Luther Gulick Park’s Community Vision
March 11, 2011

PREPARED BY:
The Friends of Gulick Park
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About the Authors

Friends of Gulick Park is a community-based organization working to create a greener, livelier, and safer Luther Gulick Park & Playground. Steering Committee members responsible for compiling the data and writing this report are David Bolotsky, Brian Crowley, Elizabeth DeGaetano, Kim Gledhill, Janet Jensen, Jim Johnson, and David Russo.

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Friends of Gulick Park is a project of the Open Space Institute.
About the Community

Luther Gulick Park & Playground straddles two segments of the community. Immediately north of the park are the Samuel Gompers Houses and Baruch Houses (NYCHA) and the Masaryk Towers (Mitchell-Lama). At the southern edge are private coops, Hillman Housing and Amalgamated Dwellings. The park lies in City Council District 1, but shares a border with District 2 to the north; many of the park users come from District 2.

Given the dominance of high-rise housing around the park and the presence of the 8-lane Williamsburg Bridge, open space needs are even greater than Council District statistics indicate.

- The park is part of City Council District 1, which has twice as many residents per acre of parkland than the borough average.
- Including nearby parks from District 2, such as the large East River Park, we still have 50% more residents per park acre.
- Out of 51 districts, we rank 32nd for parkland per resident.
- From 2004-2009, District 1 was allocated less capital improvement funds than the citywide average.[1]

Luther Gulick Park & Playground has the potential to be the common ground for a diverse neighborhood and to promote an active and engaged community. A first-class, destination park and playground has the power to make this happen.

“A more diverse community is starting to come to the neighborhood. The kids enjoy coming here and meeting their friends from school here. My daughter met her best friend here.”

Lisa Asaveto

[1] All data derived from this New Yorkers For Parks publication:
http://www.ny4p.org/media/1.pdf
About the Park

Luther Gulick Park & Playground, also known as Sheriff or Downing Park, was built during the Depression in 1933 and expanded during the subsequent 20 years. It was renamed after Luther H. Gulick, a tireless advocate for urban green spaces and, above all, play spaces. He argued that providing these for children was essential to their growing up healthy and even moral. Long-time residents still remember the park’s vibrancy—ice-skating, ball games, relaxing on tree-shaded benches, chess and dominoes on the game tables, and a clubhouse with bathroom facilities, classrooms, and sports equipment.

During the civic and economic decline in the 1970s and 1980s, insufficient security and poor upkeep led to deterioration and unwanted behavior. The game tables and benches dotting the southwestern green space were removed in an effort to deter inappropriate activity, leaving unsightly concrete pavers. Meanwhile, the cobblestone paths in this area became extremely uneven and overgrown with unsightly weeds. The building and restrooms had long been closed and subsequently demolished. An Asian Longhorn Beetle infestation in the late 1990s forced the Parks Department to destroy 80% of the trees at the western end leaving the empty tree pits filled with dirt and rubble.

“The oval was sunk 10 inches in the ground. There was a basketball court. In the summer they filled it with water there, and the young children would run around and splash each other. In the winter they...filled it with water and it froze and it was open for ice skating. .. It was really nice”

Laura Bolotsky
Friends of Gulick Park (FoGP) is a community-based organization dedicated to creating a greener, livelier, and safer Luther Gulick Park & Playground. Formed in June of 2009, the group has led an effort for revitalization and rehabilitation. Almost 300 neighbors subscribe to our e-mail updates. We are a liaison between the community and city officials and representatives in a number of ways. First, FoGP reaches out to all our neighbors, directly and through local community groups, informing them of our project, encouraging participation, and seeking their input. Second, we lobby our elected representatives and municipal foundations, informing them that the community values the park, wants it improved, and requests capital funding for its renovation. Finally, we host events to beautify it in the near-term, raise awareness, and connect our neighbors to each other and Gulick Park.

To date we have received support from Ana Luisa Garcia Community Center, P.S. 110, Hester Street Collaborative, Friends of Seward Park, Asian Americans for Equality, St. Mary’s Church, Good Old Lower East Side, Henry Street Settlement/Abrons Art Center, Grand Street Settlement/Beacon Center, The Educational Alliance, Lower East Side Ecology Center, Partnerships for Parks, among other community oriented groups, and a dozen local businesses and entrepreneurs. Institutions participating in our events include The New Museum, Museum of Chinese in America, China Institute Education Department, and American Museum of Natural History.

