

December 4, 2007

Why So Few Postoccupancy Evaluations?

Can landscape architects learn anything from visiting their built public projects and studying how people use them?

You'd think so, wouldn't you? Postoccupancy evaluations (POEs) are a means of continually improving one's design skills by avoiding repeating the same mistakes. The results could be used to compete for new jobs and could be published, thereby advancing the entire profession. I'm sure there are many other benefits. Yet very few landscape architects ever undertake POEs of their own work. Why?

One reason is that even a rudimentary POE is likely to cost time, effort, and money. A simple walk-through that involves talking to users and performing some sort of elementary audit requires training if a landscape architect is to perform it. (Does any landscape architecture program even teach students how to perform POEs nowadays?) If a trained assessor performs the POE, money will have to be found to pay him or her. The upshot: POEs are rarer than hen's teeth.

If you are a landscape architect and have done POEs on your own or others' work, I would love to know of it. Even if you haven't done a formal POE, have you at least revisited and informally assessed your own key projects? If so, what have you learned?

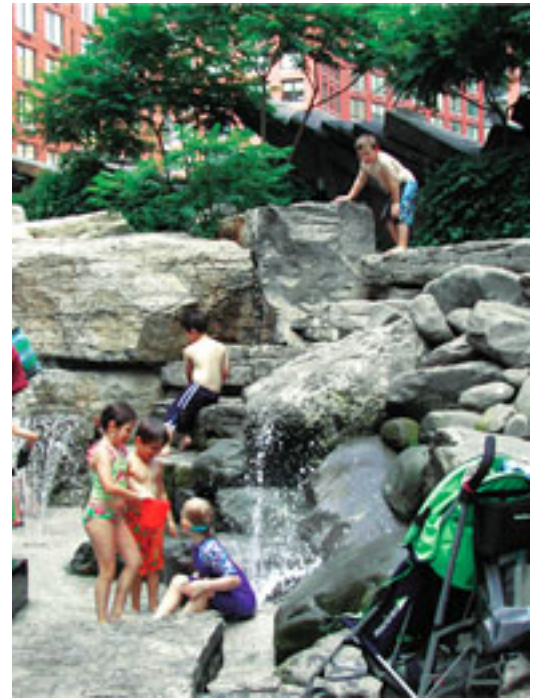
Because of the dearth of POEs, I was surprised to learn that Teardrop Park in New York's Battery Park City ("Abstract Realism," February 2007) had been the subject of one. What sparked this most unusual undertaking? Nothing less than Teardrop's gaining the dubious honor of being listed on Project for Public Spaces' Hall of Shame (www.pps.org/great_public_spaces). "There is almost nothing to do in this park," charged PPS, "and nothing to attract the people who might use it."

This allegation so rankled Robin Moore, Affiliate ASLA, who had consulted on the planning of the park, that this professor of landscape architecture and director of the Natural Learning Initiative at North Carolina State University traveled up to Manhattan to assess park use (or lack thereof) for himself. He and two other experienced field researchers spent nine person hours on two consecutive afternoons mapping the behavior of children and adults and interviewing parents and others. The results, summarized in this month's "Critic at Large," show that Teardrop is a vibrant and much-used public space. Moore ended by wondering whether PPS uses much rigor in assessing landscapes before consigning them to the Hall of Shame.

PPS has ruffled the feathers of many landscape architects, who object to its relegating some of the most revered works of landscape architecture to a "shamed" status. Would it be better for the profession, then, if PPS would just go away? Underlying that question is another, more profound, one: Is criticism good or bad for landscape architecture?

My take is that POEs such as Moore's add to the store of information about how people use urban landscapes, and if these are sparked by criticism, then criticism is a good thing. And Teardrop isn't the only example of a critique inciting a POE. I recently read one of an urban square in San Francisco that demonstrated, via observation and counting users, a very high level of use. When I asked the landscape architect why he had commissioned the POE, he admitted that one reason was a critical review published in LAM that questioned whether the park's design would ever attract many users.

But why does it take the critic's goad to incite a POE? What would it take for landscape architects to initiate POEs just because they want to know whether people love the places they create?



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CRITIC AT LARGE



Sand Cove's heavily used, three-dimensional, bowl-like form and diverse range of designed settings (rocks, sand, bleachers, adjacent paths, climbing hill, slide, platforms, and promontory) offer social niches for all family members. The overall effect is a space simultaneously animated and tranquil, where parents can relax while their children play.

