

In South Central L.A., a new park tests stereotypes about what minority groups want from parks. BY KIM SORVIG



What value is there in building a nature park in the inner city? ♦ Aren't other things more important to low-income neighborhoods? ♦ Don't minorities prefer sports fields to natural areas? ♦ Will money spent on parks help a depressed local economy, or be wasted on soon-to-be-trashed amenities? ♦ Isn't nature in the city an elitist Olmstedian fiction?

In South Central Los Angeles, such stereotypes and questions confronted the designers of the Augustus F. Hawkins Natural Park almost daily during the planning process. Named for a pioneering black educator and congressman, Hawkins Park is a tangible rebuttal of many stereotypes about nature and the poor.

This project resulted from a remarkably collaborative effort. At its core were the community of South Central and three landscape architects: University of California (Berkeley) professor Randolph Hester; Jeff Hutchins of Glendale, California's Lawrence Moss & Associates; and Stephanie Landregan. Initially at Moss's firm, Landregan has since become senior landscape architect for the

THE WILDS OF SOUTH CENTRAL

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), the regional agency that built and operates Hawkins Park.

"There were lots of naysayers," Landregan remembers, "who said, 'Why are you giving that to those people?'"

"Those people" are the residents of South Central, a district whose name conjures images of desolation and fear for many Los Angelenos. Riots in 1992 after the Rodney King verdict and 30 years ago in nearby Watts still stigmatize the area. In the early 1990s, 30 percent of South Central households had incomes below the poverty level; 35 percent of adults had experienced unemployment lasting a year or longer. Once predominantly black, South Central today is black, Asian, and Latino. Hispanics have been the largest ethnic group for the past decade; many are first- or second-generation immigrants.

Statistics and headlines, however, are little better than stereotypes at capturing the hidden possibilities and desires of a community. About five years ago, an unusual opportunity arose to transform a derelict, polluted brown-field belonging to the L.A. Department of

Water and Power into a park in the neighborhood. Confounding the naysayers, South Central's citizens asked for a place to experience and learn about nature—a place that on December 16, 2000, was dedicated as Hawkins Park.

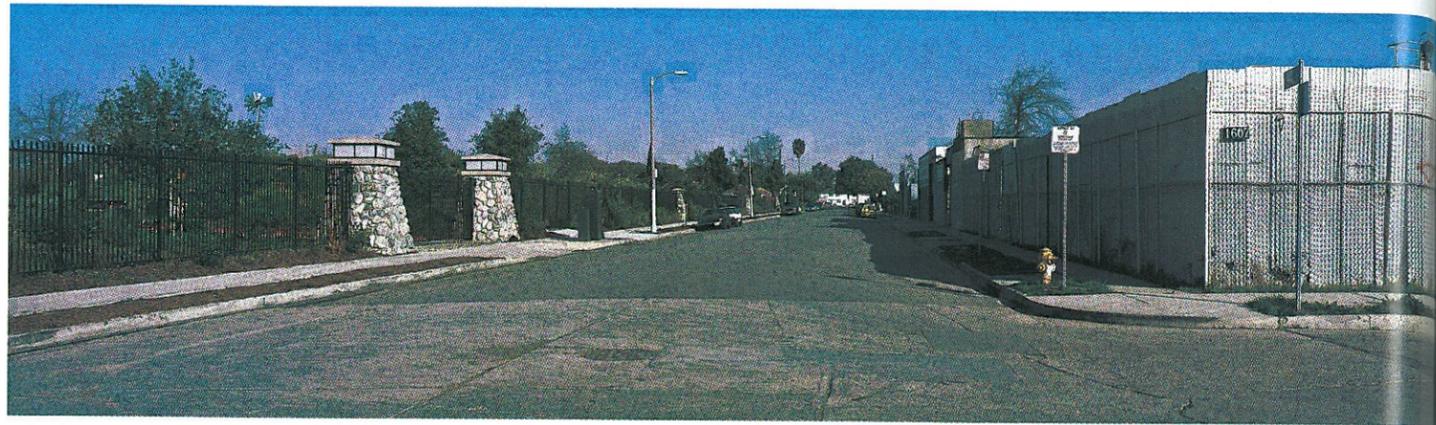
Today, the park's 8.5 acres consist of five rolling artificial hills, each representing a major regional plant community. Set among these knolls is a grassy retreat where families play and children bike, but the focus is on Southern California nature. A complex of cream-colored buildings with red and black trim surrounds a brick courtyard leading visitors from the street into the park. These buildings house a natural history exhibit, educational activity spaces, and one rare urban species: the resident park ranger.

The site began, however, as a pipe graveyard—"the guts of decades of utility, water, and power failures left to rot behind chain link and razor wire," as Hester puts it. The story of that transformation is one of collaboration at many levels—between agencies and community, between different designers, between contractors and client. Typical of collaborative efforts, it is not always easy to tell who had which idea,



REPRESENTING five native plant communities, Hawkins Park also acknowledges agriculture and sustainability with this windmill-driven fountain, top. Randy Hester's notebook sketch, above, done in the field, provided a concept drawing for these elements.

