

# Fun City

Dispelling misperceptions about playgrounds and green spaces in urban areas. **BY ROBBY LAYTON AND TERESA PENBROOKE**

**P**lay affects people's lives in many ways, benefitting physical, mental and social wellbeing. The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights considers play so important that it has officially recognized it as a fundamental right of every child.

Play also has a role in shaping our cities. Recent demographic trends show a migration from the suburbs back into the central cores of America's cities. This is good news to those who believe that dense development is healthier and more sustainable than the sprawling growth patterns of recent decades. Others remain skeptical, believing that the migration back into downtown is a temporary trend and that families will continue to seek suburban lifestyles, at least in part because dense neighborhoods lack adequate places for children to play. Conventional wisdom holds that children in the city have limited opportunities to play outside compared to their suburban counterparts.

Having a place for their children to play certainly affects people's choice of where to live. If parents are concerned that there is no place for their children to play in a dense, urban neighborhood, they are less likely to choose a home

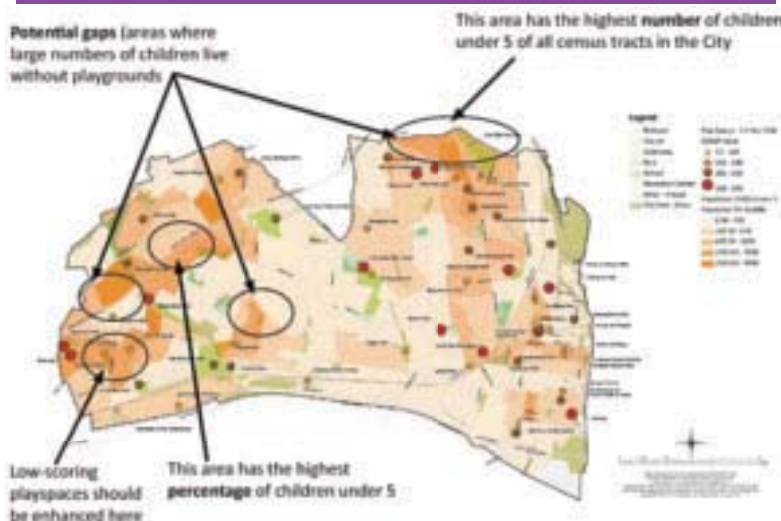
there. As a result, families who live in the city are often there to be near jobs and human services, or because they can't afford to live elsewhere. People who choose to live in dense neighborhoods seem to be mostly aging empty-nesters and hip young adults without children. The ripple effect of this self-limiting demographic is for cities to become less responsive to the needs of families and increasingly undesirable to them.

Further impacting people's choice of residence and perception of cities is a concern for safety. Crime is the biggest fear for many would-be urban dwellers. There is a belief that dense areas are less safe, but recent research indicates that the rates of violent death — those that result from serious injury of all types — are actually lower in high-density areas.

If cities are to become diverse, vibrant and sustainable places, people of all types, including families with children, must see them as desirable places with a full range of amenities, including safe places to get outside and play. For this to happen, differences between perceptions and reality need to be sorted out.

## URBAN VS. SUBURBAN

So what is the reality of urban versus suburban living? A recent study conducted by graduate students in the College of Design at North Carolina State University, looked at census tracts in Prince George's County and Montgomery County in Maryland — two counties in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area that have a wide range of densities. The study compared the availability of playgrounds within walking distance of home for people living in areas ranging from most dense to least. The study found that the chances of having a playground within walking distance of home in the densest locations were equal to those in the places with typical suburban densities. In addition, the higher-density locations averaged twice as many places to play as areas with median or low density, and those playgrounds tended to be closer to home than ones in the less-dense neighborhoods.



Component-based analysis with a Geographic Information System was used in a 2012 study to analyze and improve access to play spaces throughout Alexandria, Va.

The unpublished study referenced in the article was conducted by graduate students in the College of Design at North Carolina State University. They hope to publish the results in the near future.

**Probability of having selected amenities within walking distance of home:**

AMENITY	HIGHEST DENSITY LOCATIONS	MEDIAN DENSITY LOCATIONS	LOWEST DENSITY LOCATIONS
Playgrounds	60%	60%	10%
Picnic Shelters	15%	27%	5%
Sports/Play Courts	45%	45%	0%
Sports Fields of All Types	10%	50%	0%

**Average quantity of selected amenities within walking distance of home:**

AMENITY	HIGHEST DENSITY LOCATIONS	MEDIAN DENSITY LOCATIONS	LOWEST DENSITY LOCATIONS
Playgrounds	1.2	0.55	0.1
Picnic Shelters	0.15	0.27	0.05
Sports/Play Courts	0.8	1.14	0
Sports Fields of All Types	0.1	1	0.1

One of the factors behind the migration of people back to the city is the desire to live a life less dependent on the automobile. Walking has been found to lead to longer, healthier lives. It's a lot safer than driving, too, and even more so in cities — a study from the University of Pennsylvania found that the overall rate of deaths due to injury was significantly lower in cities than in rural areas. This is attributable in part to the much lower incidence of vehicle-related deaths in cities than in suburban and rural areas. In other words, a child is much safer walking to a playground in the city than riding to one in a car in the suburbs.

Cities offer great opportunities for families that want to live a lifestyle based on walking and playing outside. The parks and play spaces are already there in many cases. Thriving cities recognize that investing in play and green spaces increases property values and the desirability of urban living. Raising awareness of what already exists and improving the shortcomings of green space in the urban core can play a role in shaping the future of our cities, making them diverse, vibrant places.

Accomplishing this is a challenge for planners and recreation professionals, and sometimes a political hot button when funding resources are deemed scarce. One option available to planners is the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to show graphically and quantitatively exactly what parkland is available in a community, as well as the availability of access systems (walking, biking, driving). A component-based inventory can be used to digitally track and map not only where all of the parks and other green spaces are located, but also each component within them (playgrounds, ball fields, benches, open space, water access). This allows for qualitative analysis that shows how those components are functioning and provides a quick portrayal for community decision-makers as to where the gaps may be when compared to community needs analysis.

These component-based inventories allow planners to look at comparative levels of services for all types of needs in a community. Having a strong, proactive approach to ensuring that not only are there play and green space areas, but also that community members know about them, is paramount to creating a thriving healthy culture where people want to live. @



**If cities are to become diverse, vibrant and sustainable places, people of all types must see them as desirable places with a full range of amenities.**

Of course, this does not mean that everyone should pack up and move right away to the middle of the city. The NCSU study found that while people in the densest areas have more playgrounds nearby, they also have, on average, less total acres of parks and green space within walking distance of home. In particular, the dense areas have fewer large sports fields, which are typically found in the suburbs. So if play to you means a game of soccer, then you may want to stay in the suburbs, and if perceptions of crime and safety still frighten you, you probably won't use the abundance of playgrounds available in the city anyway.

**URBAN MYTHS**

While such perceptions may exaggerate the reality of the risks, their effects on the decisions people make are quite real, and they need to be addressed if an urban living environment is to become the choice of more families.

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