REASONS TO SMILE AT TEARDROP

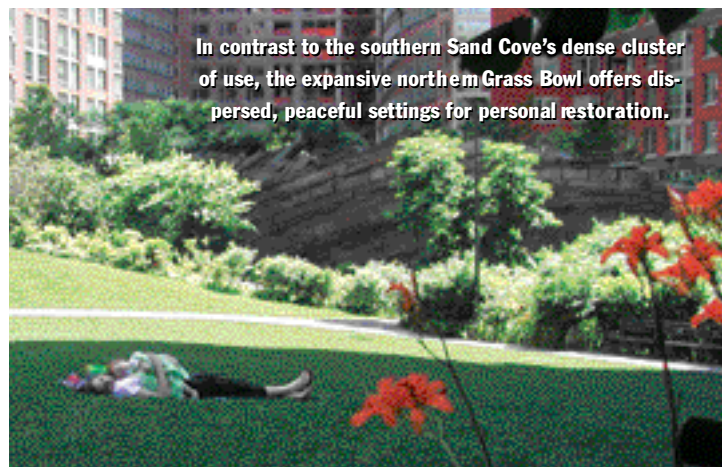
Project for Public Spaces banished it to its Hall of Shame, but a postoccupancy study suggests that New Yorkers are embracing Teardrop Park.

By Robin C. Moore, Affiliate ASLA

WHEN PROJECT for Public Spaces posted Teardrop Park in Manhattan's Battery Park City on its "Hall of Shame," the posting disturbed a group of us at the Natural Learning Initiative. The criticism seemed unsubstantiated, so we decided to visit the park to gather objective evidence on its use.

Teardrop is one of a family of parks in Battery Park City (BPC), large and small, passive and active. It was *Landscape Architecture's* February 2007 cover story, "Abstract Realism." The Natural Learning Initiative (NLI), a scientific research and design assistance unit linked to the Department of Landscape Architecture at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, was appointed by the Battery Park City Authority to serve as play consultant for Teardrop Park, as part of Michael Van Valkenburgh's design team. Rather than counter Project for Public Spaces' (PPS's) review (www.pps.org/great_public_spaces), let me share the results of our snapshot field study and let the reader decide whether or not Teardrop Park should be held up, as PPS states, as an egregious example of poor public design.

We gathered use data in the park one weekend in late June this year. Three experienced NLI field researchers, including myself, spent two consecutive afternoons (Friday and Saturday) in the park conducting user observations. We gathered 12 rounds (nine person hours) of systematic behavior-mapping data showing locations of (Continued on Page 134)



In contrast to the southern Sand Cove's dense cluster of use, the expansive northern Grass Bowl offers dispersed, peaceful settings for personal restoration.

