



# THE FIELD GUIDE

FOR PARKS AND  
CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND  
& CITY PARKS ALLIANCE

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# FIELD GUIDE FOR CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN PARKS

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# POGO PARK

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## Richmond, California

### Park Type: *Small Parks, Big Impact*

Small parks and spaces that allow for a deeply nuanced reading of a community's needs and potential outcomes.

#### Key lessons to look for:

1. **Arts are an equalizing, universal language** that allows and entices a wide range of stakeholder participation.
2. Parks projects cannot be done in isolation. They must “**repair the world around them.**”
3. **Collaborative design projects** can occur iteratively, using full-scale models, test fits, and mock-ups. Art doesn't have to be a final product; it can change and evolve.



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### Geographic context

Within the city of Richmond, California, Pogo Park and the Elm Street Playlot are located in a neighborhood called the Iron Triangle, known for devastating gun violence and being named the seventh most violent neighborhood in the country. The neighborhood also experiences the detrimental environmental effects of its bordering toxic oil refineries, which may expose residents to toxins in the air that could harm their health, cause asthma or create mental health issues.<sup>20</sup>

A third of families in the area live below the poverty line, and 46 percent of residents are unemployed. Children attend the poorest performing schools in the state of California. The population consists of 13,000 residents of which 61 percent are Latino, 24 percent are

Black, 7 percent are Asian, and 6 percent are Caucasian.

Many of the parks in this community are languishing and do not functionally offer opportunities for recreation, gathering, or celebration beyond their initial opening. As Toody Maher, a Richmond resident with a background as an artist and an entrepreneur, found in 2007 as she explored all 56 parks in her city, many needed reinvigoration and renovation.

Maher, who had long been interested in working on a city park renovation project, was particularly struck by eight small playlots in the city. Initially aiming to renovate Selano Playlot, the small lot closest to her house, she found that the Elm Street Play-lot in the Iron Triangle ended up capturing her attention,

especially after she met with city officials and explored the neighborhood. Maher then worked with the community and “fought for two years to change this small corner of a poor city’s poorest neighborhood through an organization she founded, Pogo Park.”<sup>21</sup>

### What were the goals?

This project intended to transform a physical space in a way that could have ripple effects throughout the community. It sought to use the park project as a catalytic entry point to addressing community concerns and needs in a comprehensive way.

The Elm Street Playlot was not on a main street and lacked visibility – both in real terms and in how the community perceived the space. Often, communities can feel that small lots or play spaces too easily become forgotten. This type of lot can also appear to be unsafe, and the permeating atmosphere of violence – due to the heavy use of drugs in the community, as well as high crime rates – keeps play spaces like this one from being used. The Pogo Park project integrated a variety of arts experiences and hands-on activities to help reclaim this underused public space and make it safer. A variety of arts and programs were needed to “activate” the sidewalks and support a vibrant pedestrian experience.

It was also hoped that the arts integration would help to address health disparities and help residents express and create their vision of a healthy, livable neighborhood. Throughout the project, through the pursuit of various art forms, Pogo Park hoped to engage – and ultimately empower – residents with the community. Arts were intended to engage residents, as they worked together to demonstrate their visions and desires for the reclaimed space. Arts helped to explain what activities they wanted to do there, as well as thoughtfully determine what amenities and features were needed to enable this. Furthermore, the activities sought to empower the local community through skill and capacity building, as well as providing opportunities to confront other complex and often contentious issues.

(Previous page): Pogo Park. Source: Pogo Park.

### Arts-based strategy

The park itself is a work of art. Every structure and element – from signage to fencing to sandboxes – was created through the lens of art. Everything was examined in the way it would be functional, beautiful, and in some way built or designed by the community.

To begin the design process, Maher infused her own money into the project. Once Pogo Park was established as a nonprofit, she wrote grant proposals, raised money from foundations, and solicited donations from community business owners. A \$30,000 contract from the city of Richmond was leveraged to start creating some of the planning documents for the play-lot transformation.

The park’s features demonstrate functional, public art. For instance, a recent installation mimics a mountain stream that uses a recycled water system with a UV system that makes the water safe and clean for children to play in. Through a grant from The Trust for Public Land, and with help from the city of Richmond and guidance from Scientific Art Studio, the Pogo Park team designed and built a large sandbox with a water feature; a 300-foot decorative perimeter fence; four carved benches, sanded and stained from re-claimed wood; and other hands-on features. Ultimately, a \$2 million grant was also awarded from the California Parks Department to transform the playlot in the vision defined by the community.

