

## CLOSING THE PARKS GAP

**C**ONVENTIONAL PARKS have often been large land consumers, with multiple playfields, trails, greenswards, large stands of trees, and even bodies of water. This is due in part to the notion, still prevalent in many parts of the country, that new parks should be placed on the urban edge where new “lateral” growth usually occurs.

Seattle has a different idea. Under this notion, parks are to be placed where growth is occurring *vertically*. These new spaces present the communities with shared “public living rooms” adjacent to dense development, especially multistory housing. These have contributed to the city’s effort to carry out the state’s Growth Management Act that calls for halting lateral development and concentrating new development into compact, walkable urban centers while protecting farms, wetlands, and forest lands on the fringes of the city from being developed. This effort has coincided with the

Small parks have a big impact on Seattle’s urban environment. **By Mark Hinshaw**

city’s long-range plans to increase density in certain areas, including a half dozen relatively high-density “urban centers”—mainly downtown and immediately adjacent to downtown, along with the distinctly urban district near the University of Washington.

Some of Seattle’s most interesting parks, then, are no longer being built on the edge of the city to benefit wealthier residents of single-family homes but rather right in the middle of intense, mixed-use areas. And although final costs may be higher, the benefits to the public are so much greater, as many more people can use and appreciate these spaces.

These newer parks are comparatively small, some quite small, making use of land left over from other forms of development, unused street rights-of-way, or parcels that could be picked up that were less easy to develop. But these are *not* a revisiting of the vest-pocket parks popularized in the 1970s



With its restrained design elements, Ella Bailey Park, *top*, offers a dramatic view of Seattle’s downtown skyline and Elliott Bay. Numerous small parks were funded throughout the city by a bond issue passed by voters. The four marked on the map, *above*, are highlighted in this article.



## URBAN PARKS

and 1980s. These are more the size of the classic village greens or squares found in many American small towns. Indeed, the very term urban village implies that dense development takes the shape of a small town, and the several dozen urban neighborhoods within Seattle are in a sense now much like small towns.

Seattle Parks planners have devised rules of thumb for the amount and proximity of such space to urban populations. For example, “usable open space” must be relatively level, open, easily accessible, primarily though not entirely green, and not involve heavily dedicated program areas. Usable open space should be at least

10,000 square feet—essentially equivalent to two single-family lots—and there should be one quarter to half an acre of such spaces within a quarter mile to half a mile of each resident.

The city's 2006 *Assessment of Gaps on Seattle's Open Space Network* report used a sophisticated version of GIS mapping to locate and quantify green spaces and compare them to policy objectives and projections for future development. This has helped create a rationale for bond issues that have been passed to build new parks. The last bond issue funded the parks highlighted on these pages. In November, despite the recession, voters approved another bond issue in the amount of \$198.6 million to create even more park space. Clearly, citizens see the value of spending tax dollars this way.

From a larger perspective, this is part and

parcel of the city's larger strategy to reduce carbon emissions by creating places in which people can live well without necessarily owning a car. From the evidence so far, many Seattle citizens are seeing the virtues of this effort. In return for their tax dollars, the citizens of Seattle have acquired a whole new collection of spaces that will solidify neighborhoods, anchor business districts, and leave a legacy of small, wonderfully designed civic places for many generations.

*Mark Hinshaw is the director of LMN Architects in Seattle and is a frequent contributor to Landscape Architecture.*

### Resources

■ Seattle Parks and Recreation Open Space Gap Report, [www.seattle.gov/parks/publications/gapreport.htm](http://www.seattle.gov/parks/publications/gapreport.htm)



Ballard Commons has become the centerpiece of a rapidly emerging urban neighborhood with substantial investment—both public and private.

### Ballard Commons

#### Designers' Project Statement

Traditionally a city of neighborhoods filled with bungalows, Seattle has had explosive population growth over the past 15 years that has created vital urban villages with people in the streets, farmers' markets, and dense mixed-use cores. Seattle's planned growth has been coupled with a commitment to the public realm, resulting in the 2002 Ballard Civic Center Master Plan, a new library and neighborhood center, and

this central park located on the site of a former grocery store and parking lot with a temporary skate bowl built by volunteers.

