

Culture of Health Blog

Parks and Green Spaces, For the People and By the People

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Communities should be empowered to create safe, green, vibrant spaces and parks that everyone can access. Read how a group of citizens pursued this vision, and learn about a \$7 million funding opportunity to support park equity and racial justice.

APPLY NOW



The first time I visited Elm Playlot was on a bright, sunny afternoon in May 2007.

Elm Playlot is a small, one-half acre pocket park in the heart of Richmond, California's "Iron Triangle" neighborhood. It is one of the few city parks and playgrounds in the Iron Triangle. The park serves a densely populated, diverse neighborhood that I knew was chock-full of children. However, when I visited Elm Playlot that afternoon in May, I didn't see a single child playing there.

It wasn't hard to figure out why.

A group of men sat on Elm Playlot's benches drinking alcohol. The play structure and swings were tagged top-to-bottom with graffiti and menacing gang slogans. Litter was piled up around the picnic tables, the slide, and the swings: broken glass, hypodermic needles, cigarette butts, used condoms, empty liquor bottles.

Later, in conversations with community residents, I would learn that parents had regularly told their children not to play at Elm Playlot; it was too dangerous.

In 2009, the city of Richmond raised \$300,000 in grant funding to renovate the park. Then, the city followed the same established "Design-Bid-Build" process used by virtually every city in America to build or rebuild parks. In this process, all key design decisions come from city officials outside the community, and contractors from outside the community bid on the construction.

The community's role? Except for a handful of community meetings, which are organized and run by city staff and design professionals, local residents—*experts in their own neighborhood*—are expected to enthusiastically and gratefully participate in the park's design phase as unpaid volunteers.

This well-oiled process rarely results in the creation of parks as vibrant community hubs or safe, green places for children to play.

One week after the city completed its Design-Bid-Build project and Elm Playlot reopened for public use, the new play structure was covered with spray-painted graffiti. A few days later, someone tried to light the entire play structure on fire. And within weeks, the men were back, sitting together on the sparkling new park benches, drinking.

This is not an atypical result, and it has pernicious reverberations: a sense of hopelessness deepens in the community, and cynicism grows among design professionals and city staff that anything will ever change.

A New Approach to Community Engagement

I started [\(https://pogopark.org/\)](https://pogopark.org/) Pogo Park [\(https://pogopark.org/\)](https://pogopark.org/), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in Richmond, to try a different approach.

The first thing I did was to go door to door to hire a core team of people from the community—*those who know their neighborhood best*—as paid staff to design, build, and eventually operate our new park at Elm Playlot. Diverse in age, gender, and race, the Elm Playlot Action Committee (EPAC) attacked its core job with vigor: to bring Elm Playlot to life.

These residents cared what their neighborhood looked like and what went on there. They knew their neighborhood better than anyone, and they knew what it needed to thrive.

We partnered with Scientific Art Studio (SAS), a local Iron Triangle custom design and fabrication business. SAS is renowned for designing and building cutting-edge, thrilling, and dynamic play environments for multiple clients, including children’s museums and zoos.

SAS opened its two-acre Iron Triangle studio as a sheltered and supportive place where Pogo Park’s EPAC team could gain real-life, hands-on experience planning, designing, and eventually re-building Elm Playlot slowly, over time, with their own hands.

A Hub of Community Life and Health

After a [decade of work](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://pogopark.org/who-we-are/history/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1634650829221000&usg=AOvVaw0JRd8gSUTv7GVINpHvYEmV) (<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://pogopark.org/who-we-are/history/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1634650829221000&usg=AOvVaw0JRd8gSUTv7GVINpHvYEmV>), reimagining, rebuilding, and running Elm Playlot, the park is now a safe and beloved public green space that the whole neighborhood is proud of. Families and children visit every day to play, exercise, and simply gather. Pogo Park staffs the park with community residents who clean and maintain it with care and love. They offer free enrichment programs to children that include art, chess, nature education, petting zoos, gardening, and hip hop dance.

Additionally, Elm Playlot is a trusted public space to provide urgently-needed services to the community. It is one of Richmond’s largest distribution points for the local school’s free meal program, serving thousands of meals annually to children and youth from families with low incomes. Vision to Learn provides free eye exams and glasses to hundreds of children each year through a mobile clinic at the playlot.

The park and its programming isn’t just a place for children. Parents walk the park’s trike path for exercise and participate in daily Zumba classes. Elm Playlot has transformed from dirty, dull, and dangerous into a vibrant hub of community life and health.

The Domino Effect

We’ve since replicated this approach to bring a second park to life in Richmond, called Harbour 8, and build the “Yellow Brick Road,” a walk-bike street through the center of the neighborhood that safely connects children and families to the parks and other community amenities including churches, public transportation, and schools.

And our approach is gaining traction throughout the city and the state—urging local governments to re-examine the power dynamics at play and rethink their approach to decision-making around parks in ways that put the community at the center.

Increasing Park Equity

There are parks like the old Elm Playlot all over the country—parks and recreation areas that are poorly maintained, understaffed, unwelcoming, and unsafe. And it’s no coincidence that they tend to be in neighborhoods where people with low incomes and people of color more often live.

As in the Iron Triangle, the challenges these communities face didn’t happen overnight; they are the product of decades of disinvestment, racism, and harm.

It’s clear that our nation needs greater park equity—a more fair and just distribution of parks and green spaces. But park equity means more than simply having a park. It’s about more than a prescribed quota of 3.0 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. What we have discovered is this: park equity means that everyone must have access to a safe, green, vibrant park that is truly *alive*. The way for that to happen is to set in place a system that empowers local people to develop a vision, slowly over time, and enact it.

RWJF is seeking proposals from community-based organizations and base-building groups working in urban, low-income communities of color across the U.S. to increase park equity and advance racial justice through local policy advocacy and systems change.

[Learn more about our \\$7 million funding opportunity, part of People, Parks, and Power, a joint effort of RWJF and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, led and managed by Prevention Institute.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toody Maher (<https://pogopark.org/person/director-toody-maher/>) recognized that city parks—if brought to life—were a powerful vehicle to transform the health and well-being of entire communities. This realization led her to found Pogo Park in 2007.

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