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Excerpts from “Pocket Change: New York’s Vest-Pocket Playgrounds and the Inherited Legacy of Social Reform,” M.A. Thesis, Parsons The New School for Design/Smithsonian Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, 2012.

[EXCERPT FROM INTRODUCTION]

Using language that would have resonated with Progressive reformers, in an April 1966 essay he wrote for *The New York Times*, incoming New York City parks commissioner Thomas P. F. Hoving remarked on the tremendous impact that could be made by small, deliberate gestures: “Like pebbles tossed in a pond,” he wrote, “vest-pocket parks dropped in the middle of a neighborhood can create wider ripples of reform.”¹ His statement spoke to both the small scale and considerable ambition of a new kind of recreation project launched in the city only the summer before. Vest-pocket parks, and vest-pocket playgrounds, in particular, were not simply components of an urban beautification initiative, but well considered responses to the tremendous societal upheaval that had reshaped postwar America and led to urban crisis. Reclaiming the vacant and trash-strewn lots that had become increasingly common in many New York neighborhoods, the organizers of vest-pocket playgrounds sought to not only provide children with nearby and safe places to play, but to mitigate the long-lasting effects that discrimination and poverty could have on an urban community. In this respect these spaces represented a re-ascription to a set of ideals and principles that had impelled the creation of America's first playgrounds, part of an imperative for social welfare that became virtually detached from playgrounds during the intervening decades. The location, planning, construction, and design of the vest-pocket playgrounds introduced in New York in the mid-1960s reflect a primary concern for benefitting the children most affected by the conditions of a city in crisis, and exhibit a profound understanding of all this entailed.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the ways in which New York's vest-pocket playgrounds both adhere to the legacy of America's first playgrounds, developed during the Progressive era, and reflect conditions unique to the metropolis of the 1960s. To this end, chapter one will offer a survey of the early playground movement, considering playgrounds as conduits for Progressive ideology. It will focus on their genesis as part of a wider campaign for child welfare fueled by “the new social spirit” and responding to increasing industrialization, urbanization, poverty, and the prohibition of child labor.

From the mid nineteenth century, Americans began to significantly reconsider the status of children in society. As part of the child-saving movement, laws were passed to limit children's role in the workforce, and to make school attendance mandatory. Numerous initiatives and organizations focused on ameliorating the circumstances of urban children, in particular, such as the Children's Aid Society of New York, proliferated. As society identified activities that were harmful to children, it also distinguished those pastimes it considered suitable and constructive for future citizens. Psychologists, educators and child-welfare advocates debated the nature and benefits of play. The effects of the urban environment on children were also widely considered. The city was not only viewed as a dangerous place for children, but an environment that bred delinquency and depravity, in part because it provided

1 Thomas P. F. Hoving, “Think Big About Small Parks,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1966, 2.

limited opportunities for play. The first urban playgrounds in America were created to offer organized play opportunities to the children most deprived of them, and thus believed to be at the greatest risk of corruption. At this time, playground advocates also began to consider the wider benefits of play, linking it to social equality and democracy. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Playground Association of America was founded to lead a cohesive playground movement, and to determine the most effective ways to administer playgrounds to meet these aims. While programming often took precedence over design, each piece of equipment was thoroughly evaluated for its moral and physical value. As America entered the Great Depression and then approached World War II, however, playground programming was generally abandoned and equipment was standardized. By World War II, while playgrounds had become more common in American cities, they had largely shed their Progressive-era aims.

Chapter two will examine the massive demographic shifts that reshaped American society following World War II and formed the context to which the vest-pocket playgrounds would respond. Particular attention will be given to those factors that had the greatest impact on inner-city neighborhoods – the typical location of vest-pocket playgrounds – and led to urban crisis. The state of postwar playgrounds and key examples of the representation of inner-city children in the media will be used as touchstones to explore the growing awareness of the effect societal changes had on children, and a mounting sense that intervention was required.