Not all pieces were permanent, as there are also low-cost, temporary installations such as fencing, murals, stump seating, and movable toys. While construction was scheduled to begin in summer 2013, Pogo Park worked with the community to create a “pop-up park” to beautify, activate, and maintain connection to and ownership of Elm Playlot.

The process, including mocking-up parks elements, to create the park was also one of deep creative and cultural value. When beginning the park design process, Maher



James Anderson. Source: Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group.

worked to clear the lot so that it was almost a blank canvass. As a next step – and counter to traditional practices – the space was then “mocked up” in 3D. Instead of creating designs on paper, creating models at full scale helped to determine the placement, size, and function of the installations. One example was the creation of a fire pit. Maher visited the site with members of the community to construct a model of the fire pit out of cardboard. They brought in milk crates to model seating around the fire pit to experience how the space would be used before it was even built.

Several unique and intentional choices were made around the arts implementation. As much as possible, the pieces are handmade by members of the community. Community members, from many different backgrounds, were hired to support the construction of the park. Local artists were offered paid opportunities to work on the project. For instance, Pogo Park brought in some of the top graffiti artists in the Iron Triangle, effectively moving those artists from “underground” into the public sphere. Local metalsmiths, woodwork-

ing shops, and custom fabrication shops were all employed to create elements of the park, and all the installations are tailor-made for the space.

Another aspect of the creative expression at the site was the activity and programming led by Pogo Park’s staff, which included arts and crafts and homework help after school. This helped to create a safe and nurturing environment for children’s imaginative play and exploration.

### What happened?

The Elm Playlot has evolved into a community hub for recreation, activities, and services through art. Art is essential because it beautifies neighborhoods and creates a sense of pride among residents. Parks projects can serve as canvases for local artists to show their work and as places for residents to share their culture. The parks showcase various art forms, such as murals, hand-painted signage, graffiti art, mosaics, and sculptures. The incorporation of art serves to celebrate and foster creativity within a community.

An essential aspect of this work was bringing various stakeholders together – residents and city government – to work in a collaborative space. The community involvement and relationships built through this project helped to ensure that long-term maintenance and stewardship were continued. At the outset, Maher met with each member of the City Council and the city manager. The city manager gave the community the right to “adopt” the spot; although the lot would remain a city park, the community group pledged to maintain and run programming there. Attending Iron Triangle neighborhood council meetings, making a point of getting to know important figures in the community, and hiring people from that community were also key steps in building local relationships.

In addition, research about the impact of the park is being conducted. Methods such as Photovoice—a participatory, qualitative data collection method that integrates photography—were used to initially capture and distill the community’s vision.<sup>22</sup> The physical transformation of the space was essential, but staffing and creative programming can also be powerful for creating incremental change. For instance, seeing someone in the park every day – whether it was maintenance staff, an after-school program, or a park user, made it appear safer and drew more people to the park than otherwise would have gone. Pogo Park worked with researchers at the University of California, Berkeley to count the number of park visitors before and after the transformation, which revealed a 175 percent increase in users.

Community members, such as Richmond resident and Pogo Park collaborator Joe Griffin, who is pursuing his doctorate in public health at UC Berkeley, are planning to study the park and its intervention catchment area for impact. As Griffin described, Pogo Park is providing “real tangible results and points of celebration, where people could say, I feel like something is happening.”<sup>23</sup>

The Pogo Park project proves that parks do not exist in isolation, so their revitalization doesn’t either. To maintain the park and provide additional job opportunities, a series of part-time and full-time workers have been employed to ensure the features within the park are functional. Since the opening of the Elm Street Playlot, two new Iron Triangle parks opened in 2014 and have provided roughly 7,500 local children and their family members safe and inviting outdoor spaces to play and experience nature.

Pogo Park is also receiving requests from Richmond and other private sources to design and build children’s plays spaces in city parks and private properties. To enable this broadening of mission, Chevron’s eQuip Richmond initiative provided a \$1 million grant to create a social enterprise called Pogo Park Products. Through this, the park is not only providing invaluable recreation and gathering spaces, but is also finding new ways of providing jobs and skills. These parks and related efforts have the potential to help “repair the world around them” and catalyze even greater change.

20. Jane Kay and Cheryl Katz, “Pollution, Poverty and People of Color: Living with Industry,” *Scientific American*, last modified on June 4, 2012, // <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/pollution-poverty-people-color-living-industry/>.