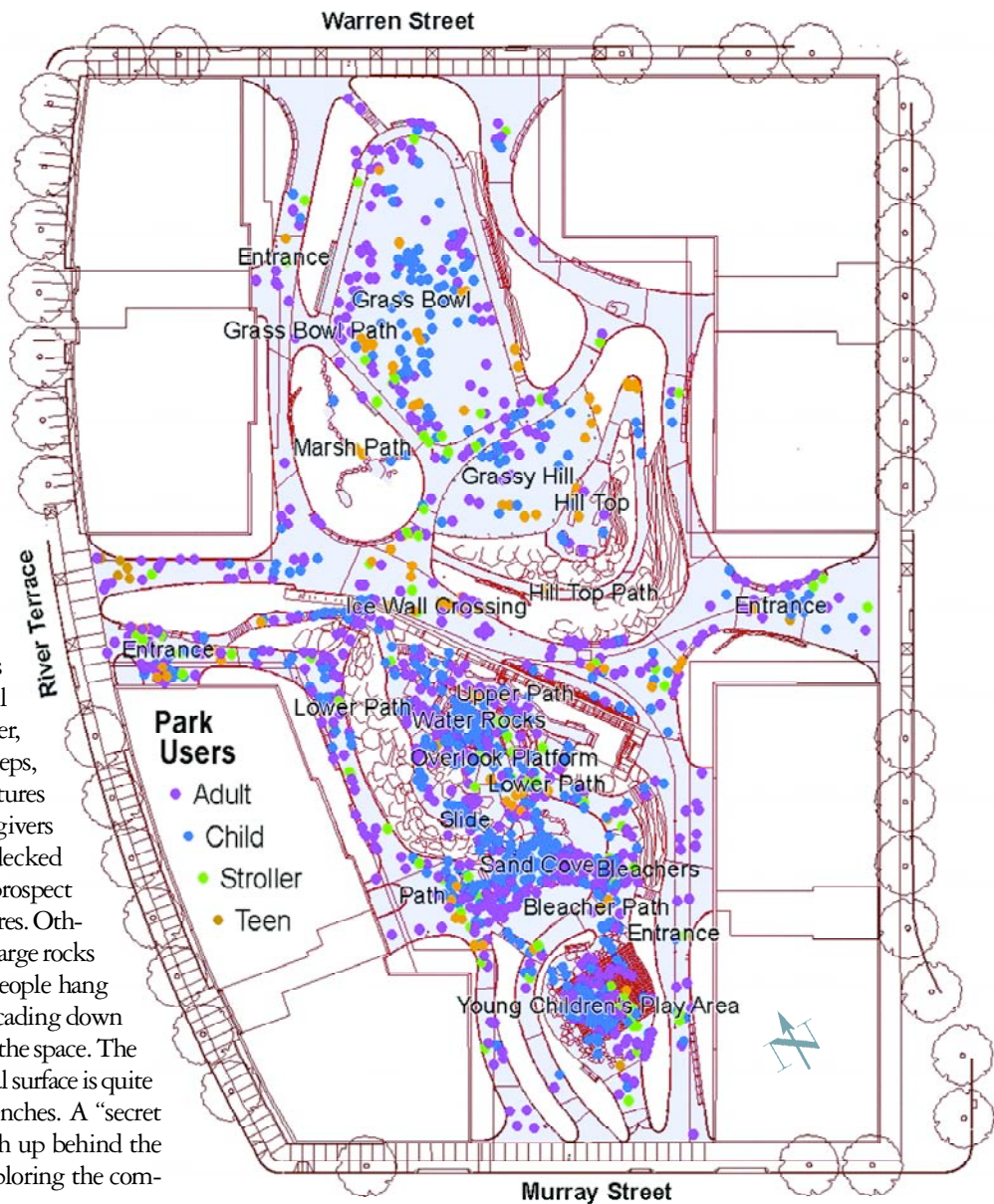
ROBIN C. MOORE, AFFILIATE ASLA, TOP; NILDA COSCO, BOTTOM

CRITIC AT LARGE

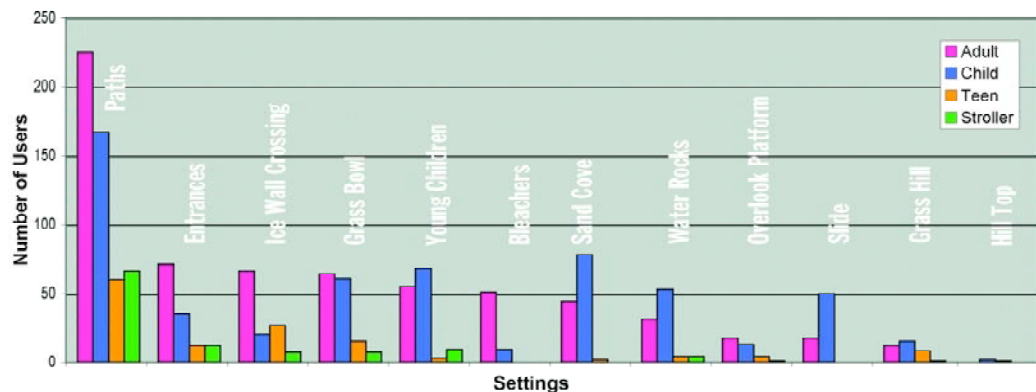
(Continued from Page 136) children, adolescents, adults, and baby strollers. In addition, we conducted informal interviews with two officers of the BPC Park Enforcement Patrol (PEP), several parents, and a group of adolescent park users. The wide range of users and activities was captured in several hundred photographs. Each round of mapping on average observed 115 users (actual population of the park; 1,380 data points in total). Each round included, on average, equal numbers of children and adults and approximately 10 adolescents. Even though the data has not been fully analyzed, the set of 12 compiled behavior maps indicates a distinct pattern of use for that time of year.

