

# Exposures

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## Building Schools & Communities Through Play

by Bambi Yost, UCD graduate student and project manager for the Learning Landscape Alliance

*“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” (William Butler Yeates)*

### Scenario 1:

Imagine you are a child again. The bell has rung and you are free to play. Recess, one of the best things about school! You run full force out the doors only to discover a sea of asphalt and pea gravel, fully exposed to Denver’s harsh climate. With gravel gathering in your shoes and sweat running down your face, you race to the only thing of interest - hot, metal, outdated play equipment from the 1950’s.



Greenlee Elementary School ‘Before’

### Scenario 2:

Now imagine instead that when you run out the doors you find a place full of artwork, gardens, outdoor classrooms, new plastic play equipment, brightly painted play areas, boulders, gathering places, trees, shelter, and grass playing fields.

What makes this place even better is the fact that you helped to create it. You worked with your friends, parents, teachers, neighbors, and volunteers you didn’t even know, to design and build your playground.



Student at Greenlee

Both of these scenarios are better than no playground at all, and both exist within Denver’s city limits.

Scenario 1 describes a typical schoolyard, or what over 32,000 children of Denver’s inner-city schools experience when they enter their school playground. Scenario 2 describes a “Learning Landscape,” or what over 7,000 Denver Public School children now experience at recently rebuilt elementary schools.

Questions raised by these scenarios are: Is it important to create Learning Landscapes? If so, how can we realistically provide these playgrounds to all of Denver’s children?

### How Learning Landscapes Came About

In 1993, parents, staff, faculty, neighbors, and students from Bromwell Elementary School collaborated with Professor Lois Brink and her University of Colorado at Denver students to redesign and rethink their playground. It was a long, slow process of 6 years, working with Denver Public Schools, and contractors, but Bromwell’s community maintained momentum and faith in a project worthy of commitment. “We wanted to raise the standard of what a playground should be, to make it a place to learn and a



Greenlee Elementary School ‘After’

community gathering place, to make it a focal point of the community,” she said.

Please see **LEARNING LANDSCAPES** on page 3

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## LEARNING LANDSCAPES from Cover

What started as a personal project at Bromwell Elementary School has since become an urban initiative, evoking social change and physical transformation of public grounds. The Learning Landscape Alliance officially began in 1999 when the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD) Landscape Architecture Program entered into a formal agreement to plan, design, and help build Denver Public Elementary School playgrounds throughout the district.

The Learning Landscape Alliance is an entrepreneurial and community-based association of public and private interests. Its main objective is to strengthen Denver's public elementary schools and their surrounding neighborhoods by designing new multi-dimensional school playgrounds that also offer profound elements of a public park and social gathering place. The success of the Learning Landscape project is founded on a healthy enthusiasm for aesthetic issues, as well as a pragmatic approach to maintenance, safety and recreational issues.

While the main objective of the project is to reconnect communities with their public schools, a Learning Landscape playground also creates innovative avenues for participatory learning, increases recreational opportunities, and provides a much needed green space in otherwise heavily urban neighborhoods. These playgrounds encourage discovery, civic engagement, and fun. Each school serves as a landmark and civic center celebrating the cultural and historic character of each distinct neighborhood.

### University Role

*"Architects, too, need to be alert to the myriad of design possibilities they possess which can help to marry the world of education with the world of architecture and make the learning environment an active not passive set of spaces." (Taylor, 1993)*

A year-round hands-on, service-learning curriculum at UCD enlists graduate students to develop master plans in the fall and design documents in the spring. In the summer students gain invaluable experience in independent design-build classes at DPS schools under construction.

Community involvement is a foundation of this program. In every step of the way, community input and involvement are solicited as a means of fostering a sense of neighborhood ownership and vision. Landscape architecture students and professionals hold extensive meetings with focus groups of

students, parents, staff and administrators at each school to identify elements for the proposed site development. This feedback is then incorporated into the master plans and unique designs.

Each master plan includes a vision statement, a set of goals to implement the vision, a program of uses, a spatial relationship diagram, and an aesthetic ordering system. The master plan targets existing and proposed uses, relationships between uses, and programmatic requirements for uses, maintenance and safety issues, and preliminary cost estimates. To date graduate students have prepared 45 master plans for the district. Once the master plan is complete, UCD students synthesize



Crofton Elementary School Sculpture & Shade Structure

the pieces into a detailed site design with further refined cost estimates. Standard bidding through DPS results and Design-Build construction begins.

