



## CHAPTER 8

# PARKS AND CIVIC SPACE

The availability of public open spaces contributes to the attractiveness of a neighborhood, increases local environmental quality and helps to create healthy, active neighborhoods. Public open spaces, including parks, plazas and natural areas, can provide much-valued “breathing room” within compact communities. They provide a venue for people to recreate and gather, thus fostering a shared sense of identity. The region’s two bays, five rivers, six lagoons and many canyons are open spaces that help define the boundaries of many communities, providing natural habitat and recreation areas. In addition to enhancing the community’s social environment, public open spaces also contribute to sustainability by combating air pollution, reducing water pollution and creating habitat for local plants and animals.

## 8.1 Public Open Space Types

A variety of sizes and types of public open spaces are required to meet the varying needs of a community. Designers should consider these needs, as well as the existing network of public open spaces, when planning for a new public open space.

### 8.1.1 Regional Parks and Natural Open Spaces

Regional parks are large areas of parkland that are typically found at the periphery of cities, although they can be located within a city as well. They are community amenities of ecological, aesthetic and historical significance. Regional parks often contain or are adjacent to natural, protected open spaces, which are lands that have been preserved to conserve ecologically important resources. Also, they often contain specialized amenities that require large amounts of space, such as zoos, marinas and golf courses.

Because of their size and unique qualities, regional parks and natural open spaces serve multiple communities and are often destinations for people from outside of the region. In addition, these spaces frequently define the boundaries of development, making it important to consider potential fire risks for surrounding development in the event of a wildfire.

- ◆ Preserve natural open space and other sensitive lands for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.
- ◆ Link regional parks and natural open spaces to the communities they serve with trails, greenways, boulevards, bicycle routes and transit.
- ◆ Where urban development abuts a natural open space that is susceptible to wildfires, ensure that the surrounding buildings and landscaping are designed to mitigate fire risks.

#### See Also

Chapter 3: Site Design  
Chapter 4: Building Design



Access to the ocean is one of the San Diego region's most valued assets.



Mission Trails Regional Park provides natural open space for the region.

### 8.1.2 Community Parks

Community parks serve multiple neighborhoods and are large enough to support community-wide activities such as athletic events, concerts and festivals. They can provide areas for active and passive recreation and formal and informal use. Community park facilities are often lighted for night use. Amenities may include tennis courts, swimming pools, sports fields, basketball courts and larger group picnic and gathering spaces.

- ◆ Locate community parks where they are accessible from multiple neighborhoods.
- ◆ Activate community parks by locating complementary uses adjacent to them. These might include libraries, community centers, or houses that face the park, as well as small shops and restaurants that create activity in the park.
- ◆ Link community parks to greenways, boulevards, bicycle routes and transit.

### 8.1.3 Neighborhood Parks

Neighborhood parks provide opportunities for recreation at a smaller scale and should be distributed throughout neighborhoods, so that every community member lives within an easy walking distance of a neighborhood park. These parks are usually within walking distance of surrounding homes and contain amenities such as children's play areas, multi-use fields and family picnic areas.

- ◆ Distribute neighborhood parks throughout the community, so that all neighborhoods are served.
- ◆ For safety, design neighborhood parks to maximize visibility from the street and adjacent homes.
- ◆ Link neighborhood parks to greenways, boulevards, bicycle routes and transit.
- ◆ Locate neighborhood parks near other public institutions, such as schools, whenever possible, so they can share larger facilities such as ballfields.

### 8.1.4 Pocket Parks and Playgrounds

Pocket parks are typically very small parks, often built on a single parcel in an existing neighborhood or developed as part of a larger project. Because of their small size, they can be distributed throughout a community, playing a key role in providing access to open space for all. Pocket parks in residential areas usually include a combination of seating areas, play areas and landscaping, while urban pocket parks often contain seating, hardscaped and landscaped areas and features such as fountains. Playgrounds can also be designed as pocket parks that occupy one or two parcels in a neighborhood.

- ◆ Site pocket parks in neighborhoods that lack access to open space.
- ◆ Use pocket parks to provide small-scale amenities, such as playgrounds, where those amenities are most needed.
- ◆ Encourage the development and stewardship of pocket parks through public and private partnerships.
- ◆ Ensure that pocket parks are visible and accessible from a public sidewalk.



A community park in Encinitas provides recreation facilities and helps to strengthen community identity.



Playgrounds such as this one in Imperial Beach provide a safe place for children to play near people's homes.



Public plazas such as this one in San Diego provide space for people to relax.



Small plazas can also be part of a pedestrian network, similar to the downtown path along San Luis Obispo Creek in San Luis Obispo, California.



This community garden is located in San Diego's Pacific Beach neighborhood.

