



An Uphill Battle

Winning strategies for recession, drought, resilience ... and play

BY DALTON LAVOIE

In 2006, the housing bubble burst, and few places in the country were hit harder than California's Central Valley. Grand visions of verdant communities vanished in the blink of an eye.

In one instance, complete designs for a unique park site in a new subdivision were reluctantly "parked" on the shelf of the Cordova Recreation and Park District (CRPD). In 2014, the economic engine finally turned over, but the park budget's steady idle had lost some significant value during eight years of inflation. Recession-weary but undaunted, park staff at CRPD dusted off the plans and called in the support of the Stantec landscape-architecture team in charting a course through this challenging terrain.

When reviewing the eight-year-old design, one thing was obvious—it simply would not work in the current environment. Too expensive. Too thirsty. Too bland.

So, how does one redesign a cash-strapped park on a challenging site to be a recession-proof, drought-tolerant, destination park? One word: creativity.





MAKE TOPOGRAPHY AN ALLY

Hillside Park is in the flat lands of a new subdivision of Rancho Cordova. The eight-acre site is about 30 minutes from the state capitol in Sacramento, two miles from the nearest park, and roughly 15 feet below street grade.

Hillside Park is literally a hole in the ground.

And there's a fantastic reason for that. From its inception, the park site was an integral component of the storm-water management and open-space program for the community. It has function: storm water needs a place to hang out when it rains a lot—and a hole in the ground is the perfect place.

CRPD established early on that the “hill” was to be treated as an asset. It was a win-win: saving money on grading and stairs while providing a unique feature.

Using the site's natural “challenges” (accessibility, visibility, safety) and viewing them as “assets” created opportunities for CRPD and the design team.

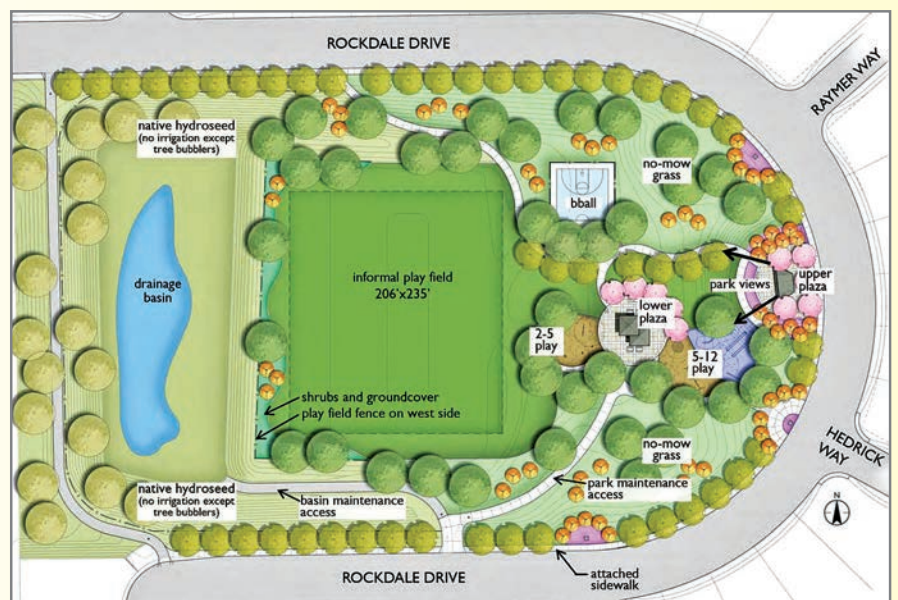
First, the hillside and flat-land play spaces were integrated with some rolling topography to deliver the accessible paths of travel to the playground, lower picnic area, and play fields. This rolling topography not only made for a natural, pleasant entry experience, but also helped increase visibility/safety while integrating the park landforms with the adjacent open-space topography. In fact, many of the site's features were unified using colors, forms, plantings, and textures that visually incorporate the design with the rolling open spaces. The design language

and color palette were coordinated to create a modern natural style that complements the surrounding community while maintaining a distinct park appearance.

The signature feature of the park is the hillside play area. It is, after all, called Hillside Park.

The play area offers a wide range of experiences and challenges that are unique in the region. The hill was thoughtfully planned to be accessible from the top with fence openings at the concrete slides. Although the fencing was not required by code, the fence was included to increase public safety by making sure that bikes, strollers, and wheelchairs are directed to the proper entry point.