“This park was a [melting pot]. Everything and everyone. And everyone was welcome. People really got along.” - Bella Langaigne
The community visioning process began with the very first event. On June 4, 2009, 75 community members gathered to recall the park when it was at its best and voice their opinions and hopes for its future, with Parks Department and political representatives listening in. Subsequently we began to collaborate with Hester Street Collaborative and Partnerships for Parks. With their help we have more inclusively and comprehensively gathered our neighbors’ ideas of and for Luther Gulick Park & Playground by utilizing their People Make Parks model.

In April 2010, we began to collect opinions through an on-line survey. A month later on May 16, 2010, we hosted Take Back Our Park Day, inviting our neighbors to share their ideas about the current park conditions and ideas for its renovation. Following the People Make Parks strategy, we developed various activities to engage the community in the process and record their memories, opinions, and suggestions: a large architectural maps of the park on which people could annotate their ideas; stickers to label current good or bad elements in the park; wish objects on which adults and children could write and/or illustrate their dreams for the future renovation; a model making station where individuals create scale models of their ideal park; an interview booth to record memories and thoughts; and surveys available in English, Spanish, and Chinese.
Story Mapping Visioning Activity

Methodology: Several large-scale architectural maps of the park and colored markers were provided. Participants were asked to record their park memories on specific areas of the map.

Results: Sixty four participants, both adults and children, recorded 100 comments on the map. Only five respondents recorded a memory; the balance suggested design elements, activities and events that they would like to see in the park. The results were transcribed into a list. Recurring themes emerged: more greenery, more seating, and restrooms. Ideas for specific areas included public art and murals, sporting competitions, gardening, swap meets and flea markets, and retail vendors.
Story Mapping

Ideas about specific places

- Paint mural on the ground of the fountain – use ideas from local schools
- Add grass area for picnic and to tickle the toes of the little ones!
- Do we need this fence?
- New surface and nets, hoops, and rims for the basketball courts
- Weekend flea market or swap meet

Weekend flea market or swap meet

Add grass area for picnic and to tickle the toes of the little ones!
Model Making Visioning Activity

A site model was built beforehand, with an empty rectangle in place of the entirety of the park from Willett to Columbia Streets. Throughout the course of the afternoon 37 participants made a model of their dream park on a rectangular base, using craft materials and pre-made elements. Once complete, the participant placed their park into the site model to see it in the context of the surrounding buildings, streets and bridge. The facilitator then filmed the participant while he/she explained what they were trying to achieve and why. The data was collected from the videos through transcription and analysis of the participants’ descriptions.
Two levels of information were drawn from this analysis. One was a straightforward count of how many participants chose to place each individual element in the park, such as seating, trees, etc. The other, more telling piece was the larger common goals and threads that came through in the participants’ descriptions, which include program elements as well as overall layout and general ‘sense of place’.
This was the exercise where people began to give form to their vision, in overall organization, sense of place, and specific park elements and program. Although layouts varied greatly, almost everyone took me through a logical series of spaces that were organized with a lot of thought as to their functional relationship to each other, and for fluid circulation from one to the other. People are very aware that the current park layout has no such rationale. Almost everyone would like to see a greener softer park, offering both passive and active recreation, with elements that help to bring the community together. Kids should be considered throughout the park, not just in traditional play equipment, but also woodland exploration, climbing boulders and the like.

"If people want to come together like a community, sit at this long long table, they could do that"

"Shifting the basketball courts to create a precinct of fenced spaces along the bridge side of the park"

"The play area could be a grassy mound in the center with pieces around it to climb over"

"This end is the forest area with a path that goes through"
Methodology: Survey results were collected between April and September 2010, on-line and on paper. In total 115 people completed it, 70% reside in the co-operatives along Grand Street, 18% are from the housing north of the park and 12% from elsewhere in lower Manhattan. Despite being some of the most active users of the park, only 25% of respondents were 13-30 year-olds, while 67% were 31-60 year-olds.

Results: All sections of the park are used or would be if in better condition. Families would like more trees, grass and plants near the playground equipment. Older neighbors and those without children appreciate what’s there today, but would like to be accommodated.

