

CHAPTER SEVEN: RECLAIMING LOST SPACE

A Comprehensive and Contextual Planning Approach for the Eastern Areas of Elysian Park

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"There is no stroll possible! The hateful railroad ... cut off all access to the river-shore, private 'places' run down close to the railroad, and if one climbs the hill to the highway, he finds that fences, walls, hedges, and close huddling houses cut him off from all but a few tantalizing glimpses of the landscape he would enjoy ... (most nearby property owners) have done what they could to shut off the villagers from their one poor chance of recreation."

- Scribner's Monthly,
bemoaning limited access to recreational open
space in pre-Central Park New York City

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As the most isolated and under-utilized area of Elysian Park, Radio Hill needs extensive improvements in accessibility. In addition, due to the historic existence of homeless encampments on the Hill and the limited area available for recreational use, developing a recreational attraction that would interest Park visitors and also accommodate the existing "residents" of the area maybe impossible. At present, both vehicular access roads to Radio Hill are closed. Improved hiking trails do not exist on the Hill, and "back country" access is very limited due to the fact that the Hill is almost entirely surrounded by private land holdings. Unlike Buena Vista Hill, however, it is not recommended that these access roads be reopened, unless there is some legitimate recreational opportunity to be had in the area. Otherwise, the new access could produce unnecessary run-ins with the existing "residents" and provide a very remote, but quickly accessible area for unscrupulous activity.

Because of current limitations on usage, only one specific recommendation is offered, involving proposed development under the Central City North plan. As proposed, the Plan includes an open space link or corridor between Elysian Park, Broadway and the Los Angeles River. The corridor aligns almost directly with an undeveloped piece of street front property that abuts Radio Hill. As one of the of the few open parcels surrounding the Hill, and the only open property joining Radio Hill to Broadway, the parcel would make an appropriate entrance to new pedestrian link to Radio Hill and Elysian Park [Photo 7.11]. This entrance would require substantial physical improvements to the side of Radio Hill, and would need to be developed in tandem with some sort of enticing recreational use to attract visitors to the top of Radio Hill. At the moment, the type of land uses and development densities surrounding this proposed link are not sufficiently intense to justify such an improvement. However, it is recommended that managers and supporters of Elysian Park monitor development and public improvements slated to be made in Central City North over the next decade. At some time in the future, the Central City North area may become desirable enough, and development lucrative enough to support both the social and financial requirements of such a proposal. At that time, Friends of Elysian Park should encourage the Radio Hill pedestrian link as an important public improvement.

Non-park or intrusive uses should not be allowed. The removal of existing intrusive uses and the rehabilitation of impacted Park areas should be negotiated with the appropriate City agencies managing the intrusive use. When possible, any beneficial physical resources left behind by relocated intrusive uses should be considered for re-use as Park visitor facilities. For example, the old DWP Pumping Station near Buena Vista Valley could be renovated into interpretive center as part of a proposal for a Elysian Park/Los Angeles River Park. Supporters of the Park should lobby City government to adopt the proposed open space zoning ordinance and ensure that Elysian Park is zoned entirely as open space. Subsequent development threats to Park open space would then require environmental review, which supporters should use to protect the Park.

Outside real estate development of industrial areas to the north and east of Elysian Park should be closely monitored for potential impacts on the Park. The proposed Central City North Plan presents several ideas that may provide opportunities for increasing access to and expansion of the Park. These include proposals for an open space link between Elysian Park and the Los Angeles River and a light rail transit adjacent to the Fremont Gate. The development of access to the River should be encouraged at the mouth of Buena Vista Valley, across the area that is currently occupied by Southern Pacific's "Bullring" railyard.

Site Specific Recommendations

The main uses of Buena Vista Hill are hiking and scenery gazing. Currently, trails on the Hill are mostly impassable, and vehicular access to the view point has been closed. The only access to the area is on foot, and most users in the area are single men. The area's isolation and the dereliction of its limited facilities have led to a negative or undesirable image of the area. To counter these existing conditions, a number of improvements need to be made.

