



## **Introduction to Pogo Park in Richmond**

Pogo Park builds unique parks and playgrounds in Richmond's Iron Triangle, one square mile that is among the San Francisco Bay Area's most densely populated hard-core inner-city neighborhoods. About 6,000 children live in the Iron Triangle; 90% are children of color, many live in households below the poverty line, and more than 50% are obese. Before Pogo Park began its work in 2007, almost all of these children were trapped indoors, with no safe outdoor places to play.

The first Pogo Park, Elm Playlot, is a half-acre "pocket park" in the center of the Iron Triangle. Eight years ago it was a neglected, toxic eyesore. Now it's a magical kid magnet and a visible emblem of community transformation. The single most important element of the work that made this transformation possible was a comprehensive community-based planning process. A string of failed efforts to revitalize and improve the neighborhood over several decades had produced only a feeling of hopelessness among Iron Triangle residents. None of those efforts sparked the kind of change that city planners and urban renewal experts had hoped for. Pogo Park shattered that dismal pattern.

Pogo Park uses a multi-faceted long-term strategy, implemented by community members themselves. The California Department of Parks and Recreation invited us to explain that strategy. We start with local residents, helping them to develop common goals and a shared vision for their public spaces, and empowering them to get these spaces built. Local residents know best how to reach their neighbors. All of our projects are based on the needs and priorities that the communities we work with have articulated for themselves.

### ***The ten key ingredients of Pogo Park's community planning recipe:***

1. **Identify a diverse group of community residents and invite them to be part of the park design team.** Before beginning to rebuild Elm Playlot, Pogo Park identified key community members who were known and respected in the neighborhood and asked them to join its resident design team, the Elm Playlot Action Committee (EPAC). The EPAC team represented diverse races, cultures, ages, genders, and interests, ensuring that the voices and desires of every possible segment of the community would be heard.

2. **Involve the local resident design team deeply in all aspects of the planning, design, and building process.**



Pogo Park accomplishes this in two ways:

First, make it clear that everyone on the local resident design team will be *paid staff members*. After all, everyone else is paid for their work (e.g., city staff, landscape architects, engineers, project managers, and contractors), but community residents (who know their neighborhood best) are commonly asked to participate in the design process as volunteers. Without a committed staff of community residents participating in the process of transformation in a deep and meaningful way, buy-in for the new park is shallow and won't take deep root.

Second, *provide training* to ensure that the local resident design team can truly participate in the planning, design, and building process. The EPAC team toured great parks and playgrounds in other cities. Pogo Park arranged for noted playground designers and landscape architects to show the team examples of great parks and playgrounds from around the world. These presentations allowed the resident team to see beyond the world of cookie-cutter parks and playgrounds into a new world of what is actually possible in playground and park design. Finally, Pogo Park identified local master builder-teachers, businesspeople based in the community who have exceptional abilities in the areas of design, construction, and craftsmanship, and who are willing to contribute their time and expertise to this effort.

3. **Conduct in-depth information gathering in the community.** Pogo Park worked with the EPAC team to develop a comprehensive community outreach strategy—and then hired and trained the team to execute their own plan.

EPAC imagined every potential park user and devised ways to reach out and connect with people from those groups. In the Iron Triangle neighborhood, many African-American children are being raised by their grandparents. The EPAC team worked through churches and local community groups to solicit input from grandparents on how a renovated Elm Playlot could help to support their efforts.

The team also connected with people with disabilities. Richmond has more agencies serving people with disabilities than any other city in Contra Costa County. EPAC identified every agency serving the disabled, went to meet them in person, and collected a wealth of information on how to transform Elm Playlot into an inclusive and accessible park for all.

EPAC did not rely on design meetings at the local community center, where, in a neighborhood of 15,000, only a handful of residents tend to show up. Instead, EPAC went door to door, in person, to canvass every city housing complex, home, business, community-based organization, and city agency within a quarter mile of the project site. Face-to-face canvassing helped EPAC connect with a broad range of key stakeholders and create a database that enabled Pogo Park to keep the community continuously

informed about the park's progress. The team was careful to include children, youth, and seniors in this survey work.



