

PLANT ARCHITECT inc.

suite 208 · 101 spadina avenue toronto ontario m5v 2k2 canada 416·979·2012
fax 416·979·1283

October 21, 2010

Vermont Square Park

REFINED DESIGN BRIEF

Introduction

The Vermont Square Park Community Design Brief dated March 2010 outlined the parameters of the final programme for the revitalization of the park. A visioning process was engaged in with the Committee, at an open public meeting, and with city internal stakeholders to finalize and expand on the programme. The Underlying Values and Priorities as stated in the Brief were generally confirmed by the all of the input, and are restated here with minor revisions:

Underlying Values:

- Multifunctional use
- Intergenerational mixed use
- Sustainability with respect to environment/economics of the project
- Economically viable
- Pay greater attention to accessibility (in the broad sense of the word)
- Synergy with Bill Bolton Arena and St. Albans Boys and Girls Club

Park Priorities:

- Restoring functionality of open space
- Playground needs improving and to be brought up to code
- Revitalizing underdeveloped sections
- Encourage planning for year round use
- Creating a safe environment

The park is a place of respite, open space, quiet, a place to relax and socialize, AND it is a place for sport and recreation. The single large open multi-functional space that already exists is the most universally valued space for its singular, open flexibility for unstructured play, its landscape character - the established trees, grass, topography, and long views, and its contribution to making the park feel like a 'whole'. Though there is a great desire to add functions to the park, the consensus is that this should not clog or clutter the park, or threaten this large open space. It has an enormous amount of pressure on it.

The Brief succinctly sums up this central programmatic issue: "There is not a lot of space and there is the desire to meet many needs. Many and likely difficult decisions will have to be made to accommodate the multifunctional uses needed to successfully accomplish the range of desired uses for the space with the funding that is available." The following is a detailed programme based on the input, as well as the reports from the Team Consultants. The needs/desires and suggestions have been prioritized into 'highest', and 'desired'. Suggestions that have not been included in these two are itemized with the reason they are not being considered at this time.

Highest Priority [in no particular order]

Park Spaces

Open Field for Active Recreation

Maintain a large open area for teen and adult games like soccer/football/frisbee/croquet/group exercise and winter ice rink (if the water supply is improved, and the community wants to organize it). Accommodate a large open well-signed space for off leash dog play. St. Albans requested areas for programmed outdoor activities. The present area can do all of this, but needs to take in larger unused areas to reduce conflicts, and have a strategy to preserve the turf. The quality of turf needs improving in order to sustain these uses. The teens desired nets and other game structures. These can be in a storage area on site.

Open Field for Community Events

The myriad of community events past, present and future include Pumpkin Patch Festival, Fathers Day Picnic, Fun Fair, Jazz in the Park, Environmental Day, Friday Night Suppers, Movie Night. This space needs to be large and uncluttered and flexible so that these activities are not hindered. North of Bill Bolton could also be considered for smaller gatherings like Movie Night.

Plenty of area for Passive Recreation

The park needs to support quiet activities like snowman building, sunbathing, picnicking, reading, writing, socializing, and watching the goings on in the park, communing with nature. The green space is a quiet space for contemplation, strolling, and enjoyment of the wide openness.

Places to Walk

Active play areas in the park are situated such that it is difficult to just take a walk in the park. There needs to be new safe paths to supplement the existing two and could include paths to cross the park, and a path that runs around the perimeter of the park. A path may help facilitate separation of uses. There was a suggestion for a running circuit or fitness stations - this may also be considered within the context of paths. Paths need to be carefully placed so that they don't chop the park up. The park needs to be made accessible from the existing sidewalk for anyone with a walker, wheelchair or stroller. The continuous curb presently hinders this for the most of the park in the south, and at the north, and also slopes to pour water on the sidewalk in the winter, thus making even the sidewalk impassable. Walkways need to be safe throughout the seasons, and be wheelchair and stroller friendly.

Hard Surface Play Areas

Teens requested an area for basketball or for 1 on 1, 4-square and other ball games. There is some resistance to ball games due to the repetitive noise and potential night noise. More significantly, there is a lack of desire to increase paving in the park thus reducing the amount of trees and "natural" areas. However, there are several underused existing hard surfaces on the site around the buildings that may be modified for these uses. It may also be possible for St. Albans to install a garage door toward the park to allow the existing basketball to expand outside while the indoor programmes are on, thus controlling noise and hours of play and creating more synergy with the park. This would need to be negotiated with St. Albans. The area Councillor suggested that another alternative is to negotiate a full basketball court at local schoolyards - an arrangement that can be negotiated by the Councillors office.

