FAIR PLAY

MILWAUKEE MEASURES EQUITY NEEDS IN REMAKING NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS.

BY JONATHAN LERNER
One of the first projects in Milwaukee’s equity-based renovation program, Columbia Playfield is now a center of its community.
ILWAUKEE’S city-sponsored recreation program was established in 1911 for the purpose of benevolent social engineering. Its goal was the civic integration of burgeoning, and mostly poor, European immigrant populations. It offered classes in the English language and U.S. citizenship, as well as arts and industrial crafts, sports, clubs, and other entertainment. In some locations there were showers and, during the Depression, workshops for repairing one’s own shoes. These programs were frankly geared toward acculturation and the transmission of mainstream ethics such as team spirit and wholesome presentation; a 1918 list of tips for staff advises that each neighborhood location “must have its own yell and song,” and to “instruct young men to remove hats upon entering buildings.”

The recreation program was placed within the school system, an atypical arrangement. It’s still there today, as the Department of Recreation and Community Services of the Milwaukee Public Schools. Over time, this department acquired the use—and responsibility for maintenance—of 52 neighborhood parks, called playfields. Most were constructed between 1912 and 1974, occupy around three acres each, and are pretty bleak. Typically, they have space for sports such as basketball and softball, a field house with restrooms, maybe a patch of grass. Some have amenities for younger kids—wading pools, slides, and swings. At about 20 of the parks, the department
MILWAUKEE PLAYFIELDS RANKED BY EQUITY PRIORITIZATION

LEGEND
HIGHER NEED
LOWER NEED

RECREATION FACILITIES
1. Alcott
2. Auer Avenue
3. Beulah Brinton
4. Browning
5. Bryant Playfield
6. Burbank
7. BURNHAM
8. Carmen Playfield
9. Cass Street
10. CLEVELAND (MODRZEJEWSKI)
11. Clovernook
12. COLUMBIA PLAYFIELD
13. Cooper
14. CUSTER PLAYFIELD
15. Dyer Playfield
16. 88th Street
17. Ermigh
18. Enderis Park
19. Fairview
20. 33rd Street
21. Franklin Square
22. Garden Homes
23. Sra-Ram
24. Green Bay Avenue
25. Hamilton HS Playfield
26. Hampton
27. Hawthorn Glen
28. Hoit Playfield
29. Jewell Playfield
30. Juneau Playfield
31. Lancaster Elementary
32. Lewis
33. Lincoln Playfield
34. Lowell
35. Merrill Park
36. North 65th Street
37. Ohio Playfield
38. Parkview Elementary
39. Pulaski Playfield
40. Pumping Station
41. Riverside Playfield
42. Rogers Playfield
43. 78th Street
44. Sijan Playfield
45. SOUTHGATE
46. Stark Playfield
47. Uncas
48. Vincent Playfield
49. Warnimont
50. Wedgewood
51. Whitman
52. Wick Field

RECREATION STORAGE FACILITIES
1. Delaware Service Center
2. Hampton Service Center
3. 39th Street
now runs free, drop-in Summer Playground activity programs. Inner-city Milwaukee is still immigrant rich, though ethnicities have changed. Many residents are Hispanic, most of Mexican origin. Some are Asian, including a relatively large Hmong community. And more than 35 percent of city residents are African American, descended not of immigrants, but of migrants who moved north around midcentury for plentiful jobs. Milwaukee was an industrial powerhouse then, but no more. The poverty rate approaches 30 percent. One index of the economic situations of kids who use the playfields is that last year the Summer Playgrounds served them nearly 29,000 free meals—lunch and supper, five days a week.

As Milwaukee’s fortunes fell, the playfields deteriorated. Many now are simply expanses of cracked and heaving asphalt with no shade, broken play equipment, backboards minus hoops, boarded-up field houses, and hostile accretions of chain-link fencing. Custer Playfield, for example, “was a very dark place,” says Beth Rosenow; she’s a neighborhood safety coordinator for Safe & Sound, a nonprofit that tries to build bridges between communities and the police. “People were afraid of who was hiding behind a bush. Nobody used the park unless it was for drinking, smoking weed, a place for kids to hide and do inappropriate things—teenagers, young adults.”

In 2014, Blake Theisen, ASLA (then with SAA Design Group, now the principal owner of Parkitecture...
+ Planning), was hired to conduct a facilities assessment. His report ran to 861 pages. “It showed we had $25 million in identified projects,” says Lynn Greb, the recreation department’s senior director. “Like, holy cow! And that was all just for replacement, not development or design.” Realizing that the department was unequipped to define a comprehensive strategy, Greb hired Pam Linn, FASLA, as recreation facilities project manager, the first-ever landscape architect on the public school system’s staff.