### 8.1.5 Plazas and Piazzas

Plazas and piazzas create an excellent opportunity for placemaking in intensively developed areas. In most cases, plazas are spatially defined by buildings and are related to adjacent uses. They provide important spaces for formal and informal community gatherings, and their design should be coordinated with new development. While plazas should be large enough to accommodate everyone who wants to use them, they should also be small enough to create an active, lively feel when they are occupied.

- ◆ Locate plazas and piazzas in places that attract large amounts of foot traffic, so that they feel active and well used.
- ◆ Limit the size of plazas and piazzas to approximately 150 to 300 square feet per person, based on the typical number of people that will occupy the space when it is being used.
- ◆ Ensure that buildings open onto plazas and their uses expand into the space.
- ◆ Provide a focal point for pedestrian gathering in the center of the piazza or plaza.
- ◆ Locate plazas and piazzas where they are visible from the street.
- ◆ Provide clear transitions between plazas and streets.
- ◆ Develop plazas and piazzas to maximize circulation opportunities between adjacent buildings.
- ◆ Coordinate the location of transit stops with plazas and piazzas.

### 8.1.6 Community Gardens

Community gardens are small neighborhood spaces used as gardens, typically found on a single parcel within a neighborhood. Many community gardens are the result of collaborative efforts by local residents and non-profits to transform a vacant lot into a productive garden. By including space for community gardens, new development can provide gardening opportunities for everyone, regardless of whether their homes have private yards.

- ◆ Include areas for community gardens within new residential projects and neighborhoods.
- ◆ Work with landowners, non-profit organizations and community groups to facilitate the creation of community gardens on vacant parcels, especially in places that are accessible by public transit, on foot or by bike.
- ◆ Provide at least 30 square feet for each plot in a community garden.
- ◆ Include a mix of plot sizes, so the garden can accommodate casual gardeners as well as people who desire additional space.
- ◆ Provide amenities such as hoses and faucets, lockable equipment storage, potting tables, greenhouses and shaded seating areas.
- ◆ If the garden is fenced or gated, use a semi-transparent fence that provides views in and out.

## 8.1.7 Festival Streets

Festival streets are public thoroughways designed so that they can be closed to vehicles and used as a temporary plaza. They contain numerous pedestrian amenities such as seating and landscaping, and they may lack curbs to facilitate their transformation into a plaza-like space. Festival streets are a valuable addition to any community because they can be used for many different activities, such as annual festivals and celebrations or weekly farmers' markets.

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### See Also

Chapter 5: Multimodal Streets

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- ◆ Locate festival streets at or near community centers or other focal points that have a high potential for pedestrian access.
- ◆ Redesign streets that are already being used as festival streets to facilitate easier access and more regular use.



Streets such as this one in Berkeley, California, can become temporary plazas for community events.

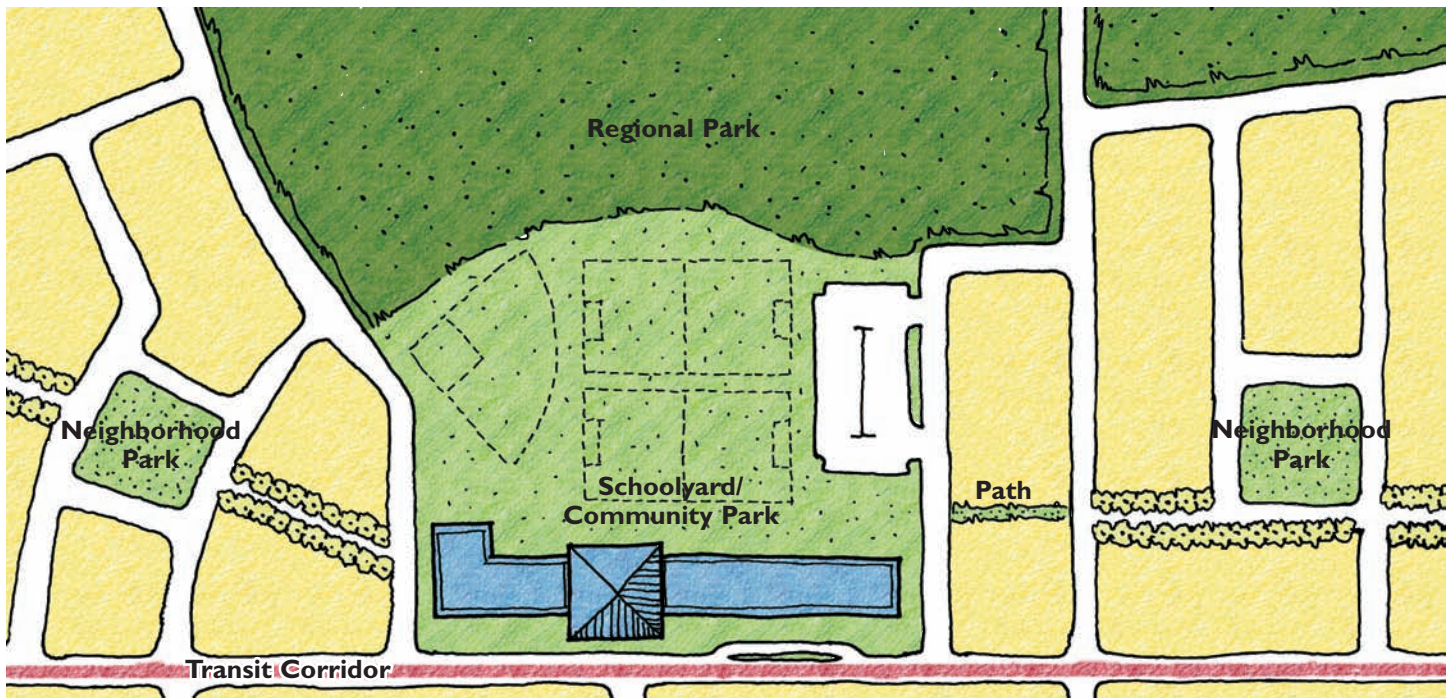
## 8.2 Principles for Parks and Civic Space

