Sustainable Playground: Promoting Social Cohesion

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Overview:

The sustainable playground model was designed to include multiple unique playgrounds placed strategically throughout the Northside community in Spartanburg, South Carolina. The idea behind the sustainable playgrounds are that all the materials used are made from sustainable materials. These sustainable materials may be organic, coming straight from the community in the form of trees, tree stumps, etc., or recycled or reused resources, such as recycled tires or repurposed plastic. Each of these playgrounds would be equipped with not only playground equipment, but also benches, picnic tables, and public restroom facilities. They can also have educational signs that teach visitors about the playground's system of sustainability, the use of organic and recycled materials, other ways to be sustainable at home, and any historical or cultural significance that the area might have. The playgrounds placed around the Northside community would all be connected through the use of trails. At each playground, there would also be a map showing where the other playgrounds were located in the community, promoting members of the community to explore their neighborhood. The ultimate hope for this playground model is that they can be easily used by the community and adapted to fit where they are needed. They don't have to be big, expansive playgrounds with parking lots surrounding them, they are meant to fit into small pockets of green space that can be located where the community wants them. Overall, this model is meant to benefit the community in three ways: economically, environmentally, and socially.

Background:

Our experience with the Northside Development Project began at the beginning of January when we met with the Director of the project. We took a tour of the Northside and learned about the ongoing plans for renovation and rehabilitation. Afterwards, we formed a team tasked with the mission to create a sustainable model that addressed the challenge of social cohesion within this transitioning community. We did initial research into the idea of having multiple playgrounds placed throughout the community that would encourage families to explore areas they otherwise wouldn't go. This idea seemed like the most efficient and low-cost way to facilitate interaction between mixed income
families. Our time researching sustainability efforts in Hawaii gave us the tools to make these playgrounds environmentally friendly. After seeing all of the creative ways that the Hawaiians implemented recyclable and organic materials, we felt confident that the Northside could benefit from this strategy as well. Overall, our current model for the sustainable playgrounds was heavily influenced by the urgent need of the community and our research in Hawaii.

Need:

The main problem that we are attempting to address is the issue of social cohesion within a community, specifically in the Northside of Spartanburg. The flow of interaction between residents, tourists, children, workers, and students is important to the success and overall growth of the area. There is a need for an area or a group of areas that will promote and encourage these interactions to create a more social, interactive community. With the recent addition of the medical school and construction of new mixed-income housing, the Northside is undergoing a period of urbanization and growth. There is a need to preserve green space amidst all of the development to maintain a dynamic, healthy living space which has been brought up by existing residents of the area. In addition to a strong and diverse relationship between the community members and stakeholders of the Northside, there is also a need for a stronger awareness of sustainability and how it may affect the long-term prosperity of the Northside.

In order for a project to be sustainable, it must be implemented in a way that will allow for continual use, and the environment plays a key role in this process. Throughout the past decade, children have been drawn further away from nature and closer toward the realm of technology, slowly creating a divide between themselves and the outdoors. There is a growing need of outdoor appreciation and awareness in the youth of this generation. As our world begins to shift, it is imperative that we preserve and educate the community on the importance that the environment plays in our lives. This effort the create a space for children to grow and learn is mainly in response to the residents of the
community expressing their desire for an environment that gives an equal opportunity to their children.

**Solution:**

Our proposed solution to these issues is the implementation of several unique sustainable playgrounds strategically placed throughout the Northside community. The hope is that these areas will provide a sustainable, environmentally friendly place for children and residents from all throughout the community to interact and build relationships. The use of natural resources provides a green alternative to preserve the area’s green space, and each playground’s unique assets will draw appeal from a variety of people residing in the Northside, hopefully bringing the community together.