To improve pedestrian access, hiking trails on the Hill should be completely rebuilt and signed with directions and destinations. Vehicular access to the view point should also be re-opened to encourage the area's use by Park visitors (most of whom drive directly to all Park facilities), but pedestrian access and uses should be given priority over the long-term development of the Point. Social spaces, perhaps including park benches and checker/chess tables should be developed near the entrance to the Buena Vista turn-off, in order to present a welcoming sense that these areas are meant to be visited.

Pedestrian access and passive uses should be encouraged all along the crest of the Hill leading down towards the Fremont Gate lawn area. Sudden and disconcerting changes in landscaping between the formal lawns of the Fremont Gate and the wild, rural environs of the Hill should be mitigated through the development of "in-between spaces" on the small plateaus along this path. These "in-between spaces," as well as a portion of Buena Vista Point should be redeveloped as rustic picnic areas for couples and small groups, with minimal park furniture or amenities.

To improve the visual connectedness of Buena Vista Point and Hill to other parts of Elysian Park and the surrounding community, overgrown vegetation should be cleared away, and view points reestablished. These viewpoints represent opportunities to help Park visitors interpret the surrounding environment, and should therefore include "what you're looking at" displays for each compass direction. In addition to interpreting the existing built and natural environment, these installations could express some of the history of the Park and early Los Angeles development. This form of historic interpretation may be sufficient for these areas of the Park, making traditional "plaque and bolder" techniques unnecessary.

Master Plan should be revised, up-dated and expanded, making use of a comprehensive and contextual planning approach similar in scope and methodology to *Rebuilding Central Park* plan discussed in this chapter.

The rich history of Elysian Park, and its long standing relationship with the social and economic development of Los Angeles should be preserved and commemorated throughout the Park. The historic interpretation of the Park should be integrated with the programs of the El Pueblo State Historic Park in an effort to present a clearer and more unified expression of life in the built and non-built environment at the time of the Pueblo's founding, and in the early years of Los Angeles. A long-term goal for park supporters both in Los Angeles and the rest of California should be to encourage the development of a state-wide park program similar to New York's Urban Cultural Park program. Elysian Park, along with El Pueblo, would be a natural candidate for becoming a cultural park based on life in a Spanish settled Pueblo.

In addition to the historical interpretation of the Park, all new development or renovations of existing areas should evoke the sense of time and place produced by the Park. Contrasts between the wild, rural landscape of the Park and the order and urbanity of the surrounding built environment enhances this feeling. Environments that encourage temporary feelings of being lost or isolated can similarly help to underscore the peculiar specialness of stumbling into unexpected treasures of space, place and time in this large urban park. Designs for renovated Park areas can encourage this feeling of the unknown through chance arrangement of developed and undeveloped park spaces.

One possible improvement along these lines would be to improve visual connections between the Park and the Pasadena Freeway. Landscape renovations could improve sight lines both from the Park and Freeway, and dramatic nighttime lighting could be designed to highlight tunnel entrances and extraordinary Park features. For Park users, these improvements could accentuate the exciting counterpoint of the Freeway's motion and activity in comparison to the passive uses of the Park. For Freeway commuters, the improvements might bring Elysian Park into the forefront of drivers' experience during their brief trip across its eastern edge.

To expand use of Park facilities both among current users and among Los Angelenos now unaware of Elysian Park, marketing and education programs should be developed that target potential users from the local community and larger region. All program information should be available in Spanish and Chinese, as well as English, in order to encourage continued and expanded Park use both among traditional user groups (Latinos and Asians) and new user groups (Whites and African-Americans). In keeping with its less developed, more rural nature, and the limited capacity of its facilities, the eastern areas of the Park should be planned for use by small groups, couples and unrelated individuals.