Would you visit more if the park were renovated? 92% Yes 8% No

"The diversity of possibilities: ball games, children's playground, relaxing, sitting." survey comment
By far the most desired improvement is the increase of trees and plantings. This applies to the playground area, too, where “liberal use of cement and wire fences” was noted. Second, renovation of the southwest sitting area for passive recreation options is strongly desired. This ties in with the first result; as one respondent wrote "no activities bring me into the park right now, as it only caters to children and sports lovers. It would be nice if it was more inviting and inclusive."

Two frequently mentioned specific issues are the chain-link fencing and the internal walkways. The fencing, along with the general look of the park from outside, reminded one neighbor of a “penitentiary yard.” The fence, the overly wide sidewalk and the lack of landscaping do not make an inviting impression. Many respondents also think that the lack of internal connections inhibits more robust use of the park. As one put it, "it is divided in such an odd way that it isn't inviting to walk through."

Many respondents of all ages like that there are multiple options for activity--both passive recreation and various active areas.
What do you dislike most?

- lack of plants: 24%
- walkway conditions: 13%
- no internal walkway: 13%
- play equipment condition: 11%
- homelessness/safety: 13%
- ball court condition: 10%
- noise: 10%
- other: 6%

Many people wrote in about the park’s fencing: "It reminds me of what New York used to look like in the 70’s."
Mark Your Park Visioning Activity

The objective of the Mark Your Park exercise was to give local residents in the community an opportunity for on-site identification of their likes, dislikes and desired changes to the existing park. Participants were given color-coded stickers, with each color representing their position on what currently exists in the park. They were asked to put the stickers on items in the park they wanted to keep, wanted to see fixed, or wanted to remove.

Approximately 20 individuals and families participated in the activity. The family participants consisted primarily of a young child accompanied by a parent. Each participant was initially given a total of nine stickers: three green stickers to tag features they liked, three yellow stickers for features they would like to see fixed, and three pink stickers for features they did not like. They were welcome to come back for additional stickers of any color if needed. The participants chose to limit their tagging to the southwest quadrant of the park where the event was being held.
The condition and “newness” of objects in the park impacted people’s opinions significantly. The only new item, the ping pong table, received the most positive stickers and was in use continuously during the event. Participants were clearly excited and enthusiastic about this new addition to the park. Conversely, many items in the park that looked poorly maintained received both negative stickers and stickers recommending repair. These items, including the metal lamp posts, the steel trash cans, and the chain link fence at the handball courts, received almost equal numbers of yellow (fix) and pink (do not like) stickers.

The items that received the most negative stickers were those that were in poor condition and appeared to no longer perform any function. These items included the derelict concrete post base at the southeast corner of the park, the low iron railing at the southern border of the park, and the miscellaneous concrete pads and curbs that once served as bases for tables or as borders for the hexagonal pavers. On one of these stickers, there was one written comment about the uneven paving needing to be corrected.

The one notable exception to the “condition” argument was the positive reaction to the cobblestone paving. Although they are very uneven and irregular, the cobblestones received many favorable stickers. There were also many positive stickers on the cobblestone pavers bordering the newly planted flower beds, which presumably were to express support for the latest beautification efforts in the park.

From this study, one can conclude that the participants in the study would like to see new activities brought to the park, to have a park that is properly maintained, and to have a park that retains the best features of the original park (such as the cobblestone pavers) but is free of derelict remnants from the old park.
# Mark Your Park Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>LIKE</th>
<th>NEEDS REPAIR</th>
<th>DISLIKE</th>
<th>TOTAL STICKERS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ping Pong Table</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Metal Lamp Posts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steel Trash Cans</td>
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<td>Park Benches</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobblestone Pavers</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Post Base</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cast Iron Drains</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Low Iron Railing (@ South Border)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chain Link Fence @ Handball Ct.</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Curbs &amp; Old Table Bases</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trees (Existing)</td>
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<td>Tree Stump</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
During two park events (Take Back Your Park day in May 2010 and It’s My Park day in October 2010) interviews were carried out to solicit and record stories and attitudes toward the park. In addition, the Urban Practices class of The New School Parsons School for Design conducted interviews of four groups.

- Friends of Gulick Park Steering Committee members
- Local UJC lunch club seniors citizens
- Young people using the basketball and handball courts
- Older people and parents using the park

The students and Professor Scott Pobiner constructed a ‘listening wall’ featuring many of the taped interviews, attached to a fold-out table for conducting additional oral histories during both park events. In all, about 30 interviews were conducted.

