Transforming lives by transforming public space

Annual Report

2012
Background

Pogo Park is a nonprofit grassroots community effort in Richmond, California’s Iron Triangle – one of the toughest, most underserved inner-city neighborhoods in the U.S. – to transform its desolate and little-used parks and playgrounds into safe, green, vibrant public spaces for children to play and families to gather.

This effort is led and staffed by a team of long-term Iron Triangle residents, with help from friends and supporters all over the Bay Area and beyond.

History

Founded in 2007, Pogo Park began by focusing its efforts on transforming Elm Playlot, a half-acre “pocket park” in the very heart of Richmond’s Iron Triangle—a neighborhood struggling with the devastating effects of poverty, pollution, unemployment, violence, blight, beleaguered schools, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

To re-imagine and rebuild Elm Playlot, Pogo Park recruited, hired, trained, and empowered the Elm Playlot Action Committee (EPAC), a core team of Iron Triangle residents — the people who know their neighborhood best — to plan, design, build, and operate Elm Playlot themselves. In 2009, Pogo Park and EPAC created a radical new design for Elm Playlot. In 2010, Pogo Park partnered with MIG, a Berkeley-based design firm, and the city of Richmond to secure a $1.94 million capital grant from the State of California Parks Department to rebuild Elm Playlot based on EPAC’s design.

In the summer of 2011, while waiting to secure the permits to begin construction at Elm Playlot (a process that would ultimately take two years), Pogo Park built a “Pop-Up Park” at Elm consisting of temporary play structures (a sandbox, hillside slide, stage, and “Global Village” of child-sized houses from around the world). Working with the Iron Triangle’s Scientific Art Studio (the company that built the iconic oversized mit at the Giants ballpark and the new playground at the San Francisco Zoo), EPAC designed and built all the play elements at Elm’s Pop Up Park themselves. They also staffed the park Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and provided free play programming (arts and crafts, chess club, dance, gardening, reading, unstructured free play) to thousands of this country’s most vulnerable children. The Pop-Up Park was an instant hit.
A New Model for Community Transformation

Pogo Park is about much more than playgrounds. It’s about using the transformation of underused city parks to transform communities and make them healthier. Our unique approach combines two distinct but interrelated strategies: child development and community development.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Parents of every race, ethnicity, and economic condition share one trait: hope for their children’s future. But the people of the Iron Triangle, like residents of blighted inner-city neighborhoods all over the U.S., have seen a procession of failed efforts to solve the chronic problems of poverty, ineffective schools, and unsafe streets that imperil their children’s healthy development.

Great parks and great playgrounds are potent medicine for sick places, affording children and youth profound health benefits. Rich, active outdoor play is the “mother’s milk” of healthy development. Decades of research shows that such play improves physical and psychological health as well as language skills and boosts social skills, empathy, creativity, and imagination. Children who play are less aggressive, show more self-control and higher levels of thinking than nonplayers, and have fewer attention disorders. Active outdoor play is a highly effective way to prevent and reverse childhood obesity.

Pogo Park makes playgrounds safe and welcoming by staffing them with playworkers, or park stewards. These trained adults watch over the space as a parent would watch over her child, and create enriched play environments that spark children’s imagination and initiative.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: What makes Pogo Park unique is that we empower local residents to take the lead role in transforming broken parks in their own neighborhood. However simple this approach may seem, it is revolutionary. Rather than the old model where "experts" (professionals in landscape architecture, environmental design, urban planning) design and build parks for the people, Pogo Park’s approach is to hire and train local residents to design and build the parks themselves.

By directing dollars for capital projects back into the local community, Pogo Park’s model works like a mini-stimulus plan in neighborhoods like Richmond’s Iron Triangle. The resulting empowerment of community residents creates a sense of ownership that is the essential ingredient of long-term success. At Elm Playlot, our pilot site, the change is striking. Because the community designed and is building it, the neighbors defend their park ferociously. They clean it and the surrounding streets daily. They report suspicious activity. If graffiti appears overnight, it is removed immediately.
Projects

Elm Playlot: The original Pogo Park, a half-acre park in the heart of the Iron Triangle. Virtually abandoned when we began work there, Elm Playlot lies within a 3-minute walk of approximately 5,500 children age 11 and younger who were locked inside, behind closed doors, living a deadened life of video games because there was no safe or stimulating place to play outside.

