (Doherty et al. 1989; Golbeck and Liben 1988). More recently, researchers have employed similar ethnographic methodologies to observe place-making (Sobel 1993) and place appropriation skills of teens (Childress 2000), and utilized observation and survey methods to understand how younger children create spaces for play or socialization (Oke et al. 1999; Abu-Ghazze 1998).

Young people are neither simply individuals at a precursor stage to adulthood, nor just a product of the social realm, but actors in the social realm (Aitken 2001; Prout and James 1997; Lee 2001). Hence, their viewpoints are integral to a complete understanding of the social milieu, which includes the built environment. Nonetheless, in most practical instances, city planners and policy makers continue to engage in a top-down planning approach, determining the amount and type of open or green space with local children and teens in mind, yet without querying these youth directly about their green space preferences.

Because adults cannot really see like children (Matthews and Limb 1999), research needs to "hear" kids' voices (Gutenschwager 1995). Multiple methods to involve youth in planning and policy-making are emerging. One way to conceptualize the range of potential youth involvement in planning and other processes is via Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation (Hart 1999). The lowest three stages of child involvement limit youth involvement to superficial levels—raising questions as to whether they elicit true youth participation:

- manipulation;
- decoration; and
- tokenism

The fourth to eighth levels represent more active participation, including:

- assigned but informed, wherein the child has limited involvement but understands the process and focus;

- consulted and informed, which is a situation essentially structured by adults, such as in studies of children;
- adult-initiated, but including shared decision-making, albeit usually only at the conceptual rather than the implementation phase;
- child-initiated and directed; and
- child-initiated with shared decision-making with adults, which therefore implies trust in adults.

Chawla's categorization of youth participation (2002) loosely parallels Hart's, and underscores the range of participatory options:

- prescribed, as in moral or cultural obligations;
- assigned, or directed by adults;
- invited, which is adult-directed but youth participants may easily withdraw;
- negotiated, wherein youth are assigned a participatory role with opportunities to determine how to carry it out;
- self-initiated negotiated participation, initiated and controlled by youth;
- graduated participation, with increasing opportunities to practice new types of participation; and
- collaborated participation, initiated and supported by a group.

Examples of youth involvement in planning practice typically fall into two areas, both designed to increase children's participation: to broaden the scope of views included in decision-making; and to get children interested and involved in planning. The following are examples of initiatives that strive to achieve either or both of these goals:<sup>3</sup>

- Since 1988 students at Kramer Junior High School in the historically black Anacostia neighborhood in Washington, D.C. have provided their insights and ideas to visiting planners and university faculty to generate redevelopment ideas for a neighborhood parking lot (Race and Torma 1998).
- In 1991, Seattle Kids Place, a children's lobby, organized three youth summits in order to provide a forum for children and teens to express issues of concern, resulting in the creation of Seattle Youth Involvement Network (SYIN), which enables kids from elementary to high school age to have a voice on education, neighborhood, and city issues (Mullaley et al. 1999).
- Ke Ala Hoku ("Charting the Course"), began in Hawaii in 1995 out of the idea that giving youth a greater voice results in an increased sense of responsibility, engaged citizens, and new perspectives in policy-setting discussions. It uses Adult and Youth Steering Committees to monitor the project's progress and to develop neighborhood-level indicators (Mullaley et al. 1999).
- In 1995-96 the city of Lemon Grove, California increased resident participation by using students as well as their parents to create a Kids Element in an update of the City's General Plan (Mullaley et al. 1999; Race and Torma 1998).
- The Costa Mesa, California's Advisory Committee of Teens (ACT), created in 1997 in keeping with the city's premise that a healthy community means

broad citizen participation, appointed members ages 14-18 to provide input and to advise on youth issues to the city council staff and community (Gonzales 2000).

- The El Arco Iris and Youth Power group created a step-by-step manual for 10-19 year olds to use to improve their communities, using examples from El Arco Iris Youth and Community Arts work in South Holyoke, Massachusetts as illustrations (Urban Places Project 2000).