Just as marketing should be encouraged to increase "mental access" or awareness of Elysian Park, so too should circulation systems be improved to increase physical access to the Park. Automobile access to all improved areas of the Park should be continued, and should be used as a technique for reclaiming under-utilized or remote areas for use by Park visitors. Both Buena Vista Hill and Radio Hill present opportunities for applying such a revitalization. Also, the popular practice of "parking and sitting" should continue to be encouraged, through the creation of roadside turnouts. Pedestrian access should be improved from Broadway and surrounding residential areas, as well as between eastern areas of the Park and the main Park. Sidewalks along Park roads, or separate pedestrian paths, should be developed in all parts of the Park. The preservation, extensive renovation and publicizing of the existing Pasadena Freeway pedestrian sidewalk should be encouraged. In the case of established areas, pedestrian circulation should take precedent over vehicular access.

to the Point, the area could be regraded slightly, and a small meadow developed for picnicking (this was also a recommendation of the 1971 Elysian Park Master Plan). This would further preclude direct access to the Point by auto, but could serve the same function of improving user access to the area, and result in better utilization and image of the Point as being a safe and desirable Park area.

Central Park recommendations regarding facilities that do not exist on Buena Vista Hill could be used as resources for the types of improvements that may be appropriate for this and other areas of the Park. The renovation of benches is mentioned, and this chapter has stated a need for better social spaces on Buena Vista Hill (see existing conditions section), so perhaps a series of sitting places should be developed in the area. Similarly, the absence of any rest room facilities in the eastern areas of the Park was mentioned earlier in the chapter. The Great Hill recommendation that the "comfort station should be reopened" might prompt one to think about developing such a facility for the Buena Vista Hill area. Finally, the recommendation for renovating the stone steps leading up the Great Hill could be incorporated into a recommendation for expanding the existing limited network of stairs on Buena Vista Hill, perhaps as a way of improving access between the Fremont Gate lawn areas and the Point. The idea of a series of grand steps was also identified as a potential way to provide better pedestrian access from Broadway to Radio Hill (see discussion under proposed "Central City North plan," above). While it would be most advantageous to develop a *Rebuilding Elysian Park* plan based on the Central Park precedent, this section has shown how, in its absence, the New York City plan can be used as a resource for comparisons and good ideas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter has discussed many aspects of planning for Elysian Park. Existing conditions in Elysian Park East were detailed and precedents for developing a comprehensive and contextual planning technique for large scale historic and recreational resources like the Park were discussed. The danger of continuing to allow areas of the Park to remain under-utilized and vulnerable to intrusive non-park uses was addressed, as was the very related discussion of development pressures both inside and outside the Park. Finally, a recognition of how large urban parks share similar problems and how they might share similar solutions was forwarded through the comparison of Central Park's Great Hill and Elysian Park's Buena Vista Hill. Based on a synthesis of these discussions, a series of recommendations is proposed below.

Elysian Park Planning Objective

Elysian Park is a valuable open space and recreational resource. Managers and supporters of the Park should encourage on-going improvements to the Park that encourage increased physical, mental and visual access to the Park. Traditional passive recreational uses should be encouraged in the Park, and its social, cultural and historical significance to the development of Los Angeles should be expressed both through physical improvements, education and marketing programs.

General Recommendations

All future planning for and improvements to Elysian Park should encourage the renovation of existing facilities and the development of new facilities that are in keeping with the traditional passive recreational uses of the Park. Managers and supporters of the Park should lobby for a sufficient capital budget to renovate at least 50 acres of park land each year, beginning in the highly neglected eastern area of the Park. As a guide to this renovation program, the 1971

developed park areas that will be used as case studies for this comparison. Both areas discussed are relatively isolated parts of each park, and areas that were once finely developed and well used vista points and scenic turn-arounds for their respective park's carriage roads. Both areas served primarily passive recreational uses.

On the Great Hill these passive recreation uses were facilitated through a large (1.1 acre) meadow that could be used for picnicking, and on Buena Vista Hill, through the existence of rural hiking trails and a parking area for enjoying the view from one's car. Over the years, both were passed over for maintenance for long periods of time, deteriorated and became under-utilized and unknown by park users as a result of this neglect. Physical neglect and the resulting dereliction in both examples has led to similar outcomes for the park areas. Abandoned and vandalized recreational facilities and wild plant cover has produced an image of these areas as being outside the useable areas of either park. Physical location and topography, like the state of overgrown landscaping, also played a role in both areas' declining level of use. Indeed, Central Park planners cite "the Great Hill's (steep) topography and overgrown vegetation (as factors that) tend to isolate it from the surrounding Park," resulting in light use by park visitors.¹⁰