Reaching out to existing residents, workers within the Northside Development Project, local business owners that may have stake in the project, as well as any investors or programs involved in possible funding will be our first step in executing this solution. In collaboration with these contacts, we then must figure out which areas will yield the highest success in social cohesion. We then would contact public institutions such as the library to see who might be interested in funding the project in return for recognition. Obtaining supplies from local recycling centers, car shops, etc. will be how we acquire the necessary materials to build the playground. We can look to areas in the Northside that will need to be cleared of trees for development and use those materials as well. Once the areas for construction are set, we can begin to build the structures. We would need to funding to pay workers for this task, but hopefully costs would be covered through public funding and grants. There is also an opportunity to have volunteers from the community and surrounding schools to help build the playgrounds, which would cost significantly less. Once the playgrounds are set, their existence would need to be advertised through school announcements, newspaper articles, fliers, websites, and, of course, the Voyagers. The community would then be able to use the area at their leisure for socializing and recreation. Since these playgrounds are made of natural materials, they are low-maintenance. Maintaining their cleanliness could easily be accomplished through partnerships with volunteer organizations in the community and nearby colleges.
Benefits:

This model for multiple sustainable playgrounds has many benefits for the Northside community. Most importantly, it allows children to take part in friendly, nonviolent play while simultaneously providing them a connection to nature. There are various studies that indicate how important it is for children to be connected to nature. The playgrounds are built into their surrounding environment and there are current statistics that point towards them being safer than the traditional plastic playgrounds. This stems mainly from the decreased risk of children falling off of tall, plastic or metal equipment. These playgrounds are easily incorporated into the community because they have the ability to be custom to any area in the Northside. The playgrounds are not meant to be massive areas, rather they make use of an otherwise unusable space and ultimately make the Northside more attractive. The benefit of using natural materials creates a green space that inevitably increases the property value of the area. There are also opportunities for education within the playgrounds because each playground will incorporate interactive signs that teach children about nature and sustainability. Sustainable playgrounds are also cost efficient. They last longer than traditional playground equipment and also have lower maintenance costs. Because of this, they leave a lower carbon footprint.

Evaluation:

In order to evaluate the successes/failures of the project, surveys can be sent out to residents of the community, as well as the Wofford Community and employees of the Northside. In addition, a survey can be sent out to Cleveland Academy to obtain feedback from them. Doing this will help determine whether or not this project was successful. The surveys will specifically evaluate whether or not the sustainable playgrounds helped gain a sense of social cohesion. The most important thing to keep in mind is that this model for sustainable playgrounds is flexible and can be implemented over the course of a couple years or all at once. If the Northside decides to gradually implement them, then evaluation will not be possible right away.
Cost:

The cost of implementing sustainable playgrounds is entirely dependent on how the community members want to design the areas. Each playground’s individual cost is variant and could be extremely low if all recycled material is used. Wood to build the actual equipment could either be bought or reused depending on what is the best option. Other equipment, like a slide, would cost around $1,000, but would potentially be free depending on donors and sponsors. Considering that the sustainable playgrounds are supposed to invite social cohesion, it would be appropriate for the execution of their construction to be carried out by volunteers and members of the community. This would eliminate the need to pay multiple contractors to construct the area. Grants from the government are available to help fund the creation of many of the educational and historical plaques and signs that will reside in each playground. The LED street lamps that have WiFi access would also be covered by the city assuming that the Northside decides to incorporate that model. There are many opportunities with local operations in Spartanburg to help fund certain aspects of the playgrounds. There is potential for a natural reading circle made out of stumps and tree branches that could be used by the library. This partnership would work by having the library fund the building of the reading circle and then paying for a plaque that commemorates their donation. Then the library would use the reading circle and be able to contribute to engagement in the Northside. The only cost high-cost element of the playgrounds would be the construction of public restrooms. Making these restrooms completely sustainable using technology that limits water distribution and energy use would cost more upfront. However, the long-term cost benefits, as well as the appeal of having a significantly lower carbon footprint, outweigh the initial spending cost. Plus, if they are already being implemented into the rec center, it would take less research and effort to create them near the playgrounds.

Helpful Links:

http://naturalplaygrounds.com

http://richardlouv.com/books/last-child/children-nature-movement/
http://www.organicplaygrounds.com