The trend to increase youth involvement underscores both a demand for greater information in planning and policy-making; and the struggle for greater inclusion. However, in order to elicit the perspectives of youth, especially hard-to-reach youth, it may be necessary to seek them out rather than wait for them to come forward; to create opportunities for individual and interactive responses rather than rely on reported data; and to acknowledge a variety—verbal and nonverbal, for example—of participatory actions.

### **Focus Group Methods for Youth**

Focus groups were selected for this study as an appropriate methodology for uncovering thoughtful, sincere opinions and attitudes from local residents. This was a good method for the participants in the study for several reasons. Focus group methodology is a useful tool for soliciting the opinions and attitudes of traditionally marginalized groups because they emphasize the collective knowledge of the group and decrease the dominance of the interviewer/researcher (Madriz 2000). They have also been effective where the power differential between the participants and the decision-makers is great enough to discourage participation without the security of a peer group (Morgan and Krueger 1993). Focus groups are also valuable for their ability to generate responses. The focus group orientation takes advantage of the inherent social orientation of individuals. They provide opportunities for individual participants to build upon their own responses, and to build on each other's thoughts as well (Madriz 2000). By questioning each other and providing reality checks on each other's responses, focus group participants enrich the quality of the data (Jarrett 1993). Moreover, focus groups have high face validity, in that participants can understand the technique (Krueger 1994). Focus groups can also be relatively inexpensive (Krueger 1994), especially compared to individual interviews, and results can be assessed quickly.

### **Research Design Issues**

This research had two main objectives concerning the results and the process of the study. The project's first objective was to uncover urban teenagers' attitudes toward neighborhood green and open spaces, and compare those perceptions with those of adults living in the same central Los Angeles neighborhood. The same questions were posed to both groups during focus group interviews. Both groups were asked to describe existing local open space, including areas they visited and characteristics they especially liked, and both groups were asked to identify local areas that could be potentially used to increase urban green space. The second objective was to expand traditional focus group methodology by incorporating an outdoor walk and soliciting observations during this experiential component.



Institutional constraints provided several design challenges in this study. We sought the participation of several teens that lived and attended school within the target geographical area, in order to parallel the adult focus group and allow comparison of results.<sup>4</sup> The teen focus group participants were limited to a pre-established group of classmates in a single class, which raised issues of peer pressure, potentially restricted responses, and group size. These concerns were partially allayed by research that indicates that stranger-groups, where participants are unknown to one another, may yield a lower rate of responsiveness than multiple members of pre-established groups and cliques (Krueger 1994; Pugsley 1996). Further, the proposed group size (16) exceeded the ideal range (from 4-12, Pugsley 1996; Kitzinger 1995; Lamp 1994; Menakshy 1994), but fell within the acceptable range for exploratory purposes (Krueger 1994), consistent with our research goals.

A second research design challenge concerned the fact that the focus group discussion considered concepts such as “nature” that are relatively amorphous and difficult to explain and articulate. Lastly, we recognized that youth have limited attention spans (Krueger 1994). How could we create a venue for teenage peer-group participants to discuss abstract ideas, and feel comfortable giving voice to their opinions and thoughts? How do we define the myriad urban green space examples to a population unfamiliar with this terminology? How do we allow those with differing experiences with urban green space equal opportunities to participate in the focus group dialogue?

We addressed these concerns by incorporating a nature walk into the focus group discussion. This experiential approach has been shown to facilitate responses among participants, especially for ideas that are vague and hard to conceptualize (Burgess et al. 1988) by replicating the experience of being in nature (Burgess 1996). This nature walk in the schoolyard created an informal, physically fluid atmosphere conducive to casual commentary. Further, it defined by example some of the concepts raised in the focus group discussion and provided a necessary mental and physical break for our teenage participants.

### **Methodology: The Belmont High Focus Group**

The study area is a 2.2 square mile urban neighborhood located five miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles, California. It is densely populated, with about 36 residents per acre, three times denser than the city average. Ninety percent of the housing is multifamily rental. More than half (60 percent) of the residents are foreign-born, and represent diverse cultures including Thai, Korean, Filipino, Armenian, Russian and Central American. The study area has no neighborhood parks, community swimming pools, or recreation centers (Pincetl et al. 2003).