The community's desire for a civic commons represents a maturation and clear departure from the tradition of heavily programmed open space filled with single-use facilities. The master plan vision was of a simple civic green marking the area's history as a working-class Scandinavian community on the water. A raucous public process ensued that included

debates, “land grabs” for specific uses, and skateboarders descending on the mayor's office. The question for Swift Company and all involved was finding the path through the inflammatory debate between the displaced, underserved skateboarding community and the residents who spent years planning for a civic commons. Public meetings helped find a balance where one use would not dominate others, and inclusiveness was the highest priority. Conversations focused on teas-





The center of gravity is the plaza in the southeast corner, adjacent to the new library we designed the previous year. The park plaza features a cupped, interactive stone fountain reflecting the sleek arced forms of the neighborhood's working waterfront. Gentle spray jets and water pooled against the fountain are a magnet for play. Artist Valerie Otani's seashell sculptures, where water spirals down or pours out of the shells, are entrancing. The adjacent skate bowl is framed with leaning rails, plantings, a seating wall, and steps. Continuing the design vocabulary of the library's sidewalk plaza, the park is full of well-crafted furnishings. The neighborhood's Scandinavian heritage influenced the park design with

ing out the points of commonality, toning down the rhetoric, and redefining the program, leading to an integrated design. The famous Seattle public process can result in solutions that are a little of this and that—immediately dysfunctional and unsatisfying in that they're not inclusive and don't hold to a cohesive vision. For Ballard Commons, the process helped create a vibrant central park with a diverse community of users.

The design for Ballard Commons reflects the community's wishes and what we believe is important in our landscape architecture practice—providing generous civic open space for multiple uses with a timeless simplicity, where the senses are engaged and where there are ample opportunities for communing with others.

The design challenge was to develop a strong organizational structure that brought together seemingly conflicting uses in a cohesive whole. The structure is a simple sequence of arced forms in land and trees that create a bowl around a plaza, all framed by a pedestri-

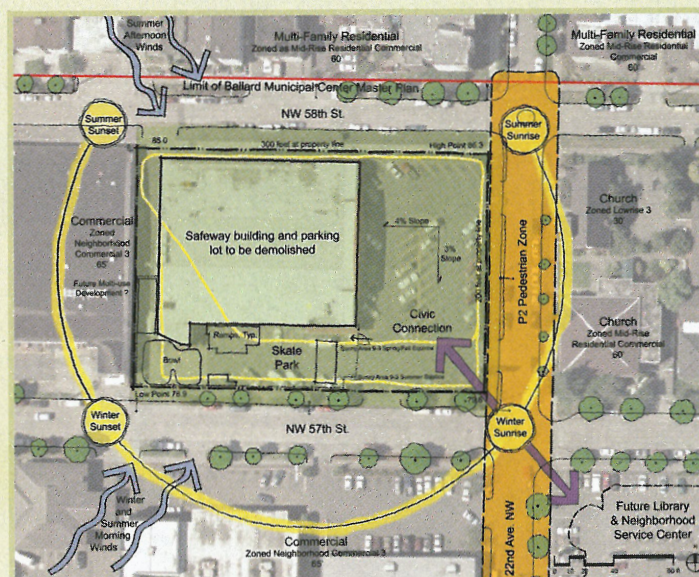
**The plan, above, is simple: a frame of trees, a central lawn, a small plaza, and a skateboarding bowl. The design for Ballard Commons took into account wind and the path of the sun during different seasons, below.**

an street environment that includes gathering areas with seating, bike racks, and plantings. The skate bowl and plaza are inserted into the landform, which provides an informal lawn amphitheater for gatherings in the plaza and street. Simple diagonal paths connect the desire lines.

simple form and lines and the use of wood, aluminum, and stone for benches, rails, and sculptures.

Is Ballard Park a success? While there are things we would do differently, one cannot argue with its popularity. On a recent weekday afternoon, the park was crowded with a heartening array of people: a young man in lotus position meditating on the grass hillside, a homeless trio resting on the benches, an elderly man reading, parents and grandparents with young children playing in the water,

teenagers and adult men skating the bowl, a gaggle of teenage girls eating on the steps, and various people strolling through with dogs, books, and packages. The community's wish for an inclusive, active park has been realized.