“The parks are a hub of the school’s mission,” Linn says. For a landscape architect, “it’s a different filter of how you look at people and services,” she says. “You’re trying to grow community, keep kids school-ready, and keep families healthy.” With those aims, Milwaukee’s recreation program still attempts what could be called social engineering. In recent decades, knowledge has broadened about the ways the built environment can promote public health and civic cohesion. The playfields as built, even if repaired, no longer contribute much. But they can certainly be reimagined as enriching venues where kids are challenged to exercise, socialize, and express creativity, for example, while simultaneously providing assets such as attractive public and green space, opportunities for multi-generational interaction, and safety from crime and violence. At the scale of the city, however, the possibilities are less clear, given that public health and civic cohesion are undermined by persistent inequality between neighborhoods and populations. Could the reinvention of 52 small parks have an effect on that?

Based on an initiative of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, and with assistance from the Milwaukee Public Schools Office of Accountability and Efficiency, the recreation department staff developed an “equity-based prioritization model.” Each playfield was scored on eight criteria in three broad categories: characteristics of its neighborhood, characteristics of the neighborhood’s...
population, and existing conditions of the playfield. To quantify neighborhood characteristics, data was collected on median income, percentage of households living in poverty, percentage of non-Hispanic white residents (to reveal percentage of residents of color and immigrant descent), and number of reported crimes. For population characteristics, the number of people living within a mile of the playfield was tallied, as were the number of residents under 18 and the number of parks available to them within that radius. For each of those two characteristics categories, the criteria scores were weighted and combined to yield a “total characteristic value.” Playfield condition characteristics were represented by a single value, derived from Theisen’s facilities assessment. The three resulting numbers were then weighted—neighborhood and population characteristics each at 0.25, and condition at 0.50—to create an “equity prioritization index value” for each playfield.

Now the recreation department had a way to order the 52 renovation projects, based on metrics that quantified not only the poor condition of the parks themselves, but also community deficits—needs that renewing the parks could help address.
“YOU’RE TRYING TO GROW COMMUNITY, KEEP KIDS SCHOOL-READY, AND KEEP FAMILIES HEALTHY.”

—PAM LINN, FASLA
But decisions about which projects to do first were more complicated than simply applying this objective ranking. “You don’t necessarily have to go in perfect order. There might be a hundredth of a decimal place difference. Or you wouldn’t do two right next to each other,” Linn says. She also cites the factor of how well-organized and easily engaged a neighborhood might be. “You have to add some flexibility.”

Modrzejewski Playfield, for example, ranked objectively as the highest priority for renovation. But it was not included in the first tranche of projects for several reasons. It’s bordered by the channelized Kinnickinnic River, which is being renaturalized in phases and furnished with a trail. That offers a rare opportunity both to treat the stream as an amenity and to integrate the playfield with the city’s park network. Modrzejewski is also one of the larger playfields, and its dilapidated Classical Revival field house is a standout candidate for architectural preservation. A concept plan has been developed, but the unusual coordination and extra funding this site demands meant more time was needed before proceeding. Burnham Playfield, on the other hand, ranked lower in terms of need. Also one of the largest, it is adjacent both to a school’s play yard and another park that together offer more, even in run-down condition, than many other playfields. Burnham is in a largely Hispanic community with a strong neighborhood association. The association had previously worked with the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee’s School of Architecture & Urban Planning on a preliminary design for the park; it also has a functioning park task force. Neighbors had even crowdsourced funds to convert a pair of disused tennis courts into fields for futsal, a variant of soccer ideal for young players, which opened last summer. “We were like, That’s a natural, it’s got a solid neighborhood group that’s working,” says Greb. Burnham is scheduled for construction beginning this year, while Modrzejewski will likely move forward only into the design phase.
Adam Arvidson, FASLA, the director of strategic planning for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, was involved in that agency’s development of equity metrics and oversees the equity matrix’s use and refinement there. He cautions, “If there’s going to be a ranking and then some flexibility in that ranking, that better be really clear to everybody involved, and especially the community. Otherwise, it could feel like the same entrenched disparity that we’re trying to break.” For Minneapolis’s parks, however, there is structural relief in the form of a funding stream, separate from that for capital improvement, dedicated to rehabilitation projects “not selected by empirical equity measure, but when the physical need in the park is immediate,” he says. “In the capital improvement program, there is none of that flexibility. That has really helped us politically.” Even the most compelling neighborhood advocates can’t sway the priorities; politicians can’t horse-trade. “There’s got to be a lot of political will for this, because they’re giving up some of their power, in the face of letting the math do the work.”

With the math having done its work, and the results then rejiggered to account for less quantifiable factors, Milwaukee’s plan of attack was devised. Playfields would be taken on in groups of two or three each year. The process for each location would take roughly three years, one for public engagement, the second for design, and the third for construction; the whole undertaking would span 10 years. So Linn and her team will be
managing something like eight or 10 projects in various stages for quite a long while. Only two of the first three projects were finished and reopened on schedule last summer. The third was held up by unexpected soil issues complicated by extraordinarily high rainfall. Ten years seems an overly optimistic goal if all 52 sites are to be renovated, given the inevitable and unpredictable glitches. Still, the ambitious initiative got under way.