The three decades following World War II saw the migration of millions of Americans. As the Civil Rights Movement progressed, generating tension and meeting resistance in Southern states, countless black Americans left the South in search of the economic opportunity, political freedom and tolerance promised by the North. At the same time, the construction of housing developments in the areas bordering major cities drew an increasing number of white families to the suburbs. Unwelcome in suburban housing tracts and in many of the neighborhoods previously occupied by white families, black families moving to the city found themselves effectively relegated to low-income, inner-city neighborhoods, areas whose distress was intensified as a result of the prejudiced federal and private sector policies associated with “redlining.” In addition to numerous other deficits, these neighborhoods made little or no provision for recreation or play. Further, while playground design in Europe was entering a period of experimentation, innovation in America was primarily focused on formal re-interpretation. In Europe, the junk, or Adventure Playground, and architect Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds for Amsterdam's interstitial spaces were playing a role in the postwar reconstruction effort, while in America the most inventive playgrounds at this time were largely inaccessible to children of inner-city, low-income families.

The collapse of municipal economies led to urban crisis in the 1960s, and took on an increasingly racial dimension as some critics blamed the decline on the influx of non-white citizens. Years of virtual confinement to the “ghetto” and the disproportionately negative effect urban renewal projects had on minority communities resulted in mounting frustration. Protests and riots erupted in American cities through the mid- and late 1960s. The discrimination and poverty that met parents was equally felt by children in New York's inner-city neighborhoods. As wider awareness for the appalling conditions of these areas grew, child-welfare advocates pushed to counteract the

marginalization of these children by representing them in literature and media. Despite these efforts, playgrounds remained generally inaccessible to children in the inner city.² An exception were the vest-pocket playgrounds implemented in the city beginning in 1965, which were planned, designed and administered in direct response to the adverse circumstances affecting children in low-income neighborhoods.

Chapter three will focus on New York's vest-pocket playgrounds, considering the ways in which they responded to conditions unique to the city in crisis. Generally built on vacant lots on residential blocks, vest-pocket playgrounds provided children in under-resourced communities safe and close places to play, addressing the lack of access many families in these neighborhoods had to recreation sites. The time and expense required to travel to playgrounds and other recreation facilities outside of the immediate neighborhood was beyond what many families could accommodate. Studies found that children themselves, depending on their age and motivation level, were similarly restricted by distance. As unused lots were more abundant in areas with lower land values, they were readily available to be leased for vest-pocket playground initiatives until they could be developed, giving children nearby spaces in which to play.

The equipment used in New York's vest-pocket playgrounds was also planned and designed to meet the specific needs of the situation in which it was employed. The relatively short life span of a vest-pocket playground meant that equipment was best used if it could be efficiently installed, removed and stored or reused. Further, to have the greatest impact on a community, it should be adaptable to the changing ages and recreation needs of local children. Equipment should also account for the small size of available land parcels. Designers and planners of vest-pocket playgrounds thus concluded that modular equipment that could be easily manipulated and tailored, and that featured few moving parts, was optimal. The aesthetic of the playgrounds was also considered in relation to the socioeconomic status of its users and neighbors to help determine an appropriate model. Finally, community involvement was identified as a key element in the implementation of vest-pocket playgrounds, as many communities had suffered as a result of large-scale urban renewal projects imposed on them. By employing local residents and encouraging the assistance of children, a neighborhood could take ownership of its spaces and mitigate the destructive forces of the city.

[EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER THREE]

Design

The demand for flexibility combined with an awareness of space restrictions and an understanding of the needs of the children for whom vest-pocket playgrounds were built played an essential role in shaping the design of these playgrounds. From the beginning, it was clear that the manufactured steel equipment found on most city playgrounds was unacceptable. Instead, designers such as Friedberg determined that modular building systems would

² While playgrounds were generally included in large-scale housing schemes, this discussion will focus on inner-city neighborhoods in which blocks are largely populated by older tenements, townhouses and brownstones.

be most successful. This was in part due to the short planning and construction periods inherent in vest-pocket playground projects, which resulted from a full recognition of the acuteness of the need for provision of play in the communities in which the playgrounds were implemented. Most vest-pocket playgrounds were thus installed within three to twelve months, a term that was considerably shorter than was usual for playgrounds. Furthermore, the vacant lots on which vest-pocket playgrounds were built were often leased for only a limited period. Friedberg explained:

One reason [empty lots] are not developed is the short period of time they are normally available for public use, an average of two to five years. If a traditional play facility were proposed for such a lot, it would take from one to two years to obtain capital funds and go through the design and construction process. The use of these lots has not, therefore, been considered feasible.³

In consideration of the short time in which vest-pocket playgrounds were planned, installed and made available for use by children, it was apparent that equipment would be most efficient if it were designed to be “removed, reused, and reused again.”⁴ Guggenheimer concurred: “The vest pocket park or vacant lot, which will be used only temporarily, obviously requires temporary equipment.”⁵

Modular playground equipment could also adapt to the changing needs of the community, mainly shifts in age demographics. Children at different ages required equipment that was appropriate in scale and in the activity it elicited from them. Modular playground equipment could be easily removed and added as a neighborhood's children grew, maintaining their interest and continuing to fulfill the original mission of the vest-pocket playground. It was believed that equipment successfully designed to reflect the scale and interests of a specific group could also serve to deter those who were not intended for a particular playground. Teenagers, for example, could intimidate the young users of a “tot lot,” so the equipment employed in playgrounds for small children should be at a scale uncomfortable to others.⁶

In addition to tailoring playground equipment to the time restrictions of the site, to neighborhood demographics, and to the developmental needs of neighborhood children, vest-pocket playgrounds were also designed to take into account the small parcels of land on which they were located. For some, this provided further incentive to break the traditional rules of playground composition and eliminate apparatuses with moving parts, such as swing sets and seesaws, which demanded a large amount of clearance space to safely accommodate their use. In their 1965 book *Child's Play: A Creative Approach to Playscapes for Today's Children*, David Aaron and Bonnie Winawer address this issue, pointing out the inefficiency of the commonly used steel playground equipment. They note that equipment with moving parts can usually only be used by one child at a time. Turn-taking, therefore, required that children not using the equipment pause their play to wait. In response, the authors called for new designs that were more appropriate to the small size of the lot:

³ M. Paul Friedberg, “Systems for Play,” in Paul M. Friedberg, in *Small Urban Spaces: The Philosophy, Design, Sociology and Politics of Vest-Pocket Parks and Other Small Urban Spaces*. Ed. Whitney North Seymour, Jr. (New York: NYU, 1969), 108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵ Guggenheimer, 132.

⁶ Friedberg, “Systems for Play,” 117.

Once equipment that moves is gone from the playground the wide clearance required to separate a swing area safely from another piece of equipment is no longer required. Nothing moves but the children. Once turn-taking equipment is gone, space required around the equipment for children to wait their turns is no longer necessary...What 20,000 square feet could do for children using the traditional playground concepts, 625 square feet will now do for the same number of children while at the same time benefitting them much more.”⁷

Considering their focus on modularity and flexibility, their dismissal of equipment with moving parts, and their intent to allocate small parks in vacant lots throughout the city, play advocates in America in the late 1960s could have followed European examples and introduced the junk or adventure playground to American cities, rather than developing the vest-pocket playground as a distinct model. However, in this respect, too, the designers' approach to vest-pocket playgrounds responded to their understanding of the communities they aimed to benefit. In this instance, the issue did not come down to efficiency and appropriateness of use, but to aesthetics. As much as they were celebrated, from the beginning adventure playgrounds were also occasionally met with consternation and disapproval from neighborhood residents displeased by the unkempt appearance of the playgrounds, which made exclusive use of cast-off materials made shabbier by constant reuse. Pollowy notes the discord that arose when adults' aesthetic preferences were challenged by children's desire for visually rich and compelling spaces and experiences. “One of the major problems that can occur with this approach,” she writes, “is an eventual conflict with the adult value system regarding order, aesthetics, and danger.”⁸ She quotes the experience of an American neighborhood in which an adventure playground was introduced, but not supported by adult residents:

The children were perfectly happy with the materials and may even have thought them beautiful. Their parents and neighbors, however, considered telephone poles and railroad ties as industrial surplus, or as one of them put it, “a bunch of junk.” This aesthetic conflict became the issue which was destined to destroy the project.⁹