The existing conditions section of this chapter mentions similar problems of topography and unruly landscaping as reasons for Buena Vista Hill being under-utilized. The 1971 Elysian Park Master Plan also recognized this problem when suggesting that "deep brush be cleared out to allow views and to discourage anti-social behavior."¹¹ In both cases, overgrown vegetation and obscured views produce a negative image for the areas, leading to their under-utilization. On Central Park's Great Hill, a simple program of tree pruning and underbrush clearing, combined with removal of derelict play facilities and renovations to other park equipment and facilities (benches, rest rooms) has begun to reclaim the area for park use. Other recommendations that have been made for the improvement of the Great Hill may also be appropriate for Buena Vista Hill, including:

1. Benches should be placed at intervals around the concourse.
2. The comfort station should be re-open for summer use.
3. All of the stone steps of the 106th Street stairway should be reset.
4. Existing pockets of open space should be maintained and gradually increased, especially along pathways and on the south slope. Meadow fingers should be established in some areas of the present woodland and edge areas.

Where similar facilities already exist on Buena Vista Hill, these recommendations can almost be used exactly. For example, the last recommendation suggests softening the edges between the "natural" and "formal" landscapes of the woodland and the meadow. Thus, edges of adjacent areas remain less defined, the slightly wild wooded areas are perceived as a less threatening change to the ordered open space of the meadow, and park visitors feel comfortable and welcome using both areas freely. Elysian Park faces a similar problem on Buena Vista Hill, where the differences between maintained lawn areas and wild woodlands have become so marked as to create visual barriers almost too strong to cross. Fortunately, a series of plateaus exist along the southeast face of Buena Vista Hill that could serve as intermediaries between the ordered, formal open space of the lawn and the random, naturalistic spaces of the woodland. These slightly less formal spaces could be used to lead from the lawns, along a well marked trail, to the top of the hill at Buena Vista Point. To tie in with this improved access

Cultural-Historical Landmark. The re-routing may also increase traffic through the Park, as it provides a more direct and high speed alignment through the Park to Chinatown, the Harbor Freeway and Downtown Los Angeles. In addition, the widening would further encourage commuters to use Stadium Way as a by-pass to downtown Los Angeles, increasing noise and pollution within the Park. The proposed widening of the southbound Pasadena Freeway would take an existing pedestrian walkway that serves to connect fragmented sections of eastern Elysian Park, as well as isolated residential neighborhoods. While it is somewhat under-utilized at present, its loss could further preclude access improvements that might improve circulation through and use of these neglected Park areas.

The Elysian Park Master Plan of 1971 attempted to plan for some of these neglected areas. Unfortunately, some of its recommendations were made outside the realm of what was politically possible, and only a few of potential improvements it suggested have been implemented. The most substantial of these implemented improvements has been the construction of the Grace E Simons lodge (now the only lodge, after the original burned down), and the redevelopment of Buena Vista valley into a picnic and passive recreation area. Some of its other long-term recommendations are outlined below:

1. Encourage passive uses throughout the Park.
2. Improve at least three of the six major entrances to Park through the use of appropriately designed signs.
3. Improve trails, both on fire roads and on smaller hiking paths. Improvements should be made in terms of rustically furnished rest spots.
4. Parking should be spread throughout the Park, in small pods. Some areas of the Park should be off limits to autos.
5. Entrance off of Broadway to Buena Vista Hill should be enlarged and parking areas provided. The top of Buena Vista Hill should be leveled, a meadow developed and picnic area installed. Underbrush must be cleared away to facilitate views from the point and to discourage "anti-social" behavior.

Unlike *Rebuilding Central Park*, the Elysian Park Master Plan does not make specific recommendations for each area of the Park. Instead, larger precincts of the Park were discussed (Buena Vista Hill, Solano Canyon, Reservoir Site, Upper Plateau, Chavez Ravine and the Old Lodge), with the remainder of the Park covered in a generalized section covering a series of plan elements (i.e., circulation, lighting, parking, etc.). Surprisingly, Radio Hill, the Park's most neglected and isolated area, was not mentioned at all. Indeed, an up-to-date analysis and planning needs to be done for the eastern areas of the Park, including Radio Hill and Buena Vista Point before any further improvements are made to the Park.