This section outlines basic principles that designers should follow for any public open space. This section also discusses how individual spaces can be joined together into citywide and regional networks of public open spaces.

### 8.2.1 Open Space Connections

Public open spaces should be connected by greenways, trails, boulevards and bicycle routes, effectively unifying the community and enabling residents to walk or ride a bike to public open spaces.

- ◆ Develop a system of greenways and boulevards to create a park and open space network. Use signage as necessary to help identify the network.
- ◆ Connect greenways and boulevards to community resources, such as schools, shopping areas, transit stops, employment centers, residential neighborhoods and public open spaces.
- ◆ Balance recreational needs with habitat preservation when developing natural greenways as access corridors.



Connections between different types of open space create a network, encouraging greater use and enabling people to walk between open spaces.

## 8.2.2 Community Identity and Character

Public open spaces create opportunities for people to gather and celebrate their traditions and heritage. These interactions reinforce a shared sense of community. The design of public open spaces can help to facilitate these interactions and strengthen a neighborhood's unique sense of place.

- ◆ Design areas within public open spaces that encourage neighborhood gatherings.
- ◆ Include materials, thematic elements and other design features that reflect the unique architectural, cultural and ecological characteristics of the surrounding community.
- ◆ Incorporate public art into the design of new public open spaces. Consider using public art to address important issues or themes that are relevant to the neighborhood or community.

## 8.2.3 Landscaping and Amenities

The design of a public open space should include amenities that help to create an active, well-used space that will be valued for years to come. It is also essential for a park's landscape design to balance water conservation with the need to create an appealing space that supports outdoor recreation. Chapter 3 of this document provides more details about climate-appropriate landscaping in the San Diego region.

- ◆ Design parks to encourage both formal and informal use by balancing the amount of programmed space with more flexible, un-programmed space.
- ◆ Provide seating areas that are coordinated with shading, landscaping, lighting and views to focal points.
- ◆ Use high quality materials for the construction of public open spaces.
- ◆ Consider future maintenance needs when planning new public open spaces.
- ◆ Provide well-maintained public bathrooms, with entrances that are visible to passersby.



In El Cajon, community members use a park for formal and informal gatherings.

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### See Also

“Energy Conservation and Landscaping”  
on page 42

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Seating and flexible play areas encourage the use of this park in San Diego.



A restored creek in Vista provides a naturalistic public open space.

### 8.2.4 Access to Natural Areas

Access to natural areas promotes physical activity and psychological health, which can translate to social and economic benefits. It can help develop an appreciation and respect for the natural environment that engenders support for habitat preservation and stewardship of natural areas.

- ◆ Provide opportunities for contact with nature within the city by incorporating naturalistic areas and native vegetation into public open spaces.
- ◆ Protect natural open spaces by providing for controlled, limited public access that preserves essential plant and animal habitat.
- ◆ Design and site public open spaces to preserve scenic views of natural areas, including hills, mountains, canyons and the coast.



A universally accessible pathway in Encinitas allows all members of the community to use this park.

### 8.2.5 Universal Design

All members of the community must have equal access to public open spaces and their amenities. The goal of universal design is to ensure that all users, including people with disabilities, can enjoy public open spaces.

- ◆ Provide easy and direct access to all public open space facilities.
- ◆ Site public open spaces in a manner that allows visibility and open access from surrounding streets and sidewalks.
- ◆ Provide amenities such as seating, play equipment and picnic areas that can be used by people with many different levels of mobility.
- ◆ Design all pedestrian pathway surfaces so that they are smooth, continuous and without obstacles.
- ◆ Provide signage and information in a variety of formats (written, symbolic, tactile and verbal) to ensure communication with all park users regardless of their abilities.