Small Parks and their Communities: Ethnographies of the Public Realm

Amita Sinha

ABSTRACT

Small urban parks are catalysts in promoting place-based communities. Their 'centeredness' is essential for successful social use as Jane Jacobs pointed out in Death and Life of Great American Cities. Subsequent studies of urban parks by Clare Cooper Marcus confirm that insight. Case studies of small urban parks in the twin cities of Urbana and Champaign in Illinois, USA support this urban design principle. Ethnographic research reveals three dominant subcultures in their social life—play, movement, and pause. All three subcultures are supported by two types of small parks – neighbourhood and community parks. Although both are centered, their urban context impacts the quality of social life. Mixed land use and high volume of traffic around community parks result in a public space for the larger community. Neighbourhood parks in the midst of single family houses and lined by streets with low volume of traffic, on the other hand, have a stronger sense of collective identity and feelings of ownership among their users. They are 'parochial' rather than truly 'public' and therefore more successful in fostering social capital in a place-based neighbourhood community.

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Introduction

In current landscape architecture discourse, the small urban park is neglected because it is not a large ecosystem, cannot support diverse species, and is heavily impacted by human populations. The emphasis on storm water

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management, restoration of native vegetation, and connection with greenways satisfies ecological goals such as improvement of water quality and reduced maintenance. Small parks play a critical role in building face-to-face place-based communities, a design principle often neglected in the current preoccupation with ecological issues. Designing Small Parks; A Manual for Addressing Social and Ecological Concerns (Forsyth and Musacchio, 2005) for example concludes that choices have to be made if small parks have to address both ecological and social concerns. Presumably ecological concerns will win over social given the focus on environmental sustainability. Cranz and Boland (2004) describe the fifth and emerging park model as defined by environmental and social sustainability. The sustainable park would not only heal degraded post-industrial landscapes but also "improve and maintain physical and psychological health even more directly than has been traditional in the US" (p. 114). Social sustainability is as important as environmental sustainability— a norm often overlooked in the current discourse on park design. The sense of place in urban green spaces is linked with community identity and social networks that are indicators

of health and well-being (Jennings, Larson, and Yun, 2016). Small parks can reduce alienation and anomie through face-to-face social communication, make people walk and exercise more, bring children in playful contact with other children and adults in the outdoors, and promote a sense of place-based identity. Values of 'nearby nature' and 'biophilia' can be supported by spaces designed for a variety of human activities and needs for

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sociability. Small parks have a role in creating a salutegenic city where the built environment promotes physical and psychological health (Marcus and Sachs, 2014).

Centeredness of Small Parks

Jane Jacobs in her seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) pointed out that intensely used small parks tend to have four elements in their design: intricacy, centering, sun and enclosure. While the quality of intricacy stimulates a variety of uses, 'center' is linked with location, i.e. the park is enclosed by buildings on all sides, much like a public courtyard as opposed to being on the edge of a neighbourhood or subdivision (**Figure 1**). The sense of enclosure created by buildings around the park makes it into a positive space, 'an event in the city scene'. Jane Jacobs' insights have been confirmed by Clare Copper Marcus and her

