

Piano, pingpong, Pilates: Can park be transformed?

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By Peter Korn

Programming worked at Director Park; city banks on similar success at Lloyd area's Holladay



On the first night of the latest attempt to make Holladay Park safe and inviting not one chair was stolen. A few had been placed on top of the park's new pingpong table, as if some middle-of-the-night visitors wanted to survey their surroundings from higher up, but no damage was done.

The park's first afternoon fitness class, held at 5 p.m. on a Tuesday, attracted a couple dozen people, most staying for a short while before moving on to the Lloyd Center or the nearby MAX stop.

All of which matters beyond whether a few more people spend more time in Holladay Park, and whether the folks paying for Holladay's improvements — mostly the new owners of the Lloyd Center — have to replace a few chairs or tables or a pingpong table that might or might not get vandalized in time.

For a long while, Holladay Park has been known as a dangerous park, to be avoided by nearly everybody after dark and by women and children during the day. Fourteen-year-old Shiloh Hampton was shot and killed there in 2011. On and off, police have increased their presence in the park. A neighborhood volunteer group called Connected has walked the park on Friday evenings in an attempt to re-establish safety and a sense of community.

Change has been a long time coming to Holladay Park, but it is necessary, according to Alex Garvin, professor of urban planning and author of "Public Parks: The Key to Livable

Communities.” You can’t have bad parks and a healthy city, Garvin says. A park in which city residents don’t feel safe or invited, in Garvin’s view, defines a city in all the wrong ways.

“This is, in effect, creating a gated community for the antisocial because it’s keeping out everybody else,” Garvin says of a park that residents avoid. “It seems to me the very essence of a public park is it is not only available to everybody, but it is used by everybody.”

Pioneer Courthouse Square and Director Park downtown, and Jamison Square in the Pearl District, where hundreds of children frolic on warm summer afternoons and evenings, feel that public embrace on a daily basis. But three blocks north of Director, long-neglected O’Bryant Square sends a different message to visitors, a message of neglect. That’s dangerous, Garvin says. But the reasons why some parks work and others don’t are not always obvious.

Last year the Lloyd Center, along with the Lloyd Cinemas property and its parking lot, were sold to Dallas, Texas-based Cypress Equities. Todd Minnis, chief investment officer for Cypress, says his company sees the fates of Holladay Park and the Lloyd Center as inextricably intertwined — they will succeed or fail together. So Cypress is pumping between \$3 million and \$5 million into Holladay Park alone over the next two years.

If anybody needed proof of Cypress’ commitment to turning around Holladay Park, it was provided when Dan Biederman came to town two weeks ago. Biederman, founder of New York City-based Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corp. (BRVC), is considered the country’s expert when it comes to turning overlooked and dangerous urban parks into city jewels.

In the 1980s he formed a Business Improvement District and oversaw the transformation of crime-ridden Bryant Park in midtown New York. He undertook other successful projects in New York City, including at Grand Central Terminal, and later formed a nationwide consulting company. Those movable green chairs and tables that could be stolen from Holladay Park? Those are a Biederman icon — the very same Fermob chairs he placed in Bryant Park in 1992 when he practically dared the drug users and criminals who had dominated Bryant Park for years



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Big chess (here played by Chelsea Baumgartner and Alex Pickard) is part of the programming and events that have made downtown Director Park a popular family destination. The city hopes that success can be duplicated at Holladay Park.

to make off with them. Today, for \$150, you can get a plaque with your name on the back of one of those chairs.

Park users gain control

Those unchained chairs are a reflection of Biederman's parks philosophy. Just watch one of his parks for a few minutes, he says. Older people move their chairs closer so they can hear one another better. Families sit close for private conversations that can't be overheard. People like turning their chairs around so the sun doesn't hit their faces, and moving them away from spots in the park in which they feel unsafe.

All those people are feeling a measure of control over their personal space, according to Biederman, by being able to move their chairs around. And Biederman sees one other benefit to movable park furniture, day and night.

"There's really a benefit perceptually of having the chairs out there," he says. "People look at it and say, 'I saw those chairs yesterday. They must take those in at night.' And (then) they notice they didn't and nobody pilfered those chairs." At New York's Bryant Park, which had been the site of more than 500 felonies the year before Biederman took over, none of the chairs were stolen in the first year they were put in place.

"If you create a place with social order, (the chairs) will not disappear," Biederman says.

Here's another Biederman tenet — an urban park at all times needs women as at least half its occupants. Women are more sensitive than men to safety issues, in Biederman's view.

"Women notice, and they vote with their feet," he says.

Plans for Holladay Park include increased nighttime lighting and security. Daytime, two people — a park host and a Portland park ranger — will be present. Most of the money Cypress is investing in the park will go toward programming activities that should keep Holladay lively during the day. But Biederman says simply making Holladay safe during the day will not suffice — remaking a park's image is an all or nothing affair.