Teenage participants were students in a multimedia study track at Belmont High School in Los Angeles. The focus group was convened in summer 2002 in the Belmont High School library. The group was composed of 16 high school seniors, including five girls and 11 boys. The group included 15 Hispanic and one Asian American student. The ethnic/racial composition of the group was representative of the student population in the Los Angeles Unified School District F where Belmont is

located, which has 85 percent Hispanic and 8 percent Asian- American students (Los Angeles Unified School District 2001). The class instructor and the director of the Academy of Multimedia observed the session from a distance of several tables, out of hearing-range; the authors served as the focus group facilitators; and a transcriptionist attended to take notes and manage the recording equipment.<sup>5</sup>

The focus group was opened in a traditional manner, with brief introductions of the facilitators, the transcriptionist, and an explanation of the focus group process and the purpose for the group, including its relationship to the larger study. The value of everyone's participation was emphasized, confidentiality was ensured, and ground rules for speaking were stated. The warm-up query asked about favorite outdoor places in Los Angeles and elsewhere. It was followed by two short sets of questions regarding desirable and undesirable outdoor features, and identification of real or imagined good and bad uses of outdoor open space, green or otherwise. Then participants were led on a short walk through adjacent open space on the school grounds. A structured script guided the open-ended, rhetorical questions posed to the participants during this experiential component. These included asking what they think of when someone says "green space" or "open space;" asking what they expected to find in the space, and then later recounting what they actually saw or heard there; and speculating how they might change the grounds to more closely approximate their own ideal vision of green or open space. Upon the group's return to the interior discussion space, a final set of questions regarding attitudes towards streets, parking lots, alleys and sidewalks completed the focus group discussion. All students signed consent forms and received a \$20 cash honorarium for their participation.

## **Results**

### **Teens on Urban Green Space**

Teen participants' attitudes towards urban open and/or green space revolved around three primary foci: multiple uses for park space, safety issues, and concerns about trash and maintenance.

Throughout the discussion on existing open space, the students expressed a keen preference for spaces that facilitated a variety of uses, including both active and passive recreational opportunities. A majority of the students had visited Griffith Park, the largest urban park in the United States, located just north of the study area. They said they enjoyed it because it offered a variety of spaces for sociability with family and friends, as well as recreation opportunities like horseback riding and nature trails. Participants noted that they liked the green space for a wide variety of reasons: "...go up there and have a barbecue, sometimes, with the family;" "Just like go play;" and "See other people." One participant described Echo Park, a city park located beyond walking distance from the local neighborhood, as likable because it had a little park in the middle of a big park. Another liked the ducks there (although another student claimed she was afraid of being bitten by them.) Another student described a park he had visited, also outside the neighborhood. He liked the range of recreational opportunities available there—two basketball courts outside, an indoor gym, and a soccer/softball field. In a related vein, while all of the

students indicated that they had visited the beach within the year, at least one felt the beach itself was too limiting and preferred the pier: "At the beach, you just go and you get wet and that's it; if you go to the pier, you can go on the rides and stuff."

While the students liked to engage in different activities, they shared common concerns about urban impacts on green space. When queried about what they did not like about the city's parks, they noted: "the smog;" "how dirty parks are;" "...the bums;" "all the paved cement;" and "you'll be dodging bullets." Indeed, during the interview, safety was a recurrent theme. Ten separate responses related to issues of personal safety were offered during the discussion and often agreed upon via nonverbal responses by most of the participants. Students perceived some park spaces, open spaces with opportunities for green space re-use (such as alleyways and vacant lots), and streets as potentially unsafe areas in which to recreate or socialize. Specific concerns included the threat of violence in alleyways, the general sense that particular streets were unsafe because of a history of violent activities and traffic, and the fear of homeless people who used parks and green spaces as living space. When initially asked about how to address the issues of safety, one student suggested avoiding the area altogether, but another student later recommended that cleaning up and planting an open space would give neighbors a new sense of pride and ownership, thus making for a safer space: "It could offer like a lift in morale. They'll like stand up for it. They won't let it get messed up again." Other students nodded in agreement to this student's statement, demonstrating how others' can support perceptions shared during a focus group.