#### PROJECT CREDITS Landscape architects:

Swift Company LLC, Seattle (Barbara Swift, ASLA, principal; Lisa Corry, ASLA, project manager; Melanie Davies, ASLA; Caitlin Evans; Allisa Carlson; and Nic



## URBAN PARKS

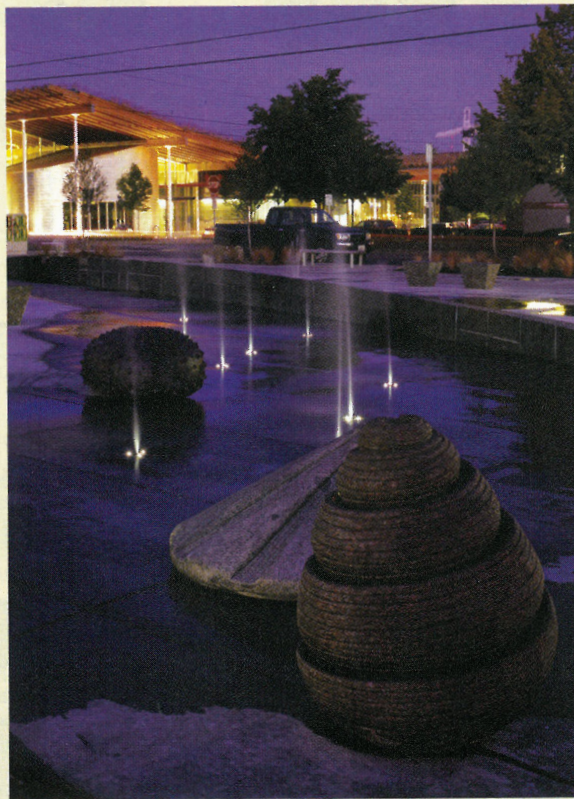
Morin). **Skatepark consultants:** Grindline Skateparks Inc., Seattle, and Airspeed Skateparks, Florence, Oregon. **Lighting design:** Candela, Seattle. **Electrical engineer:** Sparling, Seattle. **Structural engineer:** Putnam Collins Scott Associates, Seattle. **Architect:** ARC Architects, Seattle. **Civil engineer:** Magnusson Klemencic Associates, Seattle. **Fountain mechanics:** Roman Fountain Corporation, Albuquerque, New Mexico. **Irrigation:** William Stewart Landscape Architect, Lacey, Washington. **Cost estimating:** C3MG, St. George, Utah. **AutoCAD:** Cindy Cloud AutoCAD Services, Seattle. **Artist for seashell sculptures:** Valerie Otani, Portland, Oregon. Sculpture partially funded by the City of Seattle Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs: Marcia Iwasaki, project manager. **Contractors:** PCI Construction Services Inc., Bellevue, Washington; Grindline Skateparks Inc., Seattle.

### Writer's Commentary

On a recent sunny day in late September, I visited one such "village green" in the rapidly transforming neighborhood of Ballard in northwest Seattle. I had expected to find a handful of teenagers lounging about, a few elderly folks on

benches, and a couple or two walking their dog. Instead, I happened upon a community festival that combined food, entertainment, crafts, and demonstrations of sustainable household practices.

Designed by Seattle landscape architects Swift Company, a centerpiece of this 1.4-acre park is a permanent skateboard bowl. As I watched, a younger boarder was swooping down into the deep recess then flipping up onto the opposite side in