Harbour-8 Park: A formerly abandoned two-block section of the Richmond Greenway that lies within two blocks of five schools. Pogo Park has created a consortium of local businesses to work together on transforming this space into a vibrant playground and community gathering space.

Unity Park: Currently in the planning stages, this park will eventually become the "High Line of the West" which will include community gardens, playgrounds, and walking and biking trails that will connect to the Ohlone Greenway in the east and to the San Francisco Bay Trail in the west.
2012 Accomplishments

• Pogo Park’s Martin Luther King Day activities on the Richmond Greenway—a pop-up play area with arts and crafts—was attended by more than 400 children.

• The recently acquired house at 720 Elm Avenue, next to Elm Playlot, was completely gutted and turned into a temporary park office, in anticipation of complete reconstruction. The EPAC Team works with architect Dennis Fox to plan the remodeling project.

• Pogo Park Founder and Executive Director Toody Maher is named “Woman of the Year” by California State Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner. She also receives the Comcast Hero Award.

• The EPAC Team continues to perfect the pop-up park at Elm Playlot by designing and building a sandbox, a gate, and a tipi and igloo for the global village area of the park. The team also takes a class in CPR and becomes certified in this lifesaving skill.

• EPAC Team travels to Revolution Foods in Oakland to source high-quality nutritious food for Pogo Park’s free summer lunch program. Elm Playlot is primary distribution point for free lunches in the Iron Triangle, serving 9,000 meals to hungry neighborhood children.

• Child development researcher Jane Perry of the University of California trains Pogo Park team in the elements of high-quality children’s play.

• EPAC Team organizes neighborhood children to become park stewards and care for the space, its plantings and trees, and play materials. Summer activities at the park include a chess club.

• Pogo Park team begins construction of a 500-foot-long, 8-foot-high fence at Harbour-8 Park on the Greenway and completes work on half of the planned mural there.

• Elm Playlot becomes a de facto community hub on August 6 when there is a massive explosion and fire at the nearby Chevron oil refinery. Neighbors flock to the park to find out what has happened and what they should do.

• Pogo Park stages Octoberfest for 500 neighborhood children, transforming the park office into a truly scary haunted house.

• Pogo Park holds successful holiday fundraising event at the home of Board President Galen Hoskin.
Impact

Child and youth development: We have clear evidence that since Pogo Park started, more Iron Triangle children are playing outdoors for longer periods and with an increased level of physical movement and exercise. Over the first three years of play programming at Elm Playlot, the number of children coming to the park regularly increased by 170%. The length of time spent at each visit grew from 41 to 56 minutes - a 37% increase.

Health and well-being, including healthy eating: Outdoor play and exercise are just one aspect of improving the well-being of Iron Triangle children; access to healthful, nutritious food is equally important. During the summer of 2012 Pogo Park served 9,000 healthy free lunches to neighborhood children at Elm Playlot.

Economic development—job creation and training: Through our partnerships with local businesses like Scientific Art Studio and Lawrence Construction Inc., Pogo Park creates opportunities for local residents to learn valuable skills in construction, design, modeling, fabrication, and related crafts.

Crime and violence prevention: The Pogo Park team realized that before they could make Elm Playlot a safe space for children to play, they first had to deal with the row of vacant, boarded-up houses facing the park that were magnets for drug dealing and crime. In recent years approximately half of the homicides in the city took place in the Iron Triangle. Parents were extremely wary of allowing their children to be outdoors. In collaboration with the Richmond Police Department, Pogo Park organized a series of community meetings that led to consistent raids of the worst drug house. Pogo Park and the police worked with Richmond’s City Attorney to pressure the landlord to evict his drug-dealing tenants. After a year of sustained collaborative effort, the drug house was closed, cleaned up, and occupied by a local family.

Pogo Park also worked closely with the city to secure a $3.6 million HUD grant to acquire and renovate the vacant houses that surrounded Elm Playlot. Today, every single house facing the park has been renovated and is now occupied by local families. The Pogo Park team, working at the Elm Playlot office every day and in constant contact with the police, has become a vital intermediary for crime prevention. Neighbors come to the Pogo Park office to report their concerns and the team relays these reports. Since Pogo Park began work, there has not been a single incident of violence or vandalism at Elm Playlot.

Celebrating community and cultural diversity through public art: Staff artists Richard Muro and Jose Jual Reyes as well as visiting artists have created stunning murals, posters, and signs at Pogo Park’s project sites.
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