The teens' third major focus on urban parks centered on upkeep. Students overwhelmingly expressed concern that existing parks and other open spaces were polluted and under-maintained. For example, though almost all of the students had visited Los Angeles beaches in the past year, none of them enjoyed the beach because of their perception that it is polluted, citing trash specifically. "It's so polluted man, every time you go out there there's trash." Most of the group laughed in agreement. Smog was mentioned only once, but agreed upon by a majority as a problem when going outside. One primary concern was how "dirty parks are" with people leaving litter in parks and trash in alleys. In addition to trash, students were also aware and concerned about other maintenance issues, for example old and cracked concrete and impacted earth at recreation areas such as basketball courts.

When teens were asked to identify spaces that could be changed, including how they might be improved, they again focused on flexible uses. They maintained their desire to balance uses instead of designing formal, supervised, single-use projects such as soccer fields or community gardens. When asked, "What sort of spaces do you know of around here...where we can change [green] this space?" not surprisingly, the teens considered modifying places accessible to youth and creating spaces amenable to multiple, unstructured uses. Some of their suggestions were creative uses for overlooked spaces, such as using greening to remake a dilapidated, graffiti-decorated railway tunnel into a social park space (Figure 2).

"You could put grass in it [the tunnel] and maybe people could go down there during the weekdays after school just to hang out." Despite their fears, they also imagined transforming unsafe, trash-strewn alleyways into walk-through gardens or a linear skate park.

**Figure 2. The railway tunnel proposed as a site for park space**



This part of the discussion also uncovered their powers of observation and sense of frustration about underused spaces. One student stated:

*"I mean, there are buildings around the neighborhood, and they have signs for leases, but no one ever uses them. I mean, they're just there taking up space, and you could tear them down and put up a park, or at least a basketball court, where students or adults could go in the afternoon."*

With regard to recommendations for new green spaces, as with preferences for existing spaces, what seemed important were the spaces themselves, rather than any discrete activity or activities the spaces might support. Toward the end of the focus group discussion, one student offered a comment that summed up this notion: "It's like some people live close to parks and some don't. For the people that live far away from them, they need *something* there."

In a comment made at the end of the focus group, one student eloquently pointed out that the questions they had been asked emphasized conceptualizing *new* park spaces, when he perceived a much greater need for investing in improving and cleaning up *existing* parks:

*"...We have parks around here but...you go up there and they have trash everywhere, and hoboes living under trees and stuff. And it would be nice to have somewhere to go where the cement isn't all cracked and the clay isn't all like rubbery due to the usage. I mean, just a nice park. You don't need more, you just need nice. Just fix it up."*

### **Comparing Teen Focus Group Comments with Those of Adults**

Parallel focus groups in a related study queried adult residents and workers in the same neighborhood about their perceptions of urban green space.<sup>6</sup> While the teens hung out on the streets or traveled to the regional Griffith or Echo Parks, adults had a different range. Several adults said they visited the nearby Barnsdall art park, and at least one spent time in a community garden. Three specifically stated that they took their children to the Los Angeles Community College (LACC) campus in the neighborhood so their children could ride bikes in a safe, non-crowded environment. Others said they took the bus to various local parks. The emphasis in the adult place preferences is on the activity offered by the given space. These responses contrast with the teens' preferences for places that offer a range of activities centered on socializing.

When asked "Are there any places that could become opportunities for creating open space that you can think of?" adult participants tended to focus on streets and parking lots. Their suggested greening strategies were broad and enthusiastic. "Why couldn't the parking lot be landscaped?" "Roundabouts with gardens." "Streets are just too bare...like to see more grass, more plants and more greening all around." Suggestions tended to be activity-oriented. "A park [on blacktop area across from the library]." "It's a level area [blacktop area]—it could have playing fields." "What about something like a community garden?" Three different respondents suggested a skate park: "Because there are lots of kids [skating] on the street" and "LACC has 'no skating' signs." Teens asked to identify spaces that could be changed, on the other hand, described flexible use spaces. No teens suggested playing fields or skate parks. Their focus was on modifying places accessible to youth, and creating spaces amenable to multiple, unstructured uses.

Teens also identified places that are typically overlooked in terms of greening opportunities, such as the neighborhood underpass (tunnel) and local alleyways. When the adult focus group participants were asked specifically if alleys could be

turned into parks, one blurted "Alleys are scary." The other adults nodded in agreement. The teens, however, offered "I wonder if you could make like a walk-through garden [in an alley]."