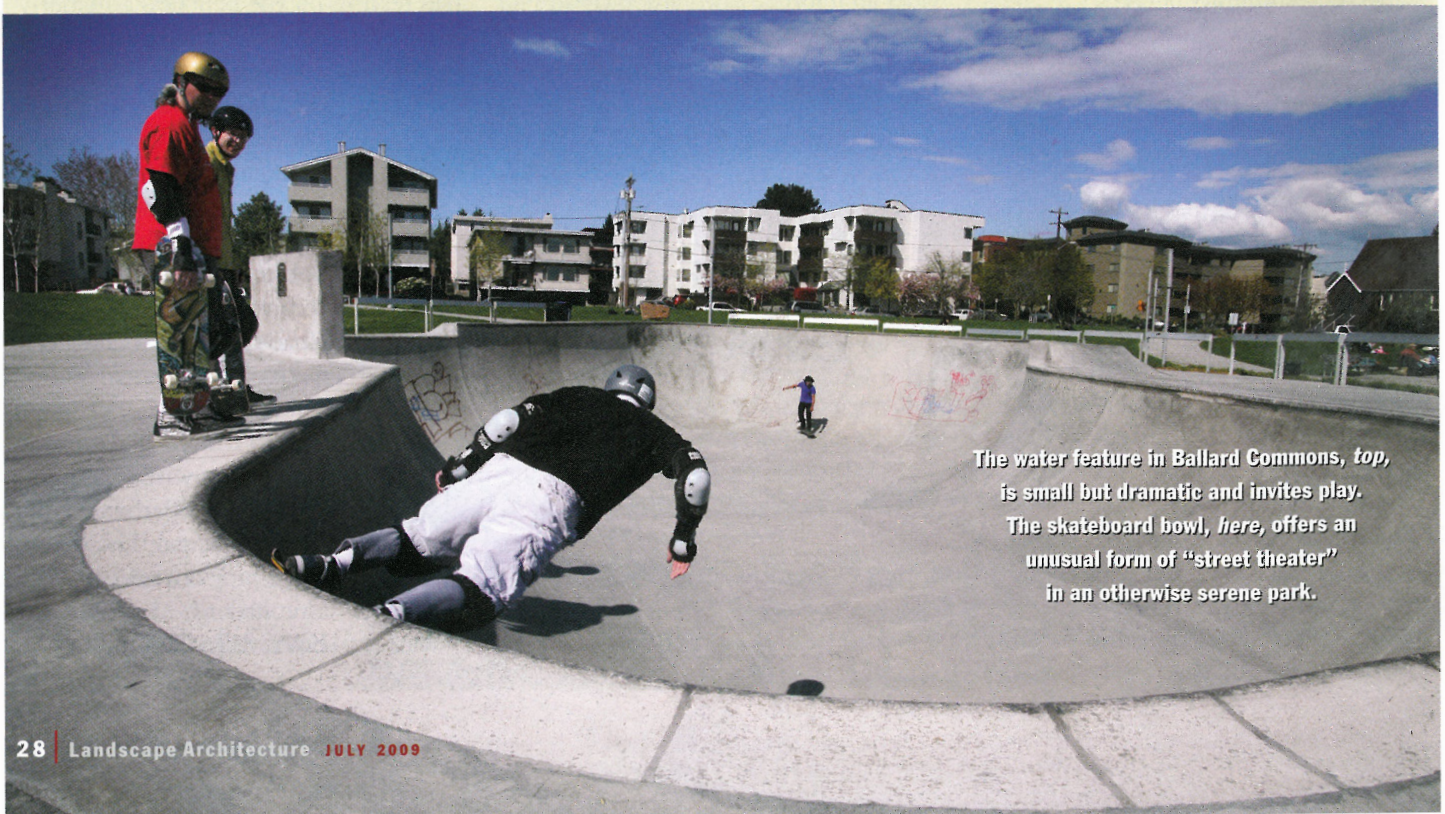


a swirling solo ballet. Next to this a long planter overflowing with tall grasses separated the activity from a plaza where a woman lectured a small group on environmentally correct kitchen practices. People strolled amid tents set up in allées crisscrossing the lawn and the adjacent, temporarily closed, street. In the distance, musicians performed for another group of people.

Swift's design clearly allows for many different types of experiences. The day I was there the scene was intense and active, and—as might be expected—I ran into someone I had not seen in years and quickly caught up. People were perched on stair-stepped ledges, watching the passing scene. The park was almost obscured by the throngs of residents enjoying themselves in every direction. Swift observes, "The Commons has quickly become the center of civic activity in Ballard."