Unite the park

There is a considerable amount of underused space that should be integrated into the park to create a new 'whole'. These include the areas between, south and north of St. Albans and Bill Bolton Arena, the west front of St. Albans and the east front of Bill Bolton Arena. As the space to the north of the arena is the most isolated, suggestions proposed tended to be single use - dog run, garden, movie space. There is an opportunity to connect the streetscape landscaping with the rest of the park, but because of the building position, these space will always feel separate. This should be used as an opportunity to separate uses, which might be in conflict with the large open space south of the buildings.

The design should provide more connectedness between the main areas of the park to each other, most particularly the open space to the playground, the open space to the south path, and the southwest sitting area.

The berms are well loved - good for kids skiing, rolling, sunbathing, and help to frame the large open space. Standing on them gives a terrific overview of the park. They do block off the corners of the park leaving underutilized space. Modifications should be looked at in conjunction with the arborist report to better utilize them.

Upgrade the physical connections between St. Albans and Bill Bolton Arena and the park

The physical relationship of the buildings to the park needs to be improved. For the most part both buildings turn their back on to the park rather than make connections, leaving a significant amount of dead space. The many fences in front of St Albans should be removed to unite the space to the park, and reduce clutter. Opening a large gym door to the park, a cafe and washrooms to the park are some individual possibilities to create vibrant physical and programmatic connections that the Committee will need to explore with the building Boards. Other suggestions include installing a living wall fed by roof water to animate the north face of the arena, using water collected from the rooftop for irrigation of the park and projecting movies on the wall. The arena walls to the park are bleak, and could be a surface for artwork. The lines of trees along the south and east do not adequately cover the walls since they are limbed up to prevent kids from climbing onto the roofs. St. Albans has windows to the north, toward the space north of Bill Bolton and the hardscape between the buildings. These should be used to advantage to create connections between indoor and outdoor activities. Two parking spaces must be maintained behind the arena, but may be rearranged to better utilize the hard surface areas for activities.

A rich, natural, horticultural environment that is maintainable

The tree canopy in the park is highly valued, as it is the major contributor to the natural character of the park and provides excellent shade. This needs to be maintained and enhanced. The park has a strong seasonal aspect to it, and this should be enhanced with any new horticulture considering flowering, colour, form, and scent. Diversity of trees is a priority as well as enhancing the streetscape. Any planting around the playground needs to consider security/concealment issues.

Edible landscapes should be considered including edible hedges, and fruit trees. The revamping of the existing needs to include turf restoration and an arboreal management plan, and be realistic about the City's maintenance schedules and equipment. Some areas may be managed by the community - refer to Community Garden. The elm stump is sacred to some and there is some question as to whether it should or should not be removed. Maintain the commemorative trees.

Maintain/augment amenities for dog activities

Maintain a timed off-leash dog area in the sun similar to the existing. (There was a suggestion to simplify the time change over the seasons and consider including some winter daylight hours- the committee will need to follow up). Improve signage type and locations to help with enforcement of the times. City enforcement of these regulations is poor, however many responsible dog owners are generally prepared to engage in a dialogue with those that are non-compliant in order to preserve this

status quo. The design should reduce the 100% overlap of off - leash with other open space activities, to reduce the pressure on space and turf. Consider some natural barriers to separate uses like seating areas/topography/logs, and careful consideration of space programming to allow for multifunctional use of the open space.

Install doggy bag stations at the edge of the off leash area. There should be seating for socializing during off leash dog play.

Park Equipment

Seating

More seating, groups of seating facing each other, curved seating areas are needed to promote conversation as well as provide places for individual relaxing. Seating should be related to activities and paths. Some loose seating could supplement this, and would need to be stored away. Seating should have arms/backs for the elderly and be accessible to people with walkers/wheelchairs. At least some picnic tables should be accessible. Consider shade and sun seating. Seating should be beautiful, artful, and low maintenance. Seating should smartly deter overnight sleeping and skateboarding without perversely preventing people from actually using the seating. Consider natural seating like logs/stumps if dead trees are cut down. Ensure some seating is provided separate from the off leash dog area. Seating could be situated between the open space and the sidewalk in order to create a natural barrier to prevent kids from running into the street.

Table(s) for games/chess.

This desire was expressed by teens/adults/seniors.

Artwork

Maintain the existing guerrilla artwork (3 steel sculptures). Consider ways to facilitate incorporation of community artwork in the project in general.

Garbage Cans

Several more and better designed garbage cans are needed.

Signs

Signage is a necessary part of the communication strategy for dog play, especially off leash play, and needs to be better situated to enable the park users whether they be dog owners or not to self enforce the park. Signs permitting guide dogs need to be erected for the playground in particular. Signage marking access to washrooms in the buildings is also necessary as many people do not know they can be used.

Community Bulletin Board

Maintain the existing.