Problems arising from conflicting aesthetic values were also quick to take on a social dimension when area residents felt a playground reflected poorly on their neighborhood. For those living in low-income areas such as Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, playgrounds had the potential to offer relief from the oppressive grit and dilapidation of the city. An adventure playground, however, was more likely to contribute to this impression in the eyes of older residents and visitors, and, further, to appear to negatively reflect something of the status of the neighborhood. Residents of these New York neighborhoods felt they were trying to clear the junk from their vacant lots, not add to it. For Friedberg, the use of previously used or salvaged materials in vest-pocket playgrounds took on an additional dimension related to the integrity of neighborhood residents: “pride and identification cannot be built with

7 David Aaron and Bonnie P. Winawer, *Child's Play: A Creative Approach to Playspaces for Today's Children* (New York: Harper & Row: 1965), 72-3

8 Pollowy, 110.

9 M. Spivack, “The Political Collapse of a Playground,” in *Alternative Learning Environments*, G. Coates, ed. (Stroudsburg: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, 1974) quoted in Pollowy, 113.

secondhand materials,” he wrote. “If anything, a deteriorated community with deteriorated morale needs a facility that is *better* than elsewhere, unique, a place of distinction.”¹⁰

As adventure playgrounds were therefore inappropriate in some New York neighborhoods, new forms of equipment were developed that accounted for vest-pocket playgrounds' small size, their use by varying and changing age groups, and the limited planning and construction period allotted to them. While designing the Bedford-Stuyvesant vest-pocket playground, Friedberg identified the need for a “system for play” that could be configured and reconfigured to meet these requirements.¹¹ He elucidated his idea in an essay published in the 1969, following the construction of his vest-pocket playgrounds:

Vest-pocket parks, developed with modular systems, can easily and economically meet the needs of children. By attaching one individual module to others, the playground designer can produce an unlimited variety of forms. The design of the module provides sufficient weight and horizontal surface to eliminate the need for footings and foundations.¹²

Friedberg would realize this modular system in a series of timber forms and panels (fig. 65). Produced in various shapes and sizes that were designed to work together, the timber forms could be arranged simply and on a small scale that would welcome young children, or in complex forms that would challenge older children. Friedberg accompanied his essay with six pages of drawings to illustrate the multiple ways in which this system could be composed. He also suggested a series of accessories that could be added to the wood equipment, including ropes, a periscope, a kaleidoscope, a reflector and a large magnifying glass (fig. 66).¹³ This system could not only be tailored to meet the needs of a neighborhood's children, but could be easily dismantled and stored when the playground's lease had expired, or it could be relocated to another lot.¹⁴ Peterson and the other organizers of the West 128th Street vest-pocket playground concluded that “replaceable wooden play equipment may be superior to the permanent concrete and steel playthings usually found in today's park”¹⁵ for another reason: because children preferred it.¹⁶

Community Involvement

An additional benefit of the modular equipment employed in vest-pocket playgrounds was that it could be assembled by local residents, facilitating community involvement. This quality represents another way in which these playgrounds in particular reflected contemporary concerns and attitudes. As massive urban renewal projects tore through the city with the aim of reshaping and reviving it, residents in inner-city neighborhoods bore the brunt of its

10 Friedberg, *Play and Interplay*, 151.

11 M. Paul Friedberg, “Oral History Interview Transcript,” Charles A. Birnbaum, James Sheldon and Shirley Veenema, ed. (The Cultural Landscape Foundation, October 5-6, 2006; May 22, 2008): 29.

12 Friedberg, “Systems for Play,” 107-8.

13 *Ibid.*, 110-15.

14 *Ibid.*, 109.