Other times, the place is a serene greensward framed by a new neighborhood library, retail, and urban residential development. The Ballard Commons seems to perform like the classic square in a classic American small town. It is quickly becoming the focal point of community life—a good measure of any successful city park.

—Mark Hinshaw



The water feature in Ballard Commons, top, is small but dramatic and invites play. The skateboard bowl, here, offers an unusual form of "street theater" in an otherwise serene park.





Cesar Chavez Park, here, is located on a tiny wedge of land but seems considerably larger. The active plaza spaces are shielded from the adjacent freeway by a dense arrangement of trees and understory, below.

## Cesar Chavez Park

### Designers' Project Statement

"Yes, we can." Most people today know this phrase as the rally cry for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. But the slogan first emerged nearly 40 years earlier, when farmworker rights champion Cesar Chavez popularized the words in Spanish. "*Si, se puede*" was his response to supporters daunted by the obstacles they faced. It has become a phrase of activism, an inclusive call to the people to participate, to do their part, large or small, in their quest for a better future. Seattle's Cesar Chavez Park, then, is most aptly named.

The park is physically small—less than a quarter of an acre. But its psychological effect on Seattle's South Park neighborhood is big. With its soft grass, handsome plants, graceful seating, distinctive trellis, and basalt sculptures, it is an attractive presence on a formerly blighted wedge of no-man's-land between busy arterials. But the real story of Cesar Chavez Park lies in its grass roots.

It begins with Sea Mar, a Latino-focused health and human services organization based in South Park. As part of a broad initiative to improve safety along one of South Park's major streets, Sea Mar drew a bead on a derelict triangle of land that lay in a dead-end shadow of the elevated Highway 99. It was a haven for transients, drugs, and blackberries run amok, and it was scary, especially for the area's many kids. Sea Mar's vision was to reclaim the land for the community in a park that celebrated the legacy of Chavez.

Sea Mar found its co-conspirator in Jones & Jones. We felt a kinship with a community trying to take ownership of a public space and understood that an inspiring vision would be essential. We also saw that with no parks department sanction, the process would be long and anything but straightforward. And so we began design.

Two events proved pivotal: The first was a neighborhood-wide work party, during which the site was cleaned up and readied for a stone sculpture to be created on site. The second centered on sculptor Jesus Moroles and his rock. This time,







Artwork has been incorporated into the park in various forms. The whimsical, contemporary pergola suggests community festivals.

the goal was more fun: Give neighborhood children a few pointers, then let the chiseling, polishing, and placemaking begin. The final installation is called “Musical Steles,” and it plays like magic.

Not long after these spirited events, a Seattle Parks Department sign appeared on the property, acknowledging what the community already knew: Together, we had built a park, and its name was Cesar Chavez. It was nothing but a lawn with a sculpture, but it was a place that belonged to the people of South Park.

With this formal recognition came more funds, and so the final phase began, this one straightforward: Finish design, get the permits; remove the sculpture, introduce the curving seat walls and highway-screening trellis; integrate the pathways and street access; introduce a vegetated swale to slow and cleanse diverted highway runoff, plants, and site drainage; build a foundation for the sculpture and set it in place for good. Finally, another celebration, this one official, to proclaim Cesar Chavez Park open for all. *Si, se puede!*

**PROJECT CREDITS** Architect and landscape architect: Jones & Jones Architects + Landscape Architects + Planners, Seattle (M.

Mario Campos, ASLA, principal in charge; Mark Johnson, project architect and project manager; Alan Cox, intern landscape architect). **Artist:** Jesus Moroles, sculptor, Rockport, Texas. **General contractor:** A1 Landscape and Construction, Seattle. **Structural engineer:** Lund and Everton, Vashon, Washington. **Civil engineer:** 2020 Engineering, Bellingham, Washington. **Steel fabricator:** Seidelhuber Iron & Bronze Works, Seattle. **Stone fabricator:** Seattle Solstice, Seattle.

