
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 13-17

Park View Playground and Field House

Square 3032, Lot 1
693 Otis Place NW

Meeting Date: July 25, 2013
Applicant: Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A

Affected ANC: 1A
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate Park View Playground a historic landmark to be entered into the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the Board forward the nomination for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1921, the date of the park's establishment, to 1954, the date that all District of Columbia parks and recreation centers became legally desegregated.

Because it was racially desegregated before most other playgrounds, Park View Playground merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia designation Criterion B ("History"), because it is "associated with historical periods, social movements, groups, institutions, or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia."

For the particular architecture of its field house, the property also merits designation under National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D ("Architecture and Urbanism"), as it embodies the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles and of a particular building type "significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia."

For the sake of practical brevity, it is recommended that the official name of the landmark be simply the "Park View Playground," as the field house is a constituent element and, as a contributing feature, will be protected, no matter the title.

Background

The Park View Playground was established in 1921 along Warder Street NW to serve the adjacent, five-year-old Park View School (now a historic landmark) and the rapidly growing rowhouse community of Park View. Although there had been plenty of informal play spaces for children in Washington, supervised seasonal playgrounds were set aside in federal parks (such as the Washington Monument grounds, the Ellipse, and Reservation 126) beginning in the 1890s. The Victorian, model, public, elementary schools frequently had play areas in their basements,

but it was not until after the 1908 report of the Schoolhouse Commission that elementary schools were programmed with playgrounds, if there was available space.¹ The provision of such space, and the opportunity for play itself, was a Progressive Era innovation; exercise in the form of play was seen as an antidote for the enervating effects of industrialized cities. Play was seen as an opportunity to cultivate the physical and “moral nature” of children, and playgrounds themselves constituted urban “breathing spots.”

For obvious reasons, playgrounds were developed next to schools, but they often served a broader community. But with the strict racial segregation of public facilities in Washington during the early twentieth century, they failed to serve the entire community. They generally served either white residents or black residents, and seldom both, meaning that the excluded race had to look elsewhere—that is, go farther from home—to use a suitable facility. As with schools, that meant that African American residents were the ones most often excluded and underserved. But again as with schools, the District Commissions were obligated to show some semblance of even-handedness in providing such facilities to African Americans, as was the case with Rose Park in eastern Georgetown, a neighborhood already largely black by the time the playground was established.

As the regime of segregation was intended to keep African Americans apart, the phenomenon of a neighborhood demographic swing from mostly white to mostly black was the most difficult for the District Commissioners to address, as whites still demanded facilities, no matter their numbers. The Recreation Department Board eventually opened a few playgrounds for use by all, but most of these instances were where the white population was increasing, and the Board wanted to furnish them access.² Because of discrimination in real estate sales, as well as general economic disadvantages for African Americans, newly built neighborhoods were typically white, but might change with a second generation of owners after homes had depreciated or become less fashionable. Park View, developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, was originally solidly white, and the neighborhood elementary school was whites-only. That segment of the community was still numerous enough in the late 1920s to necessitate additions to the school, but the demographics changed during the 1930s and 1940s, and enrollments plummeted. The Park View Playground had been reserved to the use of the school during regular school hours, but was available to the white portion of the community at other times.

Under pressure from the Southern Conference on Human Welfare, the NAACP, and local civic groups, such as the Pleasant Plains Civic Association, the Recreation Board agreed to study the use of six playgrounds in neighborhoods whose racial make-up had recently changed dramatically. After deliberating, the Board arrived at the controversial decision to adopt the parks superintendent’s recommendation to designate Park View as “a Negro unit,” but with its use exclusive to the white school during school hours. This neither fully solved the functional problem, nor did it address the stigma of segregation. And the attempt at dual use broke down, especially in the summer months.

¹ One of the earliest public school playgrounds was at Morse Elementary (R Street NW between New Jersey Avenue and 5th Street) before the turn of the century.

² These included Montrose Playground, Cardozo Recreation Center, the Anacostia Playground, Garfield Playground, Langley Playground, Hoover Playground, New York Avenue Playground, and Rose Park Playground. Some of these had previously been literally divided into two parts, but enforcing such an unnatural division proved a failure.

The switch of Park View Elementary to the education of African Americans in 1949 was likely the beginning of the end of segregation at the playground; despite the diminishing number of white families in the neighborhood, white children continued to use the facility, without any serious issues. Finally, in April 1952, the District Recreation Board agreed to open four more playgrounds to all. Of these, only Park View was originally a white playground that had been changed to use by African Americans before desegregation. Full desegregation of the recreation system came two years later. Thus, it is recommended that the period of significance for the playground should extend not only to the moment of its desegregation, but to the first two years of its use by all groups, prior to such a rule becoming universal.

Park View is also significant for having one of the model field houses developed by Municipal Architect Albert Harris. These small structures were designed for limited indoor activity and administrative purposes (i.e., not field houses in the collegiate sense). For reasons of economy, from the early 1930s the District of Columbia pursued model building types for its various neighborhood facilities, including schools and firehouses. Harris was a primary proponent and implementer of these, known best for his “extensible” school plans. At the same time, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts encouraged the District to adopt the Colonial Revival style in such instances, as derived from domestic architecture, it seemed suited to the scale and character of residential neighborhoods. Further, the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg had a great deal of architectural influence. Although it only opened in 1934, work on the site received much publicity in prior years, and several Washington-area architects had been employed on the project. The District’s park field houses were designed to mimic a Tidewater hall-and-parlor house on the exterior, sometimes in frame, and sometimes in brick, with a full front porch but an open interior plan.

The Park View field house design was unique among the six produced by Harris (one of which has been demolished). While about the same size and form as the others, its exterior has false half-timbering, for compatibility with the Tudor-style, 1916 school next door. Although its front porch was later enclosed with matching half-timbering and there have been some changes to openings, the building retains a fairly high level of historic integrity. Its integrity is comparable to that of the field house at Twin Oaks Community Gardens, and better than that at the Palisades Rec Center (because of the larger addition abutting the latter), but perhaps not as high as Mitchell Park’s.