“What I remember mostly is how beautiful this park was in the summers at night when those old-fashioned lamps were lighted and the big trees were there and it was always cool. It was cool even during the days because you had those big trees and it was very shaded.”

— Laura Bolotsky
Park Stories Results

For a number of people who grew up in the neighborhood in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the park and playground is remembered as a safe, social and special spot. Several mentioned the clubhouse and structured activities organized there for children. State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver talked about playing basketball for hours on end in the park, and watching subsequent generations follow in his footsteps. A recurring theme was that the park served multiple uses: handball, ice skating, playing in the fountain, using the sports and play equipment, and engaging in a variety of classic and made-up games, and served residents of different ages and social groups. Several people also mentioned that the park had gone through a period of decline, and seems to now be improving.

“Think it’s great to have a neighborhood association where the people know each other, play with each other and are friendly to one another. That’s the most important thing.”
Julius Shapiro

“My older brother had his art work all over the Clubhouse in a wall to wall mural. They used to have a building here, with games and an office, years ago, and there used to be tables and benches.”
Michael Mars

“When I was a four-year-old I moved into 500 Grand Street, and this was the park around the corner...I have the memory embedded in me of being on the swings, because some kid kicked me and I still have five stitches right here in the chin.”
State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver

“I think this is probably one of the best handball places. The closest one is at my middle school but there’s drugs so I don’t go there that often and there’s better people that come here”
Handball Player

Many of these interviews are available on the Urban Practices class blog at http://a.parsons.edu/~pobiners/courses/urbanpractices2010 which also explains the methodology. An edited audio version of some of the interviews will be available on the website.
Make a Wish Visioning Activity

Methodology: White fish-shaped cards, 20 categories of activity and element labels, decorative stickers, and color markers and crayons were provided. Participants were asked to think about elements and activities that they would like to see in Luther Gulick Park and use any combination of the materials provided to communicate their wishes. These Wish Fish were then released into the river (pinned to a blue banner that was hung on the fence). The Wish Fish were collected and the activity and element labels were tallied. The written text and drawings were consistently interpreted and categorized.
Make a Wish Results

Results: Eighty seven Wish Fish with a total 156 categorizable drawings, labels and text were created by participants ranging in age from 10 months to 65 years. Most indicated that Luther Gulick was their neighborhood park. Other parks represented were Bryant Park, Tompkins Square, Fort Greene, East River, and Governor’s Island. The top four wish categories were green (26%), play (16%), picnic (10%), and garden (8%).
Conclusions

Several general desirables emerge from across these activities:

• more greenery: trees, shrubs, flowers, grass
• connected sections: easier pathways between sections
• paving: leveling the walkways, refurbishing or repurposing the cobblestones
• better fencing: to make the overall feel more inviting
• mix of possibilities: elements for young and old, for activity or relaxation
• new programming: like the ping pong table, art installations, flea markets, etc.
• better maintenance: modernizing the sprinkler, replacing the court equipment, etc.

Many of these issues are related. Fencing and greenery will complement each other to create a new image of the park from outside and from within. Safer, more level paths will facilitate programming and a mix of uses. Various sections of the park focus on different kinds of use; better connecting these will only enhance utilization.

The community saw Gulick Park as a space of possibility by recalling it’s former uses and imagining new ones: benches; game tables; ice skating; art installations; stoop sales; boulders, hills, and other natural play objects; picnic tables; a field, etc. There is a desire to see something new—or newly returned—in Gulick Park.

The community also already values the park as a place for connecting different types of users: those who play ball games, those who want to sit and relax, those who want to play with their children, etc. They would like this aspect strengthened, with more support for passive recreation or creating spaces where both active play and relaxation can occur. Similarly, there were many ideas about bringing community together through programmed events, large tables, or large lawns.

Next Steps

• Develop Design Recommendations: facilitating community input on more specific elements from these general conclusions
• Continue advocating for funding: working with community groups, neighbors, and elected representatives to secure the money needed for the park the community wants
I love to play here.... Sometimes the sprinklers come on in the summer and it’s a very nice, very nice sweet. I like how they decorated it, I like the place because they’re planning new stuff around here, ping pong.

Nawal Ibrahim, age 9