Though the playfields have similar characteristics, the neighborhood engagement is considered crucial. “You can’t have a park stamp and say, ‘This is it,’ even if it’s a well-designed park stamp,” Linn says. Community members “have to feel like they were the authors of the programming.” Some input is solicited via the shoe-leather method. Last October, revisiting Columbia Playfield, one of the two that reopened at the end of summer, she mentioned, “I spent probably five days out here, all day, talking to anybody who would walk through, all the kids.”

Of course, a formal process including charrettes was run for several playfields by rec department staff and for others by Theisen. The findings were often site-specific. At Custer, neighbors wanted basketball courts moved away from a bordering row of houses. One argued, “The pounding of a basketball, it could drive you crazy. We don’t want to hear it.” The Khmer community wanted courts for tuj lub, a competitive game involving fast-spinning tops colliding into each other. It requires certain dimensions and some means of enclosure to keep the tops from flying off and causing injury or damage. Hardly anybody cared about softball fields. But “the kids just want to shoot three-point shots,” rather than play formal basketball games,
Linn found; thus half-courts were deemed appropriate for some locations. People asked for what one termed “mom spots,” protected-back seating from which play equipment and sports fields could be observed. Surprisingly, many people insisted on keeping the playfield perimeters fenced. “Cars hop the curb. There’s been a police chase right through the middle of this park,” Linn remembered that day at Columbia. “We thought, there’s so much fencing, we should get rid of it. We threw that out at a meeting and everybody was like, ‘No!’” Greb was surprised that walking paths were a frequent request. “That was from the adults. Milwaukee has sidewalks; you’d think that people would be happy that they can walk anyway. But they feel safer in an area that doesn’t have cars.” Theisen says, “People were so appreciative that there was attention being paid. A lot of times when I run a public process for a park redevelopment, people are upset because they don’t want things to change. They’re afraid of what the new and shiny might look like. This was refreshing, that people were so enthusiastic.”

The site plans so far, though location-specific, share a sinuous curve motif—for example, in the layout of poured-in-place play surfacing, walking path loops, and planters with seating walls. Theisen says that participants “gravitated toward the more organic scenarios. Maybe they were tired of the rigidity of the urban fabric—so much of the Milwaukee neighborhood is gridded. I’m not sure anyone specifically said, ‘We want this to be free-flowing,’ but when they sat at the table with me and sketched out concepts on trash paper, it became clear that’s what they were in favor of.”
The designs are uncomplicated. At Custer, for instance, which like much of the city is unrelievedly flat, the closest it gets to a wow factor is a low hill giving maybe 10 feet of elevation. “As a designer, you’re always asking, ‘What’s the big move?’” says Gregg Calpino, who led a team from SmithGroup that was brought in to design the first three playfields. “We realized that the big move is the whole project, 52 of these. It’s a thousand little moves. It’s going to change the city. That’s the courage of this project.”

Debi Banks has lived up the block from Custer Playfield for 25 years, and she captains a block watch. A few weeks after Custer reopened, she recalled being shown renderings that depicted the place full of people. “I was like, ‘Yeah, OK, sure.’ But it’s exactly what I’m seeing. People are talking in the park now. It’s not people just sending their kids; it’s parents coming there with them. That hill, knob, kids love it! Kids are constantly running up and down it.” She was excited about an art project proposed for the coming summer, to make a mosaic on the concrete seating walls. “Maybe everybody brings a plate from home and smashes it. It ties the kids in—‘That’s a piece of me.’”

Greb says that for more than a century, her department was “the programmers of Milwaukee’s public recreation. Our job was to cut the grass and rake the fields and get it ready for softball, and then run the leagues. This is a huge shift.” She worries about the new playfields’ durability, and whether her department has the appropriate maintenance staff and equipment to keep them up. (A consultant is drafting a maintenance management plan.)

Regarding the applicability of an equity matrix as a planning tool, Arvidson suggests that “any kind of public infrastructure project would benefit, even something as simple as a sidewalk replacement program. Or transit lines and highways, to weigh different corridors based on an established set of criteria—you look empirically at what is the wetland impact, what could be the benefit or impact to certain communities.” But Minneapolis and Milwaukee have been using decision matrices based on demographic and economic data for barely a couple of years, and only for park planning. The strategy’s results and value may not be fully known until the kids who play in those parks today are grown. Meanwhile Linn—cognizant of her department’s commitment to equity and public engagement, and the long-term effort she faces—thinks about the two renovations completed last summer and says, “This is my credibility. Did we listen?”

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR JONATHAN LERNER’S MOST RECENT ARTICLE FOR LAM EXPLORED THE SECOND PHASE OF HUNTER’S POINT SOUTH PARK IN NEW YORK.
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—GREGG CALPINO