SCALE: 1:30000

▢ STUDY AREA: CLARK PARK NEIGHBORHOOD

▢ LOCAL PARKS

▢ CHAMPAIGN COUNTRY CLUB

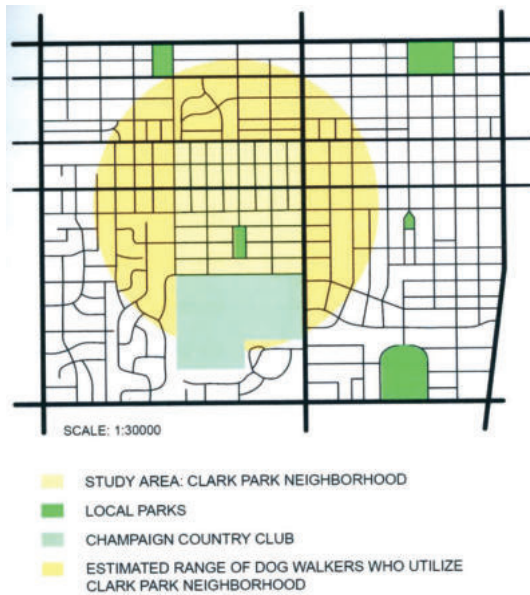▢ ESTIMATED RANGE OF DOG WALKERS WHO UTILIZE
CLARK PARK NEIGHBORHOOD

Figure 1: Clark Park Neighborhood in Champaign
Source: Timothy Marten

students (Marcus and Francis, 1990). Their case studies of urban parks show that playgrounds, basketball courts, strategically placed benches and other design features that invite use are key to park success. What makes them 'people places' is social life, not a scenic view enjoyed by the solitary observer (Seymour, 1969). New Urbanism also advocates central green

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within the five-minute pedestrian shed in the Traditional Neighbourhood Development (Duany, 2003). The advantages are good

visibility from the surroundings, 'eyes on the park', and a sense of enclosure.

The literature on small urban parks mentions the proximate principle, meaning that property value of homes fronting or abutting parks increases by as much as 20%. Furthermore, the positive effect continues for a distance of 500 – 600 feet after which it decreases (Crompton, 2005). An increase in value is therefore created by number of small parks instead of a large single park of an equivalent area. While proximity and social need (residents who have less private open space will need more public open space) are justified and social diversity is a laudable goal (Talen, 2010), the urban context should be considered as it impacts the degree of social responsibility, neighbourhood identity, and sense of community in a public park that is 'centered' in its location.

Parks are situated in a variety of urban contexts and come in many configurations. Small parks ranging in size from 3 –12 acres are more likely to be situated centrally in the urban fabric. The older gridiron urban pattern in American cities and towns accommodates small parks covering anywhere from 1 – 4 blocks. Density and socio-economic levels of residents in the catchment area are important factors, as are the park's location, size, and design features in shaping its use (Marcus and Francis, 1990; Mumford, 1969; Marcus, 2003). Land use around the park is equally important. The small park located within a residential neighbourhood is used differently than one situated within a mixed land use pattern of office buildings, shops, schools and other institutions. It feels as an extension
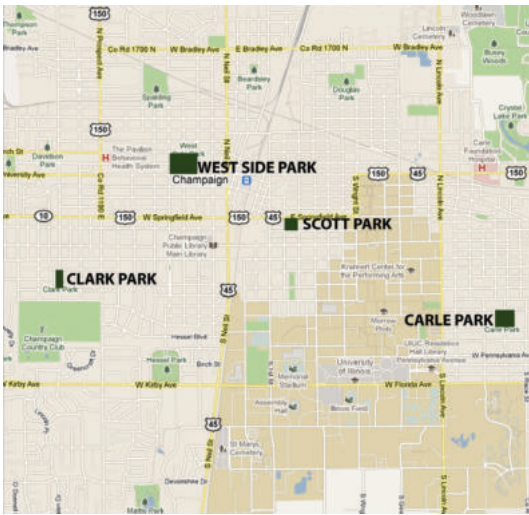
Figure 2: Four Parks in Urbana-Champaign
Source: *Amita Sinha*

of private outdoor space, its use shaped by the shared culture of familial activities and sense of belonging. Easy access and a familiar environment encouraging spontaneous participation are made possible because of its 'courtyard' like character, allowing for temporary appropriation of spaces, individually and/or by groups.