#### Writer's Commentary

This occupies a wedge of a leftover right-of-way next to a local highway. The largely Hispanic neighborhood is an island of urban living surrounded by a massive Boeing aircraft plant and a miscellany of factories, warehouses, and open-air storage. This tough but fascinating blue-collar area has badly needed new public investment. A few years ago, a new community center and adjacent playfield provided a sense of community.

In contrast to its surroundings, Cesar Chavez Park is both intimate and quirky. It demonstrates how much can be accomplished in a very small area. The place packs a number of dramatic moves into its limited area. The design, by landscape

architects Jones & Jones, includes several whimsical features. A sinuous screen of curved metal poles and panels, along with a line of coniferous trees, screens the park from the adjacent highway and creates a backdrop for the interior arena.

A raised, partially covered platform can be sat on, leaned against, or used for concerts or performances. The arrangement of poles vaguely suggests hand-built beach huts or an idiosyncratic backyard garden. Swirling forms sweep in from sidewalks and a transit shelter that has been integrated into the space.

The designers incorporated references to Mayan and Mexican cultures, and several sculptures within the park were worked on by community members. The original design concept embraced the adjacent dead-end street, allowing access to abutting homes but visually borrowing additional area. According to Tom Carlson of Jones & Jones, “The extension of the park as we initially intended had to be dropped due to the expense of relocating utilities and other infrastructure costs.”

Nonetheless, this slice of green public space offers an important symbol of history, culture, and political activism.

—Mark Hinshaw





## Ella Bailey Park

### Designers' Project Statement

The site for Ella Bailey Park was a derelict, 2.4-acre asphalt playfield attached to a vacant elementary school. Surrounded by another 1.4 acres of steep slopes overgrown with blackberry bramble, the site had one defining asset: a stunning panoramic view of the Cascade Mountains, downtown Seattle, Mount Rainier, and Elliott Bay.

Originally the Parks Department planned to develop the park as an athletic facility, complete with ball fields, lighting, and a parking lot. Early in the design process, a series of public meetings and focus groups reoriented the project, and SiteWorkshop collaborated with the community, sports groups, and the Parks Department to create a family-oriented neighborhood park that would capitalize on the spectacular view while also accommodating youth sports activities.



**Ella Bailey Park offers ample space for children to play in, top, with sections for adults off to the side. The park replaced a parking lot, center. Neighbors were involved in the design process, above. Although this park is large enough to have included formal play fields, the space was kept open, below, for more spontaneous use.**

The final design features a view promenade along the south and east edge; an acre of open space for passive play, strolling, youth soccer, and baseball; a playground; community gardens; and improved access to the surrounding neighborhood. Attracting multigenerational users, Ella Bailey Park became Seattle's first park to integrate skateboard-friendly features into common site elements such as the steel rails embedded in concrete seat walls.

Making the most of the allocated budget, the design was deliberately resource efficient. All existing materials were either kept on site or composted. The original asphalt playfield was ground up and recycled as a base course for the new paths. More than 6,000 cubic yards of earth were moved on site to add usable space and to stabilize and reshape the slopes, creating viewpoints from picnic and play areas, sloping lawns, walking paths, seat walls, and a planned pavilion. All stormwater is infiltrated on site with grass swales and amended soils.

Since opening in May 2007, Ella Bailey Park has become a dynamic addition to the neighborhood green space, as well as a special outdoor destination for people all over Seattle. The Seattle Design Commission honored Ella Bailey Park with its Design Excellence Award for 2007.

**PROJECT CREDITS** Landscape architect: SiteWorkshop, Seattle (Robert Shrosbree,







ASLA; Mark Brands, ASLA; Jim Keller; Carolyn Stauffer). **Subconsultants:** Heliotrope Architects, Seattle, and WR Consulting Engineers, Seattle.

## Writer's Commentary

Ella Bailey Park offers a breathtaking view of the bay, the skyline, and, on a clear day, the commanding presence of Mount Rainier. This is a more traditional passive park, with a substantial area set aside for colorful children's play equipment.

SiteWorkshop organized the park using a series of sweeping curves that arc up along a sloping greensward. The park is

**The design team kept the bulk of the park open and green to allow for 180-degree views of nearby hills, the bay, and Mount Rainier in the distance.**

perched on a plateau well above the street below and at the toe of a steep and vegetated hillside, itself topped with an old, now closed elementary school. The park replaces the former playfields.

