

[Blog](#) Transforming Parks and Lives in Richmond, California's Iron Triangle Neighborhood

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Transforming Parks and Lives in Richmond, California's Iron Triangle Neighborhood

Toody is an artist, inventor, and entrepreneur and founder of [Pogo Park](#), a community-based nonprofit in Richmond, California. Pogo Park is transforming broken and abandoned city parks in one of America's toughest inner-city neighborhoods into safe, green, and vibrant public spaces for children to play. Toody writes about pursuing this vision by deeply engaging with community residents.

There is a growing body of research that suggests that an effective way to revitalize a community is to revitalize its parks. Vibrant, functional parks are energetic hubs of community life. When they work, when they function, parks can provide tremendous societal benefits: they improve property values, attract and retain businesses and residents, provide green space, build community, and reduce crime.

Ten years ago I started Pogo Park in Richmond with a goal to transform [Elm Playlot](#)—a .5 acre, little-used city park and playground in the heart of one of America's toughest inner-city neighborhoods, Richmond's Iron Triangle—into a safe, green, and vibrant public space for children to play.



Photo by Pogo Park.

My goal was to not only reclaim this park into a vibrant hub of community life, but to create a model for a new kind of park that can be replicated in other city parks in Richmond and beyond.

I approached the rebuilding of Elm Playlot in a radically new way: instead of hiring professional experts from outside the neighborhood to design and build a park "for" the people, I decided to hire and train a core team of Iron Triangle residents (the "Community Resident Team")—*those who know their neighborhood best*—to design and build Elm Playlot themselves.

After 10 years of effort deeply engaging the local community to transform this one park, Elm Playlot today is a park like no other. It features a German zip line and disk swings, the "Global Village" of custom-made, handcrafted playhouses, a trike path that circles the entire park, a stream that mimics mountain wilderness, public art, a house adjacent to the park that was rebuilt into a small office/community center equipped with bathrooms, a kitchen, and a snack bar.



Photo by Pogo Park.

More importantly, many of the same community residents who planned, designed, and built Elm Playlot now run it. They clean the park each day and make visitors feel welcome. They provide free play programming (art, chess, dance, nature play) on a free, drop-in basis to thousands of local at-risk children. They serve thousands of healthy snacks/lunches from the school district's free meal program to local children. The Community Resident Team brought Elm Playlot to life: transforming it from a city park that they once described as "dirty, dull, and dangerous" to a safe neighborhood jewel that attracts 15,000 visitors a year.

One of the key lessons we learned is that, in order for a project to succeed in a neighborhood like the Iron Triangle, the local community must be engaged as key participants to drive the change.

After the successful transformation of Elm Playlot, we reclaimed, and are in the process of transforming, our second "Pogo Park," called [Harbour-8 Park](#), on the Richmond Greenway.



Photo by Pogo Park.

We recognize that when we improve parks, we improve the surrounding neighborhood and drive real estate prices up. When we transformed Elm Playlot, interest in the housing around the park increased—as well as property values and rents. This dynamic poses a challenge: while we want the neighborhood to improve, we also want to make sure that improvements to the community do not displace local people.

To protect against displacement, we are exploring strategies hailed by the Federal Reserve Bank as one of the most successful responses: purchasing and developing land around the parks in a way that benefits the community.



Photo by Pogo Park.

Last fall, The Conservation Fund embraced our vision and with a loan from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, [purchased a 17,500 square foot property at 909 Ohio Avenue that is adjacent to the Harbour-8 Park](#). The Fund's purchase allows Pogo Park's local resident team to engage the community in planning and building out our vision for Harbour-8. By owning the land around the park we are hoping to capture a portion of the rising property values for ourselves—and create a vehicle that gives back to the community. By partnering with The Conservation Fund, we are working with a leading organization that can help us to discover sustainable ways to address equity and hedge against displacement, while giving everyone access to parks and green space.



Photo by Pogo Park.

Our projects go beyond parks and stretch into public streets. One brilliant idea conceived by local youth in our community was to create a “[Yellow Brick Road](#)” through the Iron Triangle, a safe walking and biking route connecting community assets such as churches, schools, parks, and transportation hubs together. Pogo Park developed the proposed route, and we spent hours researching, planning, and walking the community on foot. The first leg of the Yellow Brick Road will connect our two Pogo Parks together and provide a safe passage in the community. Pogo Park worked with the City of Richmond to secure a \$6.2 million grant from the California Department of Transportation to build the first leg of the Yellow Brick Road.

Our goal is to create successful public green spaces that are built by and for the community, and to expand our model into other cities. Everyday we hear from our neighbors and park visitors about how much Elm Playlot has changed the tone and tenor of the Iron Triangle. These residents are fiercely protective of keeping this park

beautiful and safe. The physical transformation of land has also served as an economic development engine to transform the lives of people who live here. The only way to have meaningful lasting change is to invest resources into a community that lift up the people and the place at the same time.