"You cannot give a park back to the bad guys at nighttime," he says.

Daytime activities should lead to evening programming such as movie nights, and summer programming should eventually lead to winter park activities. Biederman says it took nine years before Bryant Park hosted winter events, but it is now heavily used 12 months of the year, and safe 24 hours a day.

Standing in the middle of Holladay Park, Matthew Jacobs, project manager for BRVC, is watching Day One of programming take effect. Devon Wilson, 24, asks another young man if he wants to stop and play pingpong, and a friendly match ensues. Wilson says he used to skateboard at Holladay but only during the day. He describes the park he had known as "lifeless" and "grimy after dark."

In recent years, Wilson has seen the park as more of an obstruction than an invitation once he stepped off the MAX line. "It was kind of getting in the way of getting to the mall for me," he says.



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - A permanent pingpong table and piano are the start of programming at Holladay Park. Matthew Jacobs, project manager for the New York City-based consulting firm hired to remake Holladay, takes a turn with a park visitor.

Invitation to play

But not today, not with the pingpong table, a playable piano, and a reading library complete with racked newspapers and board games. “If I knew this was here, I’d come here all the time,” Wilson says.

Downtown resident Jason Landes stops on his way to the Lloyd Center and idly asks if anyone wants to play Stratego. He finds a taker, though the game lasts only a few minutes. On this sunny afternoon, three or four children scamper in and out of the bouncing water feature in the center of the park, their parents on benches nearby.

Jacobs is constantly taking mental counts of park users. He looks around and finds 18 women and 10 men, though the women’s count includes children. “I like that, that’s a good ratio,” he says. The usual Biederman 50/50 goal won’t suffice at Holladay, at least not for awhile, Jacobs says. He’s shooting for 60/40 because “this park is reputationally challenged.”

Physically, the primary challenge at Holladay Park is what Jacobs calls the “unactivated perimeters.” All four sides convey a sense of the park being ignored by the blocks around it. Lloyd Center turns its back on the park and so does the Doubletree Hotel to the west. To the east sits the Lloyd Cinemas parking lot — no eyes on the park from there. South provides the MAX tracks. That will take time to change.

But Jacobs says the right programming can start bringing people into the park immediately. He’s held focus groups around town asking people what it will take to make Holladay one of their destinations. A group of housewives in the Beaverton area said they wanted a knitting class. Residents of Holladay Park Plaza, a nearby seniors residence, said they wanted tai chi in the park and offered their own teacher to lead the morning classes.

Much of what is taking place at Holladay Park is based on the success of Portland’s downtown Director Park, where director of programming Alicia Hammock has helped create a second

downtown living room — the designation being first awarded to Pioneer Courthouse Square two blocks away.

National authorities such as Biederman praise the activity at Director Park, but Hammock says it was far from a foregone conclusion that Director would work when it first opened four summers ago. There were a lot of people, including downtown business owners, who thought the mostly concrete Director Park would attract the wrong kind of activity.

The fear? “O’Bryant Square,” Hammock says of the park three blocks north, which has at various times been known as Needle Park and Paranoid Park and has served as a base for homeless people and drug dealers. Except during lunch hours, when the park serves as a dining room for people bringing over their food cart meals, O’Bryant is mostly vacant and rarely populated by women and families.

Programming proves successful

The city had a big advantage in programming Director from scratch, Hammock says. Portland designates \$475,000 a year toward Director Park security and programming. Ten minutes every hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, private security makes a pass through the park. And they have special rules they can enforce (see sidebar).

“We manage this park very tightly, and I’m very aware that if we’re not doing our job every single day this park can flip,” Hammock says.

Director Park has a couple of key design advantages, according to Hammock. It is relatively flat, which means lines of sight are virtually unobstructed. Mothers at one end can see their children just about anywhere in the park. That makes them feel safe. Also, Director Park’s east side blends into the Fox Tower sidewalk across Park Avenue. On both sides of Park Avenue there are no curbs and the paving stones in the street match the paving stones in the park. Practically speaking, this mixing zone, as it is known among architects, subliminally tells drivers that pedestrians have priority and forces them to slow down. It also encourages people standing outside Fox Tower to stroll into the park.

For its first year and a half, Director Park wasn’t all that busy or lively, according to Hammock. “People just came and looked,” she says. “They stood around and walked and asked questions.”

Eventually they began playing at the big chess board in the park’s southeast corner, which in Hammock’s view has become the park’s icon. Even during winter rains, crowds sometimes gather to watch players move 2-foot-high chess pieces around on the ground.

Hammock said that first year was a learning experience for her, and as the parks department liaison with BDVR at Holladay she expects the same trial and error process as Holladay evolves. At Director Park, she says, she learned that programmed fitness classes didn’t work. Especially yoga.

“We had a lot of people who would stand and leer at the women as they were doing their yoga poses,” she recalls. Hammock went through three yoga instructors in four weeks before calling off the classes.