Social Sustainability and Publicness

In theory, parks as public places are accessible to all regardless of gender, ethnicity, age or any other demographic variable. Social norms of use range from civil inattention to close involvement with others (Goffman, 1967). Social life is segmented in subcultures whose diversity ensures that the park will be perceived as a public place (Low, Taplin, and Scheld, 2005). In reality, socially sustainable parks are 'parochial' settings falling somewhere in the public – private continuum (Lofland, 1989). They appear to be more open and welcoming to some than others (Beardsley, 2007), producing an intangible quality

of space discerned in non-verbal modes of user behavior and subtle design cues. They harbor subcultures characterized by shared activity patterns and specific roles defining the individual scope of behavior. Users come back repeatedly as 'regulars' into a social network sustained by the park. Spaces become turfs temporarily

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Small Parks in Urbana and Champaign

Case studies of small parks in the twin cities of Urbana and Champaign in east central Illinois in the United States clearly show that the location

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of parks have a large role in determining the patterns of use in time and space. Among the

	Play	Movement	Pause
Clark Park	• Tennis by adults and teenagers • Flying kites and running games in open fields • Children in playground	• Dog-walkers cutting through • Joggers and walkers on bordering streets; rollerblading on black top	• Parents supervising their playing children • Picnicking, relaxing, socializing • Birthdays and other family events, movie campouts
Carle Park	• Soccer and Frisbee in • open field • Children in playground	• Jogging, biking, and dog-walking on the central path and periphery	• Teens hanging out • Nature gazing, bird watching, reading, sleeping, socializing, picnicking
Scott Park	• Basketball, game of catch • Children in playground	• Grocery shoppers on the diagonal path • Commuters on foot or bike cutting through; dog-walkers	• Sunbathing, office workers having lunch, homeless on park benches, relaxing on the open lawn and under trees, people watching
West-side Park	• Children in playground • Ball games in open fields, Frisbee, hackey-sac	• Commuters to and fro from downtown Champaign; strollers, dog-walkers, joggers; teens on bikes	• Office workers having lunch, homeless sleeping on benches, parents/guardians supervising children's play, nature watchers, people watchers • Annual Taste of Champaign, weekly dinner for the homeless

Table 1: Subcultures in Urbana Champaign Parks

many small parks in Urbana and Champaign, four were studied longitudinally in the last two decades – Carle and Clark as "Neighbourhood" Parks and Scott and Westside as "Community" Parks (**Figure 2**)[1]. The purpose of ethnographic studies was to study the attributes of 'neighbourhood' and 'community' parks—nomenclature used by Champaign and Urbana Park Districts.[2] The parks are centered in their location and their sizes range from 3.5 acres (Scott and Clark Parks in Champaign) to 8.3 acres (Carle Park, Urbana) and 12.7 acres (Westside Park in Champaign).

The two community parks—Westside Park in Champaign and Scott Park in Urbana are bordered by streets with heavy traffic and a mix of institutional, commercial, and residential buildings. Westside Park is the oldest park in Champaign County originally laid out as 'commons' and 'put to work' as cow pasture by settlers in 1861. Later landscaped with a number of meandering walkways converging upon a fountain and bronze statue erected in 1891, presently it has open play fields, playground, and sculpture garden. Two blocks from Champaign downtown, it is bordered by major thoroughfares on three sides that are edged by a mix of single

and multi-family, old historic homes converted into law firms and funeral parlors, offices and a convenience store. Scott Park in Champaign was donated in 1891 by the descendant of James Scott, an influential figure in the annals of the University of Illinois. A connecting link between the campus and its neighbourhoods, it is separated into two parts by the meandering Boneyard Creek flowing from north-east to

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south-west. It has been designed several times – most recently by Hitchcock Design Group in 2008. It has extensive pathways, gazebo, bridge, playground and a basketball court. It is surrounded by medical and dental clinics, hospital, and apartment buildings and one of the streets edging it has a high traffic volume.

The two neighbourhood parks—Clark Park in Champaign and Carle Park in Urbana are bordered by streets with mostly residential traffic and single-family dwellings. Clark Park was obtained in 1901 and has become the symbolic center of a neighbourhood of mostly upper-middle to middle-income residents. It has tennis courts, baseball diamond, sand volleyball courts, open fields, picnic tables, rock and water gardens. Carle Park is the second oldest in Urbana, a gift of Margaret Carle Morris in 1901 and initially designed by Joseph Blair, University of Illinois Professor and the first Director of Urbana Park District. Surrounded on three sides by houses dating back to early 1900s owned by upper middle-income residents, on its fourth side it opens up to Urbana High and Middle Schools

on Race Street. It has a Spanish style historic pavilion, Miller Memorial Garden, playgrounds, a tree walk and Lincoln the lawyer statue gracing its east entrance.