The park includes dual concrete slides on a 30-degree slope. The hill was designed for the maximum slide slope and





WHETHER IT'S THE 30-FOOT DUAL CONCRETE SLIDES, THE UNIQUE PLAY STRUCTURES, OR THE NO-MOW GRASS, ALL OF THE FEATURES OF HILLSIDE PARK'S PLAYGROUND ENCOURAGE USERS TO INTERACT WITH OTHERS AND JUST PLAY.



coordinated closely with the slide manufacturer. The resilient rubber surfacing was placed on a gunite subslab to stabilize the slope.

SAVE FOR A (NOT SO) RAINY DAY

As the project recovered from the hand dealt by Wall Street, there was trouble brewing in the Pacific: drought! It's a continuing challenge.

Some researchers say that 2014 was the worst drought year in California in more than 1,000 years. The state was rapidly mobilizing into crisis mode, and by early 2015 Gov. Jerry Brown issued the first-ever, statewide, mandatory water reductions. Everyone was trained to reduce water use in the landscape.

At Hillside Park, the solutions, including drought-tolerant, native/adapted plantings, low-flow and drip irrigation, and a weather-wise controller, are all consistent with the state's Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance (MWELO). The results are significant. The park uses half as much water as the district's traditional turf-covered parks, three-million gallons less per year than what is required by the state's water-use regulations. That's not just drought-smart; it adds resilience to the water-infrastucture system.

The most significant move to reduce water use, construction costs, and maintenance requirements was the conversion of large areas that typically would have been planted as turf grass or shrubs to no-mow fescue. This move alone reduced water consumption by 30 percent and labor and materials by

50 percent, and eliminated three-season fertilizer applications, weekly mowing, and the need for bark replacement. Functionally, the no-mow fescue effectively stabilizes the slopes that hug the park perimeter. Aesthetically, it provides a more-natural setting to ease the project into the built environment. Pleasingly, it is being used by the children for unstructured, creative, natural play opportunities.

Sometimes, a seemingly simple solution can have a big impact for a more-resilient future. When the next recession rolls around, Hillside Park will be ready.

Where water was used, we made it count. The two-acre turf area was designed to fit the needs of this growing community by providing for a range of uses and activities. Whether residents are attending soccer practice, throwing a Frisbee, or playing fetch with the family dog, the design provides a sizable, recreational-turf area in the flattest portion of the site.

The district knows there is a need in the community for natural turf—even in a drought. This is it.

MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

In designing more responsibly for the recessions and droughts of tomorrow, we design more responsibly for children today. And to them, parks are for one thing: PLAY! When it comes time to make a splash on a park site, it's almost always the playground that's the key.

In the flat lands of the park play area, the design features the first Berliner TRII structure in the region. A hybrid between

a climber and post and deck, this structure is reminiscent of that favorite refuge of childhood—the tree house. The unfamiliar structure draws children in to explore its unique appearance, encouraging imaginative non-dictated play. The unique play feature introduces new experiences, develops the children’s physical strength, and refines their ability to balance. The colors were coordinated with the rest of the park’s structures and ground planes for a cohesive visual environment.

Adjacent to the main structure, interactive play features include a large tree spinner for small or large groups of children. This feature has proven to be one of the most popular (and accessible) in playgrounds today. It encourages socialization and teamwork while building strength, endurance, and group excitement for many age groups. Other non-traditional elements include a disc swing that can be a group- or individual-thrill experience. This element strengthens group activities, builds friendships, and promotes good old-fashioned exercise.

With the ambition to reach the hill’s “summit,” the children can play in an area that references the area’s natural beauty while building motor skills, providing single or group activities, promoting teamwork, and developing communication skills.

Among the hillside elements is a challenging ladder to develop balance, core strength, and communication. The resilient rubber surfacing represents bands of native wildflowers

in bloom while the meandering blue mounds reference water rushing down from the distant Sierra Nevada Mountains. The rubber spheres are a playful touch to represent play balls thrown on the hillside. These simple features in their context encourage interaction, climbing, jumping, and balance. From the top of the slope can be seen a panoramic vista of the surrounding community and open space.

DESIGNING FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

Regardless of financial or environmental challenges, kids and communities need places that inspire us, challenge us, connect us to our environment, and remind us to make time for play.

At Hillside Park, a financial upheaval put a project on hold. But creative thinking turned an obstacle into an asset. Creating and maintaining community parks is sometimes an uphill battle, but it’s worth the fight. **PRB**

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