TOM LAMB, ALL PHOTOS EXCEPT AS NOTED; RANDY HESTER, SKETCHBOOKS



and exactly who designed what is less important than the shared results. The many contributors to Hawkins Park clearly think in terms of, "WE did it."

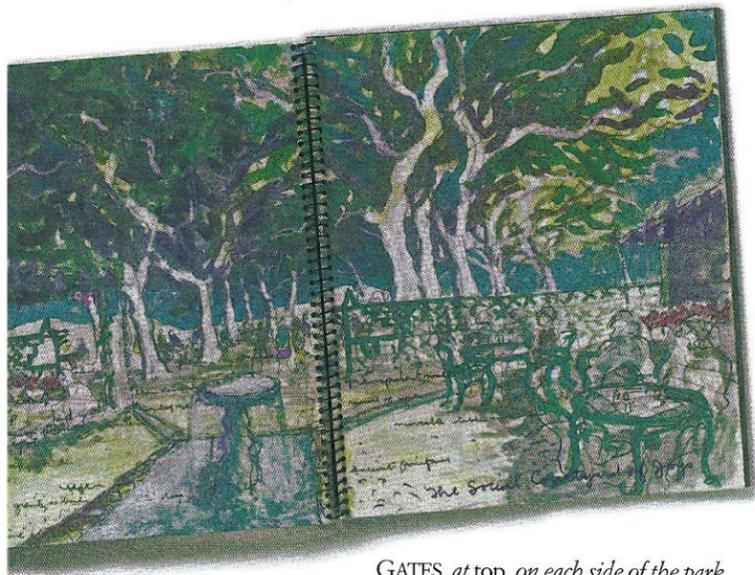
The story of Hawkins Park begins far from South Central, with Joe Edmiston, executive director of SMMC. Hester, who has consulted on Edmiston projects for nearly 15 years, calls him "the person with the big ideas." For years, Edmiston and SMMC have been buying and protecting undeveloped property, using bond issues as well as private support, in the several mountain chains that ring the Los Angeles valley. But although "Joe was doing this extraordinary thing of creating a greenbelt around Los Angeles," says Hester, "it bothered him that those nature experiences were largely inaccessible to inner-city people." Partly on Hester's advice, Edmiston and SMMC began to consider extending green fingers into places like South Central. "To egg Joe on," Hester told him that if SMMC acquired an inner-city site, Hester would consult for free. "Sort of like playing chicken," Hester says.

How Edmiston met Rita Walters, then South Central's city council member, is the stuff

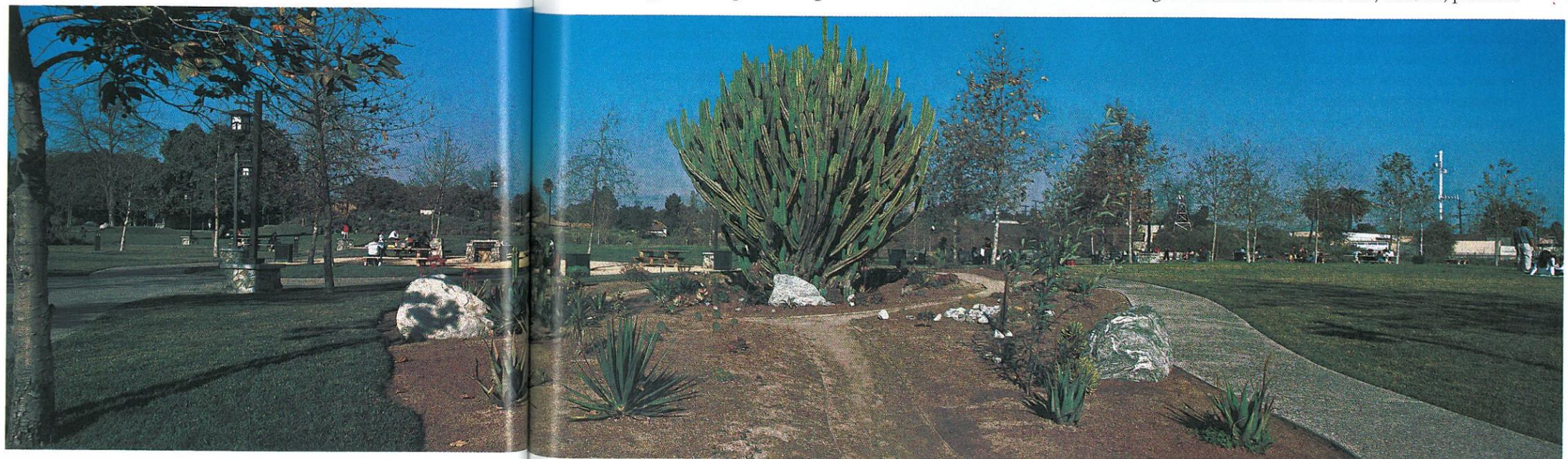
of legends. Different versions of the story are in circulation, but they all begin, as Landregan tells it, with a skeptical, even antagonistic Walters challenging Edmiston at a council meeting: "What has SMMC ever done for my constituents?" Edmiston recalls going straight from the meeting to look at existing inner-city parks, which proved few, rundown, and drug infested. "Here