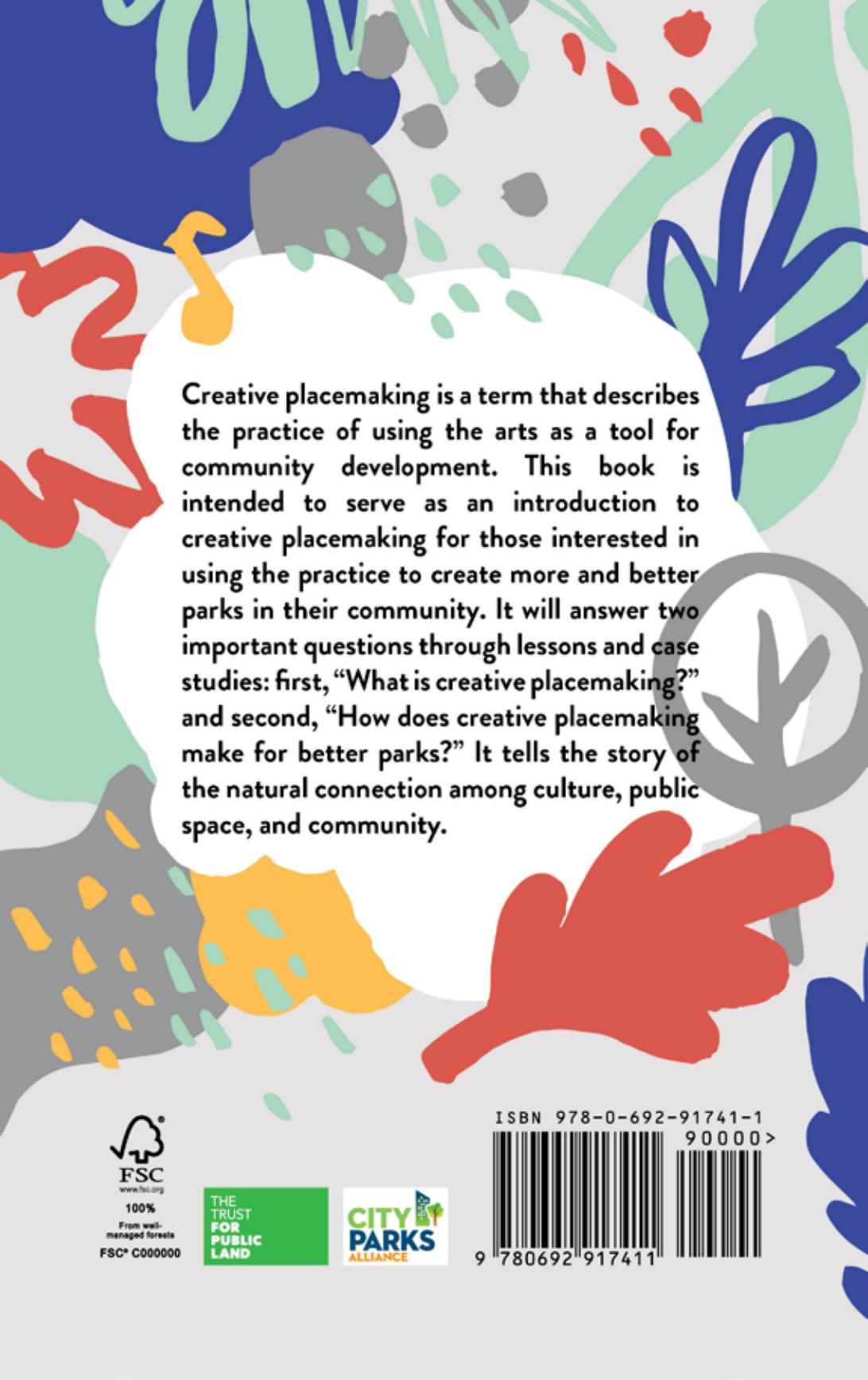
21. Heather Tirado Gilligan, “A Slow Park in Richmond,” *California Health Report*, last modified December 8, 2010, // <https://www.calhealthreport.org/2010/12/08/a-slow-park-in-richmond/>.

22. Pogo Park. “Photovoice.” *Pogopark.org*. Accessed June 28, 2017. <http://pogopark.org/photovoice/>.

23. Gilligan, “A Slow Park in Richmond.”



Pogo Park. Source: Pogo Park.



Creative placemaking is a term that describes the practice of using the arts as a tool for community development. This book is intended to serve as an introduction to creative placemaking for those interested in using the practice to create more and better parks in their community. It will answer two important questions through lessons and case studies: first, “What is creative placemaking?” and second, “How does creative placemaking make for better parks?” It tells the story of the natural connection among culture, public space, and community.



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