4. If a significant percentage of local residents are not English speakers, **ensure that all communications, written and spoken, are translated** into second languages (in Pogo Park's case, Spanish).
5. **Train the core team of local residents in the techniques of interviewing and surveying** by having them conduct practice interviews and by providing constructive feedback on methods of asking questions and soliciting feedback.
6. **Take careful notes during survey interviews**, transcribe them as soon as possible after the interviews are conducted, and keep a tally of the responses divided into useful categories. For example, we tallied how many residents named each of the following as things they would most like to see in their neighborhood park: swings, slides, sandbox, water play area, clean drinking water, clean bathroom, barbecue and picnic area, baseball diamond, soccer field, handball court, community garden, shade trees, benches, climbing structure, play area reserved for small children, public art, etc. Make a point of telling residents to think creatively and that almost anything is possible if the community works together to make it happen.
7. **Use participatory photography and recorded voices** as a powerful tool for communication and advocacy. (See [www.photovoice.org](http://www.photovoice.org).) Pogo Park worked with a group of 15 Iron Triangle residents (6 African-Americans, 8 Latinos, and 1 Asian-American) for five weeks. Each participant was outfitted with two cameras and took pictures of the things they liked about their neighborhood and its parks, the things they didn't like, and the things they wished to change. The design team met with the participants to review their pictures and record their voices as they described why they took the pictures and what they revealed. (Watch some of these video recordings here: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL69-Yd\\_ykab15CdXPeALe1ucAG8aRhLbG](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL69-Yd_ykab15CdXPeALe1ucAG8aRhLbG).)

The Iron Triangle Photovoice project quickly illuminated many critical issues that needed to be addressed before Elm Playlot could become a safe place for children and families. These included:

- Stop the drug dealing at the house directly across from the park;
- Keep vagrants from using the park to drink, deal drugs, and take drugs;
- Stop vandals and graffiti from destroying or defacing the play equipment and trees;
- Stop the practice of using the park to train dogs to fight;
- Clean up the garbage around vacant homes and in streets and empty lots;
- Transform the vacant houses adjacent to Elm Playlot into homes for families;
- Provide better street lighting;
- Get the police out of their cars to patrol the streets of the neighborhood on foot or bike;
- Offering better recreational, cultural, and artistic opportunities for youth;

- Create a place where the community can come together.
8. **Use graphics creatively to communicate how the new park will look to residents.** To help community members better envision and understand the proposed new park design Pogo Park created (a) graphic renderings of different “zones” of the park and (b) a three-dimensional scale model of the entire park’s layout.



To produce the graphic renderings, the design team took pictures while standing in different locations in the park and created drawings of what they planned to build. These illustrations, drawn from an eye-level perspective, were highly effective in communicating the proposed design to the community. Many people cannot translate two-dimensional architectural design drawings on a sheet of paper into three-dimensional images.

The EPAC team also created a scale model (1' = ¼") of their proposed park design. There was nothing more powerful than to actually see the entire park layout in a 3-D model. This model has also been instrumental in gaining funding for the reconstruction of the park. The drawings and scale model were continually updated as the design evolved over time, so that the community was always informed about changes.

9. **Create “pop-up parks” to inspire children and adults** with the infinite possibilities of open-ended play with “loose parts” and inexpensive materials. Getting new parks funded is challenging. Sometimes the best way to make change is just to start. Pogo Park begins to restore public spaces simply by activating them. It organizes clean-ups at parks that don’t work and provides tables, chairs, and loose parts like balls, blocks, and other toys. It also helps organize temporary installations of sandboxes, murals, and even metal shipping containers that can be transformed into a park office or a cafe. Once a park becomes a safe, inviting place to play, children use it and families feel a sense of ownership. With more eyes on the parks and people in them, there is an immediate reduction in crime and an increase in play. Only then does Pogo Park begin structural renovations.
10. **Build from the inside out.** The traditional “design-bid-build” approach does not work in inner-city neighborhoods. It usually goes like this: a landscape architect comes to a community he does not know or understand, solicits community input at a handful of design meetings, and creates a conceptual site design and, finally, a set of construction documents. The city sends the documents out for bid. The lowest bidder wins the contract—and often brings in a team of workers from outside the community to build the park. Apart from providing a wish list, local people are not involved in any meaningful way. In low-income neighborhoods where many people are idle and desperate for any work, they look out their windows and watch well-paid construction crews build a park “for” them.