What does work at Director Park, according to Hammock, are “one-off welcoming things” such as music and dance performances. And chess — 80 parents and children attended an afternoon family chess event two weeks ago. The Director Park wading fountain attracts its share of children on summer afternoons and evenings. Last year Director drew 373,960 visitors, up from 291,270 in 2011.

Hammock is curious about those unchained Biederman chairs at Holladay Park. Shortly after Director Park first opened, the metal chairs, tables and garbage cans were chained down at night

after Hammock would come to open the park in the morning only to find somebody had rolled the cans downhill onto the nearby MAX tracks overnight.

The first week at the new Holladay Park, she says, one of the Holladay Park tables was broken and 15 chairs were tossed into the garden area. Last week, one of the chairs was broken and one table had “Stay out of HP” scratched onto it.

Next week: Portland’s neglected downtown park

Developers spend big bucks to reap big rewards

Investing between \$3 million and \$5 million over two years in Holladay Park makes business sense to Todd Minnis, chief investment officer for Cypress Equities, which recently bought the Lloyd Center shopping mall, as well as the Lloyd Cinemas properties just east of Holladay.

Lloyd Center simply as a place for people to shop isn’t a winning proposition anymore, Minnis says.

“You have to create a sense of place today to make a shopping mall succeed,” Minnis says. “If it’s just picking up merchandise, you can do that on Amazon.”

Lloyd Center has a skating rink, which helps establish its sense of being more than a place to buy stuff. But the key to making the mall succeed, according to Minnis, is Holladay Park across the street. The park, Minnis says, will give people a reason to come to Lloyd beyond just shopping.

The Lloyd Center’s relationship with Holladay Park is all wrong, according to Minnis, who says “the mall turns its back on it.” Cypress is going to change that. A \$50 million redesign of Lloyd Center will focus on having the shopping center’s main entrance face Holladay Park. Traffic will be slowed on Multnomah Boulevard to make crossing the street into the park more inviting. A curbside restaurant rather than the current parking garage entrances will face the park.

Minnis foresees a public restroom in Holladay Park and either a coffee shop or a restaurant, much like the one Elephants maintains in a corner of Director Park.

Minnis says the key to keeping Holladay Park safe at night, after the daytime programming and park hosts have gone home, will be “eyes on the park.” Cypress is planning a mixed-use tower where the surface Lloyd Cinemas parking lot currently sits, with apartments looking straight down into the park and residents taking ownership. The ground floor of the development might feature a second restaurant that will sit just across the street from Holladay.

Those apartment dwellers also are going to help keep Holladay safe in the winter, Minnis says, though he hopes for year-round programming in the park. “They’re going to get outdoors,” he says. “They’re not going to stay in their apartments the entire time.”

Cypress has started a nonprofit so that other businesses and nonprofits can contribute to the costs of the design changes and programming at Holladay Park, though Minnis recognizes Cypress will always be the main contributor. That’s because it has the most to gain, if it can increase sales in the Lloyd Center shops. Though Holladay Park is a city property, parks officials are fully on board with the plans, seeing as how they aren’t costing the city a cent. Even the Portland Park Rangers who are stationed throughout the day in Holladay Park now have their salaries paid for by Cypress’ nonprofit.

Mike Abbate, director of Portland Parks & Recreation, says the changes taking place at Holladay Park were things the parks department has wanted to do for years but could not afford. The city has a history of partnering with nonprofits that run programming at facilities such as Pioneer Courthouse Square and the Pittock Mansion.

“This is a little different,” Abbate says. “This is an adjacent property owner saying the park and the Lloyd Center have a relationship and it’s a symbiotic relationship.”

Special parks, special rules

Ever notice how there aren’t homeless people lying around Director Park? Design, programming and privately funded security have played major roles in making Director Park feel safe and inviting, but so have city ordinances that allow police and private security to enforce rules at that park and Pioneer Courthouse Square that don’t apply at other city parks.

Visitors to Director Park and Pioneer Square cannot lie down to take a nap either on benches or other park structures. In places such as Waterfront Park, police have been told that people lying on sleeping bags are within their rights. Only if they are resting in their bags are they considered camping, and can thus be rousted. Balls, Frisbees and boom boxes also are illegal at Pioneer Square and Director Park.

Also, Director Park and Pioneer Courthouse Square have been declared no smoking areas — a designation not placed on other city parks, though smoking is not allowed around park playgrounds.

Those special rules allow security at Director Park and Pioneer Square more leeway in dealing with homeless people who might want to stay for extended periods, or others who might contribute to a sense of disorder.

“Not everyone wants to be checked in on when we see them smoking or their dogs off leash or drinking out of containers,” says Hammock, director of programming at Director Park.

Hammock, who also will be the city’s liaison for programming at Holladay Park, says there are no plans at this point to extend the special rules there.