Play, Movement, Pause

Ethnographic studies over two decades have yielded rich qualitative data based on the premise that the gamut of social life in public spaces can best be studied in an open-ended research method, its variety captured in taxonomies of people, places and activities, and its meanings interpreted in dimensions of contrast emerging from componential analysis (Spradley and McCurdy, 1972; Spradley, 1980; Cranz, 2016). Participant observation was carried out in fall in the months of September-October when the weather is agreeable enough for outdoor life. The small parks were observed at all times of the day, weekdays and weekends, and on holidays. Behavior mapping was done, interviews were conducted with willing informants, and field notes were taken. Data from the three domains of people, places and activities was categorized into taxonomies that were further compared and contrasted in componential analysis to decipher the patterns of use in time and space.

Three subcultures emerge from longitudinal studies of the four parks.[3] Play is the most important activity in small parks, building a 'face-to-face' community of adults, adolescents and children. Movement on foot and bikes, for exercise, pleasure, and going towards a destination is seen in all parks, some of it done sociably in groups. Movement to and through the parks is interrupted by pauses for chance encounter with others, nature contemplation, and people watching. Parks provide opportunities for pauses in the hurried rhythm of daily life,

Figure 3: (anticlockwise from top left) Examples of 'Play' in Carle Park (Amita Sinha), Clark Park (Amita Sinha), Scott Park (Xinxin Chai), and Westside Park (Andrea Fabor Taylor).

to take a break from the tedium of chores, and to relax and participate in planned recreational events (**Table 1**).

The three subcultures defined by dominant patterns of park use sustain communities or quasi-communities of sorts. The small parks are therefore catalysts for allowing leisure communities to take root and flourish around play structures, open fields, baseball, volleyball, and basketball courts, picnic tables and benches and other design elements. The 'centeredness' of parks within the residential neighbourhood or mixed-use urban sector ensures an over-all high use in good weather conditions. While all four parks have similar patterns of activities, variations among them justify their categorization into 'neighbourhood' and 'community' parks.

Play in the two neighbourhood parks—Clark and Carle—is the dominant activity. Parents play with children in running games and flying kites in the open fields. They play tennis while their children use the playground only 15' away. Basketball courts are used by young adults from the neighbourhood for opportunistic pick-up games. The same pattern can be observed in Carle Park where the soccer field is a male adolescent space dominated by high school students. Younger children (2-6 years) supervised by their parents who also socialize with each other are found on the play structures while older children (7-12 years) can be found playing everywhere.

At Scott and Westside Parks too, playgrounds draw young children and their parents from the neighbourhood. In Westside Park however, the proximity of preschools and elementary school results in large groups of toddlers and children being brought by guardians during

Figure 4: (clockwise from top left) Examples of 'Movement' in Carle Park, Clark Park, Scott Park, and Westside Park.
***Source**: Amita Sinha*

daytime. Open field in the northwest is used for physical education classes by Central High School students, as well as ball games, hackey-sac, and frisbee throwing by young adults. At Scott Park, the basketball court is used by young adults of all races (Asians and Caucasians tend to be students) although the African-American group drawn from neighbourhoods on the north tends to dominate in the afternoons. The playground receives use from parents and children but is also 'hijacked' by homeless and adults who use it at all odd hours (**Figure 3**).