Lighting/ Electrical

Existing lighting is harsh - as "morality" lighting, the nine tall lights, are somewhat effective, but do not contribute to the overall aesthetics of the park. Trees adjacent to the existing lights have been limbed to accommodate the tall lights making them asymmetrical and will need continued maintenance. Lower lighting fixtures may be a consideration in these areas. Ideally, the lighting would be changed. There is a desire to not over-light the park. Outlets are needed within the park for use during community events.

Water

Maintain the two water fountains - update to new accessible ones when these reach the end of their lives. Fix the dog drinking fountain - it tends to clog as the kids use this fountain for sand play. Provide water access in the playground to alleviate this. Improve the hose connections and add a connection for manual irrigation of trees, community garden, shrubs etc. The City Standard is to fully automatically irrigate sport fields and connect the system to the standard city controller guided by the weather station data. Although not technically a sport field, the large open space supports sport play. Look at opportunity for stormwater collection on site and at the possibility of adding a water feature in the park.

Storage

Storage for loose seating, soccer nets and the like would enable additional multi-functional use of the park. This could be a structure added to, or inside one of the buildings.

Bike racks

Increase number and location.

Dedicated Play Spaces

Bocce

The Bocce courts are well loved, and are a strong intergenerational activity. At least 2 of the three courts should remain. The third could be removed, or turned into a shuffleboard court/multipurpose hard surface for balls, hopscotch etc. Ensure adequate drainage. There needs to be seating beside the play area. The courts do not have to stay in the existing position, if there is a good reason to move them - they are presently awkwardly located. The raised walls are integral to the multi-use as little kids use them as balance beams.

Playground

The Playground Priorities as stated in the Brief were generally confirmed by the all of the input, and are restated here with minor revisions:

Overhaul the enclosed play area including

- Better use of the space with regard to play equipment, social gathering, birthday parties, young children's communion with nature. Maintain large enough space to play tag

- Replace equipment - should incorporate multi-sensory, gross motor, and dramatic/intellectual play elements. Play equipment should be grouped according to developmental/age abilities and should address children from zero to 'tween. Play things for older children do not have to be in the playground area.

Provide more opportunities for natural, open-ended creative play area with elements such as boulders, stumps, artful climbing structure. Water play was suggested, but would need to also meet the green/sustainable aspirations for the park

Preserve the climbing trees

Keep/upgrade the sandbox where it is under the shade of the tree. Any changes will need to take into account the relationship with the tree roots.

Keep the swings - review the situation with regard to proximity of the fencing.

Keep the wading pool and upgrade the equipment - it serves a range of ages. It is a great playspace for skateboard, little kids on trikes/training wheels in the off season. Consider painting it/making it more beautiful. Access to the equipment needs to be more user friendly for the lifeguards.

Provide new ground surfacing to make more accessible and less messy

Maintain the shade.

Add adult seating/ picnic tables.

Add garbage cans.

Give consideration to:

Natural and/or non-toxic use of materials/recycled materials (tire swings, logs)

Made in Canada products

Natural elements within the footprint

Give consideration to:

Usage density

Wide range of ages and developmental stages

Ensure area for morning adult exercise group;

Play equipment must include pieces that are appropriate for children or adults who need accessibility considerations as much as possible within the limited budget.

Fencing

Caregivers would like to keep the fully fenced enclosure especially for the youngest children. Others would like some easing of the fencing especially towards the south/east in order to better integrate the playground into the park, while still ensuring safety from the road/providing good supervision. Other kinds of barriers that clearly delimit the playground while providing enclosure were suggested including continuous benching or topography, or using the west side of the arena as the fourth fence. These alternates can be explored in the alternative concept design proposals. Fencing needs to meet CSA standards

Moveable play features

Moveable play features allow for creative play and could be incorporated in the playground and provision made for storage. The existing plastic toy incursion into the playground is both welcomed as it serves this purpose, and disliked because it is messy, and un-curated. This is an issue that needs to be handled by the playground community.

Tether Ball

Tether ball should be kept but does not need to stay in the fenced playground area. It could be part of a strategy for playground equipment for older children all around the park.

Park Amenities Desired

Gazebo/Small Covered Park Shelter/Theatre Arts Shelter

Teens and adults expressed the desire for a small covered gathering space for social activities/small central meeting area and music in the park. It could complement St. Albans theatre arts programme. This could be a wonderful focus for the park and help tie together the park spatially but also may clutter it up -this would need to be reviewed in the design process. This element will likely not be able to fit into the present park budget, however, is an easily identifiable object that could be the subject of fundraising.

Amphitheatre space/stage

A small amphitheatre or stage could be made in conjunction or instead of the park shelter. Although it would not provide shelter, it could be a nice gathering area, complement the theatre arts programme and be used

creatively by all. It could support activities such as performances, movie nights. This could be a sculptural element, logs or landform.

Community garden/Children's garden

A community garden was mentioned several times as a way of creating a natural or edible landscape, to teach stewardship, to pass elder knowledge to children, to promote cross-cultural activities.