A constructed wall of alcove bluestone subdivides the park into two zones. The zone south of the wall engages a high level of active play focused on water, sand, a long stainless steel slide, pathways, and the steps, lookouts, decks, and rocks linking them. These features provide a rich variety of gathering places where caregivers relax, chat, and keep eyes on their children. A decked promontory jutting out above the slide serves as a prospect where parents can view their children's slide adventures. Other parents loll in their favorite spots, reading on the large rocks beside the sand play area. On the opposite side, people hang out on a steeply raked section of timber seating, cascading down to the sand, adding an amphitheater-like feeling to the space. The more dynamic interaction afforded by the tilted social surface is quite different than that provided by a single line of benches. A "secret path" overlooking the water play area, tucked high up behind the bluestone wall, adds a sense of mystery for kids exploring the complex, three-dimensional landscape. The atmosphere is relaxed yet animated by the giggles and shrieks of active play. Teenage boys and their father climb the large sentinel rock, which overlooks the sand play area at the foot of the slide. "It's really cool up here," one of them shouts.

Farther south, an enclosed area dedicated to infants and toddlers and their caregivers is in constant use. Strollers are parked (86 in total were observed in this area). Children in their first and second year of life are exploring the sensory wonders of the planet in an intimate landscape of textures, surfaces (stone, timber, metal), plants, colors, smells, sand, and wa-



A behavior map, above, provides a snapshot of overall midsummer weekend use of Teardrop Park. Use is spread throughout the park. No setting is unused. The park is subdivided into more and less active zones south and north of the constructed alcove bluestone wall. Well-used pathways link the park to surrounding residential and public spaces. Pedestrians passing through provide a sense of security. Entrances are social gathering points. Diverse settings offer places for adults (purple) as well as caregivers with babies in strollers (green), children (blue), and teens (orange). The chart below illustrates the variable social mix by setting type. Heavy pathway use shows Teardrop to be in part a strolling park—both internally and as a pass-through experience. The chart also shows the overall spread of use across settings variable by age group.





ter. Parents, appearing at ease about their children's safety, sit comfortably engaged in animated conversations.

On the north side, the upwardly curving bluestone wall and the water trickling down its face intrigue passersby. Two children, just old enough to walk, catch the drips and run back and forth between the wall and bench-sitting parents on the other side of the path. On Friday afternoon many businesspeople and others stroll by the wall and through the park.

The zone north of the wall offers a pastoral quality. People lie on the lawn and sit on benches, alone in their thoughts or chatting. Occasional groups explore the marsh. Others play with a ball. Mothers

A hilltop, sheltered rock cluster "prospect and refuge," above, is noted by teens as a favorite place to hang out. Below, the diverse, multi-level, hierarchical pathway system traversing the park (including fully accessible routes) offers a broad range of experiences for all users—including adventures for these toddlers.

and little kids frolic together, rolling down the grassy slope east of the main lawn. The foot of the slope seems to be a gathering spot for mothers with young children. A pair of lovers lies in an endless embrace on the lawn during the whole observation period.

Two PEP officers on regular patrol are happy to talk about security in Teardrop. Since it opened, they report, there has not been a single reported or observed "incident" of negative behavior, including vandalism.

Every age from babies to grandparents can be seen in the park. Older adults relax on the long, curving bench beside the "promenade" running lengthwise through the park. Two 15-year-old adolescent girls tell us, "We meet in the 'reading circle' to do homework because it is calm and quiet here. We always meet in the same spot [gesturing toward a group of large rocks at the top of the sloped lawn] because it feels private—except for the little children, but that's all right. You can see out from there, but you are away from other people."

As an aside, these comments are especially gratifying, as the spot referred to was designed specifically with adolescents in mind, using the concept of "prospect and refuge."

There was much discussion with the client about the potential for vandalism in the park, leading to the idea of trying to design subtly for adolescent "hangout" needs. The rock placement is an artwork created by artist Ann Hamilton—apparently readable by adolescents as a place for them.

Two groups of cyclists appear (against park rules). A band of younger teen boys roams around the peripheral pathways for a while at reasonable speed. No one seems bothered. A line of 8 to 10 adult cyclists cruises through the bluestone wall tunnel and up the path on the edge of the lawn, stopping for a while to drink on the benches overlooking the lawn (another prospect and refuge), as if they planned the stop during a ride down the BPC Hudson River Esplanade.

We speak with a group of neighborhood residents who identify themselves as frequent park users. They comment on the "exquisite planting design" and how "beautifully maintained" the park is.

Can this be the same park featured so negatively by PPS? Based on our own field observations, Teardrop deserves to be praised as a successful public space rather than placed in a category of shame. I respectfully suggest that in the future PPS make a greater effort to gather evidence to support their arguments, spend their time and talents critiquing the many examples of poorly designed, unloved parks that all too frequently litter North American cities, and reconsider their hasty judgment of Teardrop Park. LAW

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