15 Peterson, 136.

16 *Ibid.*, 129.

effects. Many were displaced to make way for large scale public works. Others saw their neighborhoods disintegrate under the pressure of rerouted highway traffic or the sudden absence of pedestrian traffic. In response, community activists such as Jacobs called for a groundswell of local participation to “[temper] the technocratic and bureaucratic government policies with new ones.”¹⁷ Noting this phenomenon, and connecting it to recreation, Guggenheimer wrote:

Protesting groups no longer fight the “Boss Tweeds” but rather the professionally trained administrator. Those who seek to meet these challenges will be the masters, not the slaves, of social change only if they mold comprehensive recreation systems truly responsible to the needs of the people. Cities need to search for new ways to meet pressing urban needs with, not for, citizens.”¹⁸

However, some forms of participation were as ill-fitting in New York's inner-city neighborhoods as the adventure playground model. These modes of involvement could have a negative impact on the morale of the neighborhood. Although maintenance was a recurring issue for vest-pocket playgrounds, local residents could not be expected to volunteer their services in tackling this problem. Shiffman notes that residents of low-income neighborhoods, many of whom work long hours and are single heads of families, generally could not afford to devote time to park maintenance. Furthermore, he observed, “the job itself has connotations of all the menial occupations to which minority groups have been so often restricted.”¹⁹ Friedberg similarly notes this issue in *Play and Interplay*. While he stressed the importance of community participation in realizing recreation projects that would effectively meet the needs of residents, he cautioned against a “paternalistic attitude” that expected the community to be responsible for upkeep. He writes: “the myth holds the community responsible: 'If they can't take care of it, they don't deserve it.' At Quincy and Lefferts, though, it was understandable that they couldn't take care of the park: they were working... Residents of New York's fashionable Sutton Place are not expected to take care of a local facility.”²⁰ Thus to burden neighbors with a vest-pocket playground's maintenance would be to undermine the agenda that had led to its creation.

Therefore, sensitive community involvement was integral to the implementation of most vest-pocket playgrounds. Many, including those in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, were built with the assistance of local, oftentimes under- or unemployed residents. Once again, Friedberg exhibits an awareness of the importance of correctly managing this involvement. He comments on the way in which many ostensibly community-oriented initiatives function, noting:

all too often, self-help programs are paternalistic and infuriating. One technique, for instance, is to give a community a carload of secondhand timbers, pay persons who are otherwise unemployed a meager dollar or so an hour, and expect them to develop pride in their labor and respect for their achievement. These self-help programs have not worked. They are based on the Protestant ethic, by which moral virtue follows absolutely from hard work...If all that an unskilled worker can sell is his labor, it is criminal to ask him to *give* it away...grown men should receive grown men's wages...[and]

17 Liane Lefaivre, *Ground-Up City* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007), 54.

18 Guggenheimer, 3.

19 Shiffman, 154-5

20 Friedberg, *Play and Interplay*, 150.

building a man's dignity is more important than building a vest pocket park.²¹

Participating in the creation of neighborhood vest-pocket playgrounds could also be empowering to children, who at this time were increasingly considered disenfranchised members of society. Giving a child the opportunity to assist in the preparation and construction of a vest-pocket playground, and to have a say in its configuration, was believed to instill a sense of ownership over the playground that could extend to the whole neighborhood. As was noted in the discussion on the development of the Quincy Street playground, it could also help ensure the appeal of the play equipment for children, and thus its effectiveness. A 1971 report on environmental design recommendations based on the visual preferences of children also attests to the currency of this thinking. "In all societies children must be considered a vitally important subgroup with special needs," it stated. "As such, their attitudes, needs, and preferences must be considered necessary inputs to the design process, especially when planning is being done specifically for them."²² The same year, a panel at the White House Conference on Youth concluded that "there is a continuing need for better recreation programs serving poor youth in both urban and rural areas," and recommended that "recreation programs, proposed by poor youth themselves, could yield numerous benefits."²³

Designers, and recreation advocates such as Friedberg were conscious of the importance of child participation in the development of sites made for them and they factored it into the planning of their playgrounds. As has been discussed, in Bedford-Stuyvesant local children helped prepare the Quincy Street and Lefferts lots, and participated in the completion of the playgrounds. Friedberg also encouraged them to bring additional construction materials, such as ropes and boards, to add to the equipment once it was installed.²⁴ Two years later, during the development of the Boerum Hill vest-pocket playground site, Friedberg asked children to respond to the theme "What Children Want A Park To Look Like," by illustrating their vision for the space. He would then synthesize their ideas to inspire the park's design.²⁵