The community garden in front of St. Albans is not well tended, however with a park revitalization it may be easier to create/match up with a group or programme that would maintain one. If the existing one stays where it is, it needs redesign to integrate it into the whole park, and needs to be clear in its purpose - it was intended as a butterfly garden, with little to attract butterflies. One area suggested for a potential new one is north of Bill Bolton, another is inside the playground - either temporary or permanent. A location for a community garden can be looked at for the park, but the community will need to find a constituency to make it happen. This could be a program run together by Palmerston School and St. Albans.

Coffee Shop/Beer Garden

This desire is as much a desire for a specific use, as it is an attempt to solve two issues - the aggressively blank wall of Bill Bolton arena to the South, and the relative lack of amenity in the treed area adjacent. The existing snack shop in the arena is on the south wall, and could be turned around to provide a wonderful amenity to the park in general, while animating this area specifically. This would require negotiations with the arena to pursue this change in their building. There was also a corollary desire to improve the food with more healthy snacks and provide access to washrooms in the park.

Skateboard element

A small skateboard element can be provided to satisfy this desire - a bench or curb - something dedicated and artful. There is already skateboarding inside St. Albans, so this activity is provided on the site, albeit inside.

Suggestions not included in the priority list

All of the input/suggestions were evaluated with respect to the best use of the available budget, capacity of maintenance and governance, compatibility with the existing uses, availability of similar uses close by, appropriateness to the existing best attributes of the park and if they actually fulfill a particular common need/desire. The following suggestions were not included for the following reasons:

Teens desired a place to ride bikes. As this could cause dangerous accidents with pedestrians in the park this has not been included.

Farmers Market. A market brings in traffic that is already a strain due to the two buildings, and requires significant hardscape - the community has invested a huge value in the soft nature of the park.

There were a number of suggestions for using the roof of the buildings for youth activities/skateboard park/gardens. This is outside the scope of the present park project, and would need to be investigated on an individual basis with each of the buildings. Issues would include structural loading, fire and life safety issues.

Replacing the bocce courts with ball hockey. There is a clear lack of desire to generally increase the hard surface areas, and the bocce courts were championed by many. Ball hockey can be played at St Albans, in the hard space provided at Palmerston Elementary School, or may be able to be played in the hard surface areas around the buildings if these are renovated as per the above.

Install a climbing wall. Climbing walls require specific liability/supervision. This activity is already provided at St Albans, and is therefore already supplied on the site.

Putting green. Much as the ground cover is intended to improve, it is unlikely to be maintained in such a manner as to make this viable.

Community Oven/ Firepit/ BBQ. An ideal area for this can be designated for an oven for the future, but the City needs to confirm if allowed under new policies. Currently there are two community ovens located nearby at Christie Pits and Wychwood Barns. For large picnics the community already roll out their own BBQs to the park

Narrative about the park/ neighbourhood history within the playground. This is an interesting suggestion which requires significant research in order to create content which is outside the scope of work at this time.

Install a fountain with seating/install a fountain at Olive and Palmerston. Although this is a lovely idea, it is

very expensive and not likely to fit into the budget.

Install a beach volleyball court. This is too large to include within the park amenities without altering the character and nature of the park.

A permanent dog agility course was suggested to be included within the park. Dog owners already bring their own portable dog agility equipment that allows for flexibility within the park.

PUBLIC INPUT

There are several formal and informal ways that the public will be able to continue to provide more input: VSPRC is establishing a place on the website for documents related to the park including the Refined Design Brief above, and a way to get feedback.

VSPRC is establishing a facebook page for teens and youths to provide input and feedback

Public Charette 1: PLANT will facilitate this workshop: The theme is Paths and Small Gathering spaces. This will be an outdoor workshop working directly on the site. People will be asked to lay out desired routes for paths, small gathering spaces and a possible gazebo/amphitheatre using tape and balloons. The aim is to confront the desire to have a large open unobstructed space with the desire to cross the park and create accessible social spaces. The results will be photographed throughout the process and used in the schematic design process.

Public Charette 2 : PLANT will facilitate this workshop working with models. The theme is 'Passive' (Quiet, Non Recreational) and 'Active' (Recreational, Sport) Uses of the Park. Using 2 models - one active and one passive, and a number of active component pieces and passive component pieces, participants will be asked to create an ideal passive use park, and an ideal active use park. The aim is to try to find the best places for each separately and discuss with the participants why, without worrying about how they may conflict with the alternate uses. The results will be photographed and used to inform how these two things come together in the schematic design.

Public Meeting 1: PLANT will present the Refined Design Brief, and 3 Concept Designs for public input, comment and selection.

Public Meeting 2: PLANT will present the revised Final Concept Design based on the comments and selection made at the first meeting/by the VSPRC.