To mark the 100th anniversary of Berkeley’s first public park, an exhibit and public lecture opened at the Berkeley Arts Center in November 2007 presenting the history of Berkeley’s park system and visions for the next century. The exhibit was prepared in collaboration with Sarah Graham Mitchell and Reuter Design, engaged a number of CED graduate classes, and was supported by the Beatrix Jones Farrand Fund. It was subsequently displayed in the Civic Arts Commission’s Addison Street Gallery, and the Berkeley Public Library.

THE LEGACY OF BERKELEY PARKS

A CENTURY OF PLANNING AND MAKING

Above: McGee “Parkstreet” plan (Sarah Graham Mitchell)
Right: Werner Hegemann’s plan for Berkeley 1915 including the “Midway Plaisance” (College of Environmental Design Library)
Facing page: Victory celebration, Civic Center Park, Memorial Day 1942 (Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association)
Like most American cities, Berkeley formed parks as a public good, with the conviction that they played an important role in citizenship, health, equity, and stable property values. But accumulating parks was never a foregone conclusion—the process was sporadic and hard won. The exhibit boards examine Berkeley’s eras of park planning and production and highlight the advocacy of citizens, many of whom have been members of the CED community.

The result is an impressive park system that ranges from the ordinary to the cutting edge, but is shaped by certain underlying characteristics:

- Berkeley’s hills with rock outcrops, sloping alluvial fan, flatlands, and Bayside, fingered together by creeks, create a “geographic genetics” that give the park system a bio-locality.
- The parks lend local traction to national trends about how cities function and whom they serve.
- Exuberant participation exposes competing claims on Berkeley’s public landscape that also evince a love of the community—self interest rightly understood.
- The essence of Berkeley parks is plain and simple. Their open format can read as boring but is experienced as democratic.
- Visions matter. They have provided Berkeley with compelling back-pocket ideas for when events, people, government, and institutions galvanize around civic notions.

Today the park system, plus the regional and state parks edging the hills and the shore, is arguably an approximation of the “Midway Plaisance,” planner Werner Hegemann’s 1915 vision for Berkeley. The question is, “What should the next 100 years yield?” On May 3, 2008 we assembled 21 speakers representing four decades of Berkeley park activism to put forward their vision. What resulted was a
heARTENING INTERSECTION OF RESONATING IDEAS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION:

1. Berkeley needs a vision drawing for Berkeley’s parks that engages the physical structure of the city in a specific way. Since Berkeley began general planning in 1955, the distinct intentions of park planning have been co-opted. It is time to correct this and make Berkeley’s bio-local genetics once again integral and visible.

2. Berkeley can be transformed from a city with many parks into a city within a park. This should occur at various connected scales, starting with all Berkeley neighborhoods having a green center.

3. Every infrastructure improvement should include strategic thinking about parks. Making the city’s infrastructure add up to a multi-functional green should be the goal. There are opportunities to add strategic parcels to the park system, to exhume and display the city’s creeks, and to create hybrid public space.

4. Streets are the greatest opportunity to build a layered and linked open space circuit. They are where most of the water flows and where the City already controls generous existing rights-of-way. Berkeley’s streets should treat runoff, move people on foot or bike instead of automobile, and cool the landscape.
5. The city will grow denser but “eco-density” can be balanced by generous collective public space. Parks are destinations in the everyday life of the city where citizens meet, greet, and latch on to each other. One proposal is to re-design the Derby-Addison corridor as a 21st century plaisance where a wide a green circuit would connect key parts of the city landscape.

6. Berkeley needs money for parks. The legacy of Berkeley’s parks is a periodic, flexible commitment to park planning that readied the City for when acquisition and capital improvement opportunities arose. The time is right for another big push in park funding.

7. Berkeley historically uses parks as a showcase for innovative thinking and a stepping stone for long term civic engagement. Change in Berkeley has happened best when working to achieve something positive and progressive, such as building the Adventure Playground or opening Strawberry Creek. A vision for a reunited park and playfield system where Berkeley’s ever more diverse residents go to be active and healthy should be a catalyst for community action.

The future of Berkeley’s public park system lies in nurturing what it has but also capitalizing on moments in time when various agendas and needs can be stitched together to create something bigger than the sum of its parts. We need to utilize the cachet of the 100-year anniversary before it fades and the acknowledged confluence of ideas that came out of this process dissipate. We encourage the CED community to participate, to seize the moment.

Louise A. Mozingo (M.L.A. ’84) is Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning and Urban Design

Marcia J. McNalley (M.C.P. ’83) is Adjunct Professor of Landscape Architecture & Environmental Planning

Left: Live Oak Park playground 1940s (Berkeley Historical Society)

Above: Proposal for the Santa Fe Right-of-Way (Andreas Stavropoulos)