One curving pathway cuts into the slope, creating a long seating ledge that invites people to sit and take in the magnificent, sweeping panorama of water and cityscape. A central open green allows for

informal games, but no permanent playfield, as the goals are stashed off to one side. Much of the time, people simply lounge about on the grass, overseeing small children on bikes.

A number of low, arcing concrete forms serve as great benches. Edged with tough steel to protect them from skateboarding, they are nonetheless used precisely for that—skid marks are clearly visible.

No big moves here, just a handful of delightful, gentle touches that result in a place that revels in its breathtaking surroundings rather than competing with them.

—Mark Hinshaw

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## Counterbalance Park

### Designers' Project Statement

Counterbalance Park is an urban pocket park in Seattle's dense Uptown neighborhood. The design responds to the dramatic temporal changes of the neighborhood, creating a dynamic urban space.

The original design concept was a collaboration between the late Robert Murase and media artist Iole Alessandrini, who took the project through the schematic design phase. Scott Murase and Murase Associates completed the design process and the implementation of the project. Counterbalance Park was one of Robert Murase's last public works.

Murase Associates worked closely with various neighborhood associations, including the Uptown Alliance, to design a space that met the requirements of the community while remaining a contemporary urban environment. The park is programmed by the Uptown Alliance

and accommodates neighborhood festivals, markets, cultural events, and outdoor performances, effectively acting as the front porch of the Uptown area.

During the evenings, the neighborhood transitions into a vibrant entertain-

ment district of theaters and restaurants. Illuminated walls define the edges of the park and draw people into the space. The park activates the night landscape of the area, creating a valuable amenity at all times of the day.



Counterbalance Park occupies a small square that had been a parking lot for many years. The angular shape reflects the atypical offset intersection.

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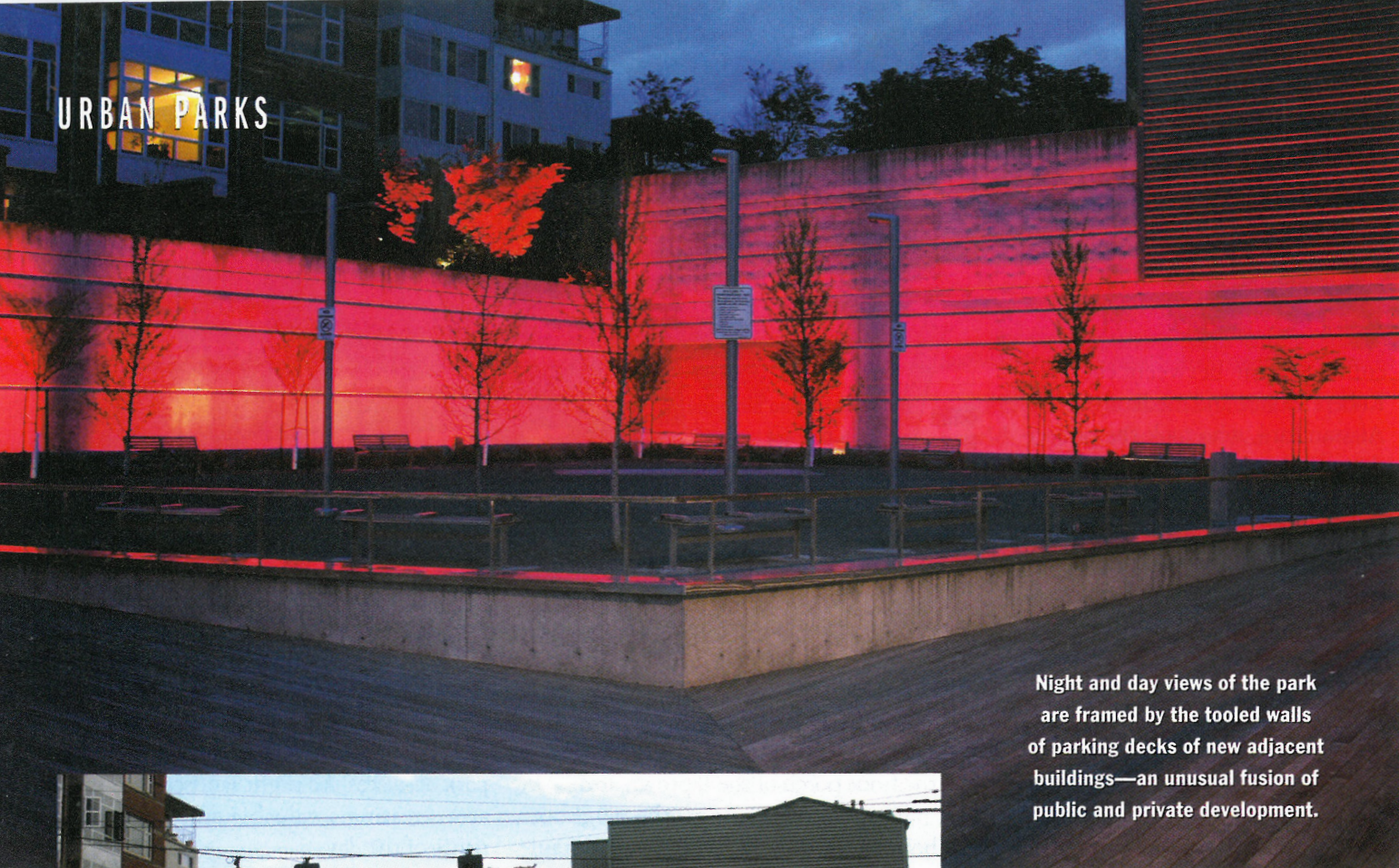