Their centrality and the many walkways of the four parks ensure that they are sites of movement on foot and bicycles. They are used for 'cutting-through', as a path to somewhere else, or a destination for exercising through walking and jogging, strolling for pleasure, rollerblading and skateboarding. Movement can be slow, meandering and unpredictable, or fast, focused

and oriented towards a destination. At Clark and Carle Parks, neighbours cut through when they are biking, jogging or walking on adjacent

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streets. Walking is often done in pairs or groups by women and elderly while running is largely a solitary activity. The woodchip path in the center of Carle Park is heavily used, as is the 'axis' between the High School on Race Street and the Pavilion. The tree-walk on the park periphery is used for educational purposes by students. Dog walkers in Clark Park neighbourhood cut

Figure 5: (clockwise from top left) Examples of 'Pause' in Carle Park (Amita Sinha), Clark Park (Timothy Marten), Scott Park (Amita Sinha) and Westside Park (Amita Sinha).

through in early mornings and frequently stop in the north and south fields. Scott and Westside Parks too are places for 'cutting through' by people going to and coming from grocery stores, clinics and offices and businesses in downtown. The perimeter sidewalks are used in all parks for brisk walking and jogging, especially in Westside Park where the distance covered is measured in markers. Teens ride their bicycles in the park to meet up with friends and then move elsewhere. At Scott Park the main northwest, southeast path has foot and bike traffic and the creek bed invites many dog walkers (**Figure 4**).

Pausing in the park takes many forms—relaxing, sleeping, reading, people and animal watching, nature-gazing, tanning, hanging out with friends,

picnicking with family and friends, and eating lunch on a break. Pause can be an interlude

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in the daily routine of work and domestic life indulged in spontaneously or it can be in the form of participation in a planned event. This category covers myriad park uses excluding play and movement. Carle and Clark Parks are heavily used by neighbours, especially on weekends for

Figure 6: Community Participation in Carle Park Renovation (source: Xinxin Chai, 2009)

enjoying time outdoors, watching their children play, sitting on benches and reading, eating with family and friends on picnic tables. At Clark Park, gatherings organized by the Clark Park Association include movie nights and campout that draw about 10-20 families. Birthdays and other family events are celebrated in the open fields on picnic tables or near the tree groves. At Carle Park the historic pavilion and Miller garden become backdrops for weddings and family events in summer and fall. The proximity of High School and Middle School ensures that parts of the park—pavilion, fountain, benches—are dominated by students hanging out, talking on the cell phone, tanning themselves and smoking pot and cigarettes, on weekdays during lunch and after school hours (**Figure 5**).

At Westside Park too, teens are the dominant group at lunchtime, their boom boxes causing consternation among others who move away to other places in the park. The park is an escape for office workers who come here to eat lunch, seek solitude, or simply relax and enjoy the sun. The tree canopy at the Capron Memorial Sculpture Garden provides privacy for young couples and a place for homeless sleeping at

night. On Monday night in spring, summer and fall, the homeless are treated to a free dinner. Westside Park becomes public grounds when 'Taste of Champaign' is organized in fall. Vendors represent local restaurants, arts and crafts booths, charities set up displays, as does the antique car club and the bandstand offer a variety of music and entertainment. At Scott Park, the homeless linger on benches by the creek and in the gazebo.

The banks of the Boneyard Creek provide a windbreak and a refuge as one ethnographer put it to the 'dis-enfranchised souls'. Students use the park especially late at night for stopping by for a short while, meeting others for a rendezvous, and eating food from the nearby restaurants before continuing on their course.

Neighbourhood and Community Parks
Clark and Carle Parks are clearly perceived and used as neighbourhood parks. They foster a subculture of neighbourliness through face-to-face social encounters with 'regulars' who come to the park every day or many times a week. They are settings of spontaneous

> **They bring together people in large events organized by the Park District rather than the local community. They feel and act as public places, easily accessible, open to all yet owned by none. No individual or group feels responsible and avoidance rather than engagement in social interaction with others is the rule.**

interaction as well as planned get-togethers, acting as 'third places' (Oldenburg, 1989). They play a role in building place-based

communities very different from virtual social networks in social media. They encourage neighbourhood residents to care for the park's future, to participate in its renovation and re-building, and invest in its upkeep (**Figure 6**). They are sites of memory evident in the trees planted, and benches installed and dedicated to those who loved the park. They are central to the neighbourhood identity as indicated by realty listings referring to homes being in the Clark Park or Carle Park Neighbourhood. Neighbourhood residents frequently engage outsiders and new users in conversation to

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inform them about their park history and rules. There is a sense of pride and feeling of collective responsibility towards the park.