COMPARING POTENTIAL: CENTRAL PARK AND ELYSIAN PARK

Rebuilding Central Park is a high quality planning document, and might be an appropriate standard against which to measure future planning work in Elysian Park. This section will compare two very similar areas in both parks and attempt to show how some of the ideas developed in the Central Park plan might be applied to Los Angeles' Elysian Park. Central Park's Great Hill & Buena Vista Hill in Elysian Park are examples of similarly sized and

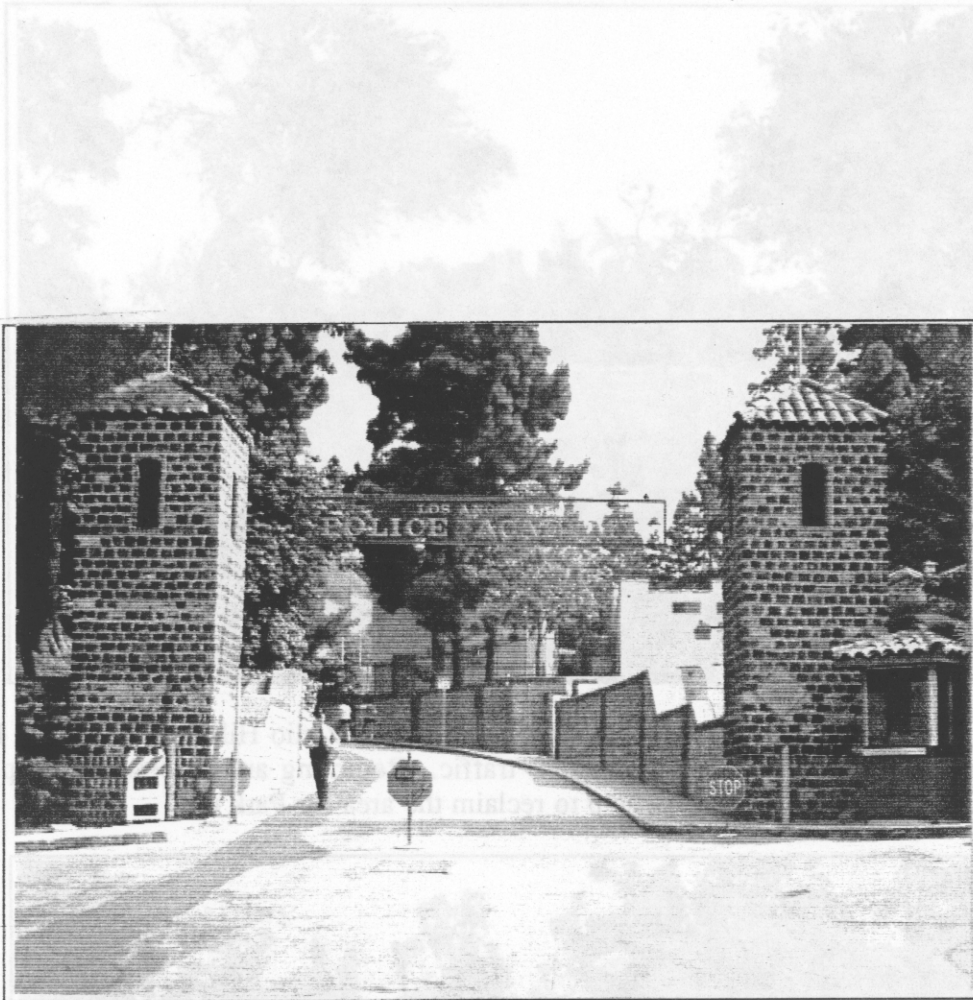


Photo 7.12: The historic gates to the Los Angeles Police Academy mark the potential site of a new Police Academy three times larger than the existing facility

Photo 7.11: This undeveloped piece of property along Broadway could become the entrance to a pedestrian link up the ravine to the top of Radio Hill (seen in the background). After the development of Central City North has substantially increased commercial and residential densities in the area, this improvement might be a very reasonable way to encourage better use of Elysian Park in an increasingly urban environment.