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Night and day views of the park are framed by the tooled walls of parking decks of new adjacent buildings—an unusual fusion of public and private development.



#### PROJECT CREDITS Landscape architects:

Murase Associates, Seattle (Robert Murase, principal designer; Scott Murase, designer; Mark Tilbe, ASLA, principal in charge; Liz Wreford Taylor, project manager). **Media artist:** Iole Alessandrini, Seattle. **Graphic design:** RMB Vivid, Seattle. **Engineers (civil, structural & electrical):** Tetra Tech KCM Inc., Seattle.

#### Writer's Commentary

This small, square, plazalike park replaced a parking lot that for decades anchored a major intersection on Lower Queen Anne, a hilly neighborhood just north of downtown. The diminutive Counterbalance Park, located at the base of the hillside, commemorates a cable car that used to operate there in the early 20th century; the

vehicles were pulled up the hill by a mechanism involving a flywheel and weights. Even today, the modern electric trolley bus that serves this area is called the "Counterbalance Route."

Designed by landscape architects Murase Associates, it is the last park designed by Robert Murase before he passed away a few years ago. This gentle, self-effacing designer and sculptor was well-known for his spare and poetic stone fountains that serve as the centerpieces of many public spaces. Murase's zenlike attitude toward design influenced many other landscape architects and designers in the Pacific Northwest. His spare compositions of stone and water offer an artful atmosphere of repose and contemplation, even when in the middle of a busy urban setting.

In this case, the space involves a deft arrangement of a few, simple elements—a design as restrained as it is elegant. Contrasting with the slightly sloping grade, a platform appears to lift out of the ground as if it had been peeled upward. This forms a low plinth that serves as seating and as a low backdrop to a flat, street-facing plaza surfaced with wood planks. A larger backdrop to the rear of the park comprises the intersecting walls of two buildings that abut the space—their windowless parking levels are detailed similarly to serve as a neutral frame. Concealed downlighting on the plinth and uplighting on the walls make for nighttime drama, especially welcome during long winter nights.

The interior of the space is dotted with a handful of benches; some Spartan, contemporary light poles; and a small bosque of trees. For such a small urban space, this feels about right. It is expected that local groups will sponsor various activities, whether small concerts, a market, or seasonal celebrations.

For a barren urban corner that cried out for something gracious and refined, this park provides a welcome and welcoming response.

—Mark Hinshaw