### **The Outdoor Walk**

The outdoor walk shifted the focus group from the formal configuration of sitting around a library table as part of a large group and discussing virtual green space, to a leisurely stroll amongst the campus' trees and shrubbery. Whether it was the physical activity or the immersion in nature, this walk appeared to facilitate greater student articulation about and realization of aspects of green space. Students shared observations about a range of urban green attributes—trees, climbing plants, flower boxes, birds, squirrels, street noise and their newly greened football field—more readily and quickly than when queried in the library setting. Students' body language changed, they formed smaller clusters within the larger group, and they gestured to and freely pointed out features that supported their responses to queries. In the walk setting, too, students engaged in more discussion with one another regarding the queries, and commented on each others' responses, whereas such interaction was rare during the indoor portion of the focus group discussion. It is possible that being outside, in an environment less bound by rules than the school library, resulted in a greater sense of speaking comfort and encouraged more responses. Furthermore, especially given the large group size, students may have felt freer to express themselves when in smaller clusters, milling about outside, rather than as one member of a relatively large, immobile group where attention was focused on them if they spoke up.

One of the co-moderators asked "Where's a place we can go outside this school building and see something green?" One student commented "Nothing's green out there" but another quickly corrected him with "Just outside, you know there is a couple of trees and some bushes." This student led the way past a plum tree with fruit growing on it (most students seemed surprised to see this) and walked to a concrete area overlooking the football field. Someone explained that we were standing on the roof. Several large potted trees decorated this area. While standing in this semi-green urban space, the students were asked, "What do you think of when you think of outdoor green space?" One answered "trees;" another "it's not really green;" and yet another: "I'm not against it [green]" and corrected the second student "There's trees in boxes and other...flowers."

Then the students were asked "What don't you see out here that you'd like to see?" More students provided responses during this portion of the session, and the responses given, while brief, built upon previous comments. Six students provided nine different responses: "Grass;" "More plants;" "Plants that grow on the walls;" "A basketball court;" "Ducks, squirrels;" "Water fountain;" "Picnic tables;" "Barbecue pits;" and "A football field, if there is grass." At this point the students disagreed about whether their football field had grass currently; the group walked over to look at the field and observed that it was lush and grassy. One commented that it looked this way now for graduation and looks great because no one is allowed to use it.

## Conclusions

This focus group was successful as a probative tool. It was relatively simple to organize and implement, and yielded immediate data. The authors obtained first-hand understanding of the issues and concerns of the youth regarding urban parks and open space. Student participants offered responses to queries posed, remarked on each other's comments, and seemed to challenge the popular call to create more urban parks in favor of better-maintaining existing parks and open space.

The outdoor walk provided a change for the students, providing a contextual backdrop to the discussion and possibly offering a needed physical and mental break. It allowed students a bit of safety and anonymity when expressing perceptions, preferences, and ideas compared to sharing in front of the entire group, suggesting the potential value of using an experiential component when working with youth.

At the same time, the authors caution against replication of specific aspects of the Belmont High focus group. When possible, focus groups should be removed from institutional settings that convey a hierarchical power relationship. Future student groups might yield freer information exchange if they were convened off school property, although meeting with students off-campus may prove infeasible due to school security policies. Again, where possible, the presence of authority figures that might influence responses should be minimized.

The responses support burgeoning research that indicates youthful voices challenge adult perceptions (CABE 2004) and thus underscore the value of youth participation. Adults' propensity for creating relatively large-scale new spaces that require specific, structured, and typically supervised participation is at odds with teens' desires for casual open spaces that permit a range of youth-controlled social activities. This contrasting preference epitomizes a century-old effort to shape the lives of youth through recreation. As early as the 1880s settlement house workers and social reformers argued that properly supervised play fostered respect for property and law and order (Cranz 1982, 191). Supervised athletics were seen as an antidote to middle class youth "turning soft" and organized sports fostered strength and courage. Recreation specialists at the turn of the century claimed that regimented and supervised team sports could teach lower-class boys obedience and cooperation (MacLeod 1998, 127). Lester Gulick, Chief Secretary of the Playground Association of American (PAA) wrote in the "Popular Recreation and Public Morality," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 35 (1910):41:

*Not only must municipalities and philanthropic associations coordinate their efforts in some harmonious scheme, but the whole plan must be administered by experts with definite goals in view. It is not enough to*

*give everyone the chance to play. We must also direct that play to specific as well as attractive ends (Cavallo 1981, 39).*

While these early directives argued against unstructured opportunities, our youthful participants desire precisely that. When teens envision themselves as planners and consider what represents important green space, the spaces they are most concerned with are local and immediate. The underlying theme that emerged from the student responses was an interest in and affiliation with neighborhood parks and simple activities. Students expressed little, if any, affection for urban green or open space beyond grass and trees within their immediate home and school neighborhood. They used limited spaces flexibly, from active sports activities with friends, to family gatherings and barbecues, to passive socializing. When pressed for suggestions to improve or increase urban green space, their responses were pragmatic, yet innovative: maintain the existing parks rather than create more parks; green the areas around some old railway tunnels nearby and also in front of school buildings; and transform narrow alleys into walking gardens.

These creative plans highlight benefits of youth participation beyond simply capturing youth voices. Focus group results regarding attitudes towards parks and urban space can complement recent valuable observation and survey research regarding youth park usage (Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz 2001; Owens 1994). Further, the teens who participated in the focus group conceptualized integrating green space into their neighborhood in ways that differed sharply with the ideas of local adults. Their ideas add to, rather than support or parallel the adult discussion on urban greening, indicating that their inclusion can enhance local planning efforts.

This study's results suggest the importance of paying close attention to the attitudes toward open and/or green space held by diverse youth. The urban teenagers participating in this research—living in a park-poor, high density area—were aware of and had experienced personal and collective benefits from parks. Although they had not been directly queried previously regarding their urban open and green space preferences, they voiced clear and consistent desires and concerns. They were also keenly aware of safety and maintenance issues, recognizing their responsibility and accountability. Both their experiences and their preferences appear specific to local geography, further underscoring the value of a breadth of local knowledge to inform local planning. An observation in a recent study with younger children (7-11 years old) illuminated the variation in types of local grass, and the importance of these variations to play (Burke 2005). Delving deeper into space perceptions with youth in targeted areas can enhance planning and geographic theory.

## Endnotes

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2. The focus group moderators posed several main questions: Where do you go if you want to spend some time outside? Are there other places you have been that you really liked? What are the things you enjoy when you go outside? What do you dislike about being outdoors? What are the open spaces you like to go to the most? Can you think of any places in this neighborhood that could be used for places to be out-of-doors? What can you picture in these outdoor places? Imagine there is a vacant lot next to where you live. What would you like to have there? What would you not want to have?
3. Volume 15, Issue 2 of *Children, Youth and Environments* had a special focus on Children and Governance ([http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/15\\_2/index.htm](http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/15_2/index.htm)).
4. Our initial proposed group, with a limited number of self-selected students at a local middle-school, could not be approved by the local school within our timeline. Our subsequent outreach to teachers at additional local schools identified a teacher interested in participating provided each student in the class had the opportunity to participate if he or she desired. Each of the students completed an Assent Form for Research that indicated their willingness to act in the focus group, and each attended school the day of the focus group. In retrospect, we could have randomly selected a smaller group of those available on the day we conducted the focus group meeting. That simply did not occur to us; we were skeptical all would opt to participate, let alone return their required voluntary participation forms.
5. For data collection, three tape recorders and one minidisk recorder were used to record the entire indoor session, and an experienced transcriptionist attended and made notes during the focus group, including the outdoor walk, as well as completed the transcription of the session tapes afterwards. The session was transcribed within 14 days of the focus group dates, and the tapes destroyed to guarantee participant anonymity.
6. Adult resident participants were recruited by a community-oriented non-profit partner, the California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund (CLCV Ed Fund). This group's mission is to undertake local environmental education. The CLCV Ed Fund had contacts in the area in other community organizations, and their own employees were familiar to residents. The adult participants were required to commit to attending two focus groups. A total of 24 such participants were recruited.

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