Scott and Westside Parks have bigger catchment areas and draw people from a longer distance. Student and senior citizen apartments, offices, clinics, schools, grocery and convenient stores ensure a diversity of people, engaging a cross-section of population varying in age, ethnicity, and socio-economic backgrounds, thereby justifying their nomenclature as 'community parks'. They bring together people in large events

organized by the Park District rather than the local community. They feel and act as public places, easily accessible, open to all yet owned by none. No individual or group feels responsible and avoidance rather than engagement in social interaction with others is the rule.

Conclusion

Neighbourhood parks in Urbana Champaign appear to be 'neighbourhood commons', acquiring a semi-public feel in the way they invite regular use by residents that is similar to that of shared open space in multi-family and cluster housing that Clare Cooper Marcus has so consistently advocated as necessary and useful in meeting children's needs and building a sense of community (Marcus, 1975; 1986; 2003). In single family neighbourhoods, the idea of "community greens" as in Meadows in Berkeley, California implies shared green space created by merging parts of backyards. This provides a safe play space for young children, increased safety inside the block, and enhances social bonds among neighbours (Inerfeld and Blom, 2002). Neighbourhood parks centrally located in residential blocks do the same, with front yards looking into the open green space across narrow, low traffic streets. There are many such examples across North America in co-housing schemes and gated communities. An ethnographic study of a small neighbourhood park in Lucknow, India revealed that it was used as a semi-public courtyard, an extension of private outdoor space of houses surrounding it (Sinha, 2005).

Small parks are of course not limited to those with quadrangular layouts. If they happen to be linear, would they offer similar

social opportunities? Would proximity and the attribute of 'centeredness' necessary in building place-communities work if the parks had a different configuration? The marginal landscapes of many post-industrial North American cities are being redesigned to increase greenery and add to the 'carbon-sink'. Day lighting of urban creeks, reclamation of derelict riverfronts, and the 'rails to trails' movement have created linear parks that offer enhanced opportunities for human and wildlife movement. If they are above ground, as in abandoned elevated railroad tracks redesigned as public parks, they become a slow landscape of movement and play, a place to see and know the city, and a social space of chance encounter as in High Line in New York City and 606 in Chicago (Sinha, 2014). Social sustainability is thus the process for creating successful places that promote human well-being. ∎

Notes:

[1] Urbana with a population of 41,250 has 14 acres of green open space per 1000 while Champaign with a population of 11,591 has 9 acres of green open/1000 people. The University of Illinois campus with a population of 40, 000 college students spans both cities. Small parks surrounded by buildings on all four sides have been popular sites of ethnographies in my course LA 470 Social and Cultural Issues in Environmental Design as they are well used.

[2] Interview with Tim Bartlett, Superintendent of Planning and Operations, Urbana Park District, March 2011.

[3] The two neighbourhood parks –Carle Park have been studied in 1989 (Nick Quartana), 1990 (Ying Qu), 1996 (Amy Gahlbeck), 1999 (Karen Hofstra), 2000 (Brandon Qualls), 2003 (Miran Jung), 2009 (Xinxin Chai), and 2010 (Steve Shiley); and Clark Park in 1998 (Stephanie Hanko), 2004 Alec Cashman), and 2008 (Timothy Marten). The two community parks

—Westside Park have been studied in 1991 (Tim Dougherty), 1993 (Mark Streiter), 1994 (Joel Jones), 1995 (Lisa Duwall), 1996 (Andrea Faber Taylor), 1998 (Lamont Tarcotte), and 2005 (Julie Sajtar); and Scott Park in 1990 (Rupert Condict), 1994 (Yinyuan Qing), and 2009 (Luke Baldwin).

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