Pogo Park does the opposite: it builds parks from the inside out, not the outside in. It starts by working with local residents to envision how their parks can be transformed into

public spaces that better serve the needs of the community, and then by working shoulder to shoulder with them as they create these new parks themselves.



***What were the most effective outreach/invitation methods used to notify residents of the opportunity to design their park? What got the best results in terms of residents showing up?***

1. **Hire and train local residents** to spearhead the community outreach and design process. Local residents can convince their neighbors, friends, and family to come to design workshops. The EPAC team says, “It’s critical to go meet the people where they are rather than having them come to us.”
2. **Put up design tents; stage a Festival of Ideas.** Pogo Park put up tents onsite for several days to enable local people to drop by and see what was happening rather than having to attend a community meeting (which is usually a PowerPoint presentation by a landscape architect or city planner). For the Unity Park project on the Richmond Greenway, Pogo Park organized a consortium of local nonprofits to stage a “Festival of Ideas.” For eight consecutive days, Pogo Park and its partners staffed tents located directly on the Greenway at strategic locations. In the tents residents could draw their vision for the new park and submit their opinions on survey sheets.
3. **Make it easy for local residents to participate.** Pogo Park provides food, child care, and even music, pony rides, and bike rentals to get people talking about and drawing pictures of their vision for the community.

***What were the most memorable moments?***

1. Watching the transformation not just of the park but of the people involved in the planning, design, and building process. They started out doubting their own ability to make the project happen. But the experience of working through puzzles, problems, and conflicting opinions with each other resulted in the blossoming of team members’ inner strengths and confidence in their own abilities.
2. Many of the most memorable moments in Pogo Park’s eight years of work happened in the last year, as the transformation of Elm Playlot neared completion and the neighbors came by every day to congratulate and thank the team. “Never in a million years did we ever think we’d have a park this good in our neighborhood,” said one neighbor. The process of building Elm Playlot has instilled *hope* and *pride* in the community.

***What most surprised us?***

1. That there was no “half-stepping” in the process. The EPAC team went all the way; everyone was dedicated, committed, and supportive of each other.
2. That the bonds between city workers and local residents have grown so much stronger.



3. That the park design process has opened doors to a whole new world, a whole new way of being.
4. Seeing the way the neighborhood has changed, now that Elm Playlot is finished. EPAC Member Carmen Lee: “This park changed the neighborhood into a community.” People are more friendly, and are getting to know each other, finding their common humanity despite coming from different backgrounds.
5. Seeing that the neighborhood kids have changed, too. They are happier, more respectful and courteous. And they have seen, perhaps for the first time, the dignity and pride inspired by work. The kids—especially young boys and youths—came every day to stand outside the fence as the park took shape. They watched their older sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents take part in the building of the park. “When is the park going to open? When will we be allowed inside? We want to work!”
6. Realizing that the park is never finished. It is always a work in progress, in a state of dynamic change. In that sense, it is like a living being.

#### *What would we do differently?*

1. Make certain that the local resident team was involved in the details of every single step along the way without exception. “Anytime we turned our heads,” one team member said, “someone tried to redesign what we did, or made changes because they thought it was what we wanted or needed. That approach was very paternalistic!”
2. Have more say about how the money was spent. We spent more money on outside consultants than we needed. We could have leveraged our grant to raise more in-kind donations and have more money drilled down into the local community—to the people who really need it.

**For photographs, videos, and more detailed information about Pogo Park’s community planning process, see [www.pogopark.org](http://www.pogopark.org) or contact Executive Director Toody Maher ([toody@pogopark.org](mailto:toody@pogopark.org)) or Communications Director Ed Miller ([ed@pogopark.org](mailto:ed@pogopark.org)).**