Indeed, community participation in the development of the first vest-pocket playgrounds was considered as primary a goal as the creation of the playgrounds themselves. Shiffman frames his essay on the development of the Quincy Street vest-pocket playground, "The Vest-Pocket Park as an Instrument of Social Change," in these terms. His introductory paragraph makes no discussion of parks, playgrounds, or recreation, but instead comments on the growing importance of participation as a means of mitigating the gulf between low-income communities and the organizations established to benefit them, such as government agencies and philanthropic groups.²⁶ Shiffman argues

21 Ibid.

22 Robert L. Bishop and George L. Peterson, abstract in *A Synthesis of Environmental Design Recommendations from the Visual Preferences of Children* Urban and Regional Planning Program Department of Civil Engineering, The Technological Institute, Northwestern University (September, 1971), n.p.

23 *Youth Agenda for the Seventies: A Report on the White House Conference on Youth with a Summary of the Recommendations*, ed. Wade Greene (New York: The JDR 3rd Fund, 1971), 49.

24 Friedberg, "Systems for Play," 108.

25 "House Tour Plants Trees in Brooklyn."

26 Shiffman, 149.

that low-income, primarily minority residents have historically been disenfranchised from municipal government, as opportunities to influence policy have been co-opted by dominant, more affluent classes. He thus sees the development of small-scale civic projects, such as vest-pocket playgrounds, as a means for a community to cultivate its self-advocacy skills, and ultimately to overcome its challenges. Friedberg echoes these notions in *Play and Interplay*:

Physically, it is simply the use of leftover land available in dense residential areas...But in the process the vest-pocket park can do several things of primary importance – mobilize a community and give it a sense of itself as an active participant in its own future; establish the techniques and structure by which the community can move on to make demands and decisions in larger projects; bring jobs and money, dignity and pride, into areas where they have been minimal; train residents in practical skills to give them entry into larger society.²⁷

Finally, at the heart of many of New York's vest-pocket playground projects, particularly the first, was the imperative to provide both amenities – through the construction of recreational facilities – and empowerment – through the fostering of community participation – to the city's minority citizens, chiefly black and Hispanic. A 1964 report by the City of New York Commission on Human Rights entitled “Towards a Social Geography of New York City” divides the city based on socioeconomic status. It lists central and east Harlem, and Bedford-Stuyvesant among the neighborhoods with the lowest socioeconomic status. Further, it states that “the higher the [socioeconomic status] of the tract the greater the likelihood of its being all- or nearly-all white; conversely, the lower the [socioeconomic status] of the tract, the greater the likelihood of its being at least fifty percent negro.”²⁸ It goes on: “the higher the [socioeconomic status] of the tract the greater the likelihood that few or no Puerto Ricans lived there; conversely, the lower the [socioeconomic status] of the tract, the greater the likelihood of its being at least ten percent Puerto Rican.”²⁹ It is clear, then, that if the selection of Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant as neighborhoods thought to benefit from vest-pocket playground projects was related to socioeconomic status, it was also linked to race. A November, 1968 *New York Times* article announcing, “Harlem Dropouts Train To Build Parks,” suggests this association:

Thirty unskilled, unemployed Negro and Puerto Rican dropouts, turning from street warfare to community welfare, are learning how to build vest-pocket parks in East Harlem. Four such parks are projected as immediate by-products of their training for jobs in the construction industry. The training...combines shop work, masonry, carpentry and the reading of blueprints under the direction of skilled Negro craftsmen.³⁰

Implicit (indeed, almost explicit) in this article is the notion that community involvement in vest-pocket playground projects could counteract the negative impact the city had on its minority citizens. Guggenheimer similarly advocated well-planned recreation programs as means to “foster pride in the national heritage of [a] minority group”

27 Friedberg, *Play and Interplay*, 147.

28 Harold Goldblatt and Mildred Zander, “Towards a Social Geography of New York City,” City of New York Commission on Human Rights (August 1964), 17. http://www.nyc.gov/html/cchr/pdf/towards_a_social_geography_of_new_york_city.pdf

29 Ibid., 18.

30 “Harlem Dropouts Train to Build Parks,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1968.

and reflect “the long history and present achievements of the non-white citizens of America.”³¹

31 Guggenheimer, 36.