Please see **LEARNING LANDSCAPES** on page 4



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### Volunteer Role

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” (Margaret Mead)*

Projects are always built during the school year so that children and families can be involved. Volunteer dates, established during construction, usually yield 50 to 100 people from the school community and other volunteer organizations such as Americorps, Peer One, Hope Communities, church groups, and Neighborhood Associations. Each project has 2 – 4 volunteer builds. Typically the community creates artwork, plants gardens, lays sod, moves engineered wood fiber into play pits, builds playground equipment, and lays bricks. This involvement helps to reconstruct a neighborhood identity that is so often lacking in other urban renewal efforts. Additionally it has become a wonderful way to bring parents into the school, particularly when language is a barrier.

### Funding

The Learning Landscape Alliance, a relatively small committee composed of representatives of the City and County of Denver, the University of Colorado at Denver, Denver Public Schools, and private foundations, initiated a fundraising campaign for 25 elementary schools in Former Mayor Wellington Webb’s “focus” neighborhoods. The majority of these schools have received “low” or “unsatisfactory” ratings in state scholastic achievement tests. Close to 90 percent of the students are non-white; 93 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch, and the mobility rate averages 80 percent for each school. According to Tom Kaesemeyer at the Gates Foundation, “students who receive a free or reduced lunch are 11 times less likely to go to college.”

By December 2003, the alliance will have funded and constructed 22 learning landscapes. In addition, there are 8 partially rebuilt playgrounds funded primarily through individual school fundraising. The cost of completed projects averages \$430,000 each. Building a broad base of support is necessary for projects of this scope. As a result, no single funder is responsible for more than 25 percent of a

school’s financing. By the end of this year, a projected total of over \$9 million will have been raised through the city of Denver, DPS, foundations, communities, in-kind support from volunteer groups, local businesses, and from funds raised by each school.

### Accountability and Self-Evaluation

“It’s more than just putting in a couple of swings,” says Professor Brink. “This has much bigger ramifications in terms of children and their ability to learn and the self-esteem of a community. Our goal is to build landscapes so we can demonstrate that you can improve learning, you can improve test scores by the environment kids are in, and that includes their playground.”



Kids at Play - Swansea Elementary School

An independent evaluation firm, the Center for Research Strategies, has completed an impact study assessing Learning Landscapes. Students, teachers, principals, and community members were included in the study. Results were positive in terms of community impact, referrals to the principal, vandalism, and injuries. In fact, one Denver school has recorded an 80 to 90 percent reduction in disciplinary referrals and injuries since the schoolyard was redesigned. This continuing post-occupancy evaluation promises to yield information on how the physical design is actually being used, along with hard data on the impact of outdoor facilities on learning

and student behavior.

### Conclusion

Back to the initial questions, is it important to create Learning Landscapes, and if so, how can we realistically provide these playgrounds to all of Denver’s children?

Having worked with more volunteers and DPS staff than I could possibly name, on virtually every school built with the Learning Landscape Alliance, I know the project is of value. I have never had anyone approach me and ask where all the pea gravel has gone. Neither have I have ever heard anyone say they wish the playground had been left untouched. In fact, I hear just the opposite. Yes, there are difficulties associated with maintaining any public work and Denver

continued next column

from previous column

Public Schools are not exempt. Still, the rewards far outweigh the costs.

In a recent survey, the Environmental Protection Agency found that average Americans spend 90 percent of their time indoors. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, kids need to play outdoors at least an hour a day for their health and physical development. Both children and adults need recreational opportunities for organized games and creative play. In addition, people involved in community projects form closer bonds with each other and their physical environments. An increase in social responsibility, empathy, and compassion for one another and the natural world is enhanced when individuals feel they belong and can claim ownership to a place or cause. And last, public schoolyards make up a significant portion of the built environment. The appearance, physical construction, and use of these public places can influence real estate values, city temperatures, wildlife migration, experiential outdoor learning, and more.

The Denver School Board is currently developing a general obligation bond to be presented to voters this fall. Discussion of including the Learning Landscapes program as an item in that bond indicates the value of these projects. In addition, the Gates Foundation is actively involved in seeking funds to help maintain these playgrounds 20 years into the future. And last, AmeriCorps provides tuition grants to UCD students through the Campus Compact Initiative focused on collegiate level service-learning, community-based programs.

Ultimately, the value of these built works rests in the hands of the people. How do you continue to engage civic responsibility over time? How do you value the knowledge, ownership and empowerment gained from community builds? What is the value in creating partnerships and strengthening communities? Is there a dollar amount?

**Join us on our next volunteer build and see for yourself what learning landscapes are all about!** Dates and details are provided on page 13 of this newsletter.

**For Additional Information, Contact**

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