RANDY HESTER, LEFT



GATES at top, on each side of the park, welcome neighbors and stand in stark contrast to general neighborhood blight. Decades of utility debris crowned the site, above right, but a 100-year-old *Cereus* survived to become part of the agricultural heritage garden (at right). Hester's field sketchbook, above, previewed amenities of the new park.

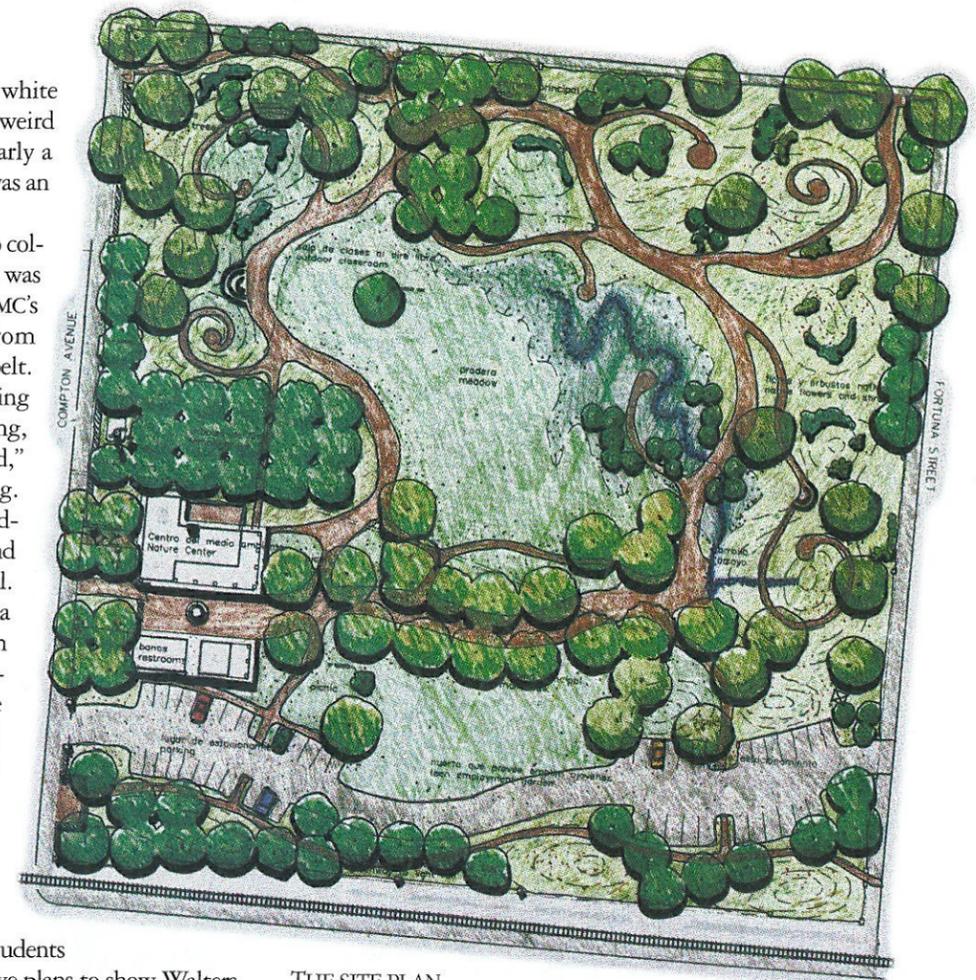


we were," says Edmiston, "a bunch of white people in council-meeting suits, asking weird questions about park usage. Pretty clearly a lot of the people I talked to thought I was an especially crazy narc."

Eventually, Walters was persuaded to collaborate with SMMC. Edmiston says it was largely a matter of showing Walters SMMC's existing programs of free outings from inner-city neighborhoods to the greenbelt. A more dramatic story has Walters visiting an SMMC park with Edmiston and saying, "I want one of these in my neighborhood," and Edmiston surprising her by agreeing.

Whatever the details, Walters and Edmiston ended up working together to find and acquire a park site in South Central. "Rita added a spark," says Edmiston, "a burr under the saddle." It took them nearly two years to get Los Angeles Water and Power to lease them the pipe graveyard at the corner of Compton and Slauson Avenues. (Many locals still refer to the place as the Compton-Slauson Park.) The site's four sides overlook warehouses, retail stores, and residences, as well as the rail/bus/transit bustle of Compton Avenue.

Hester and a group of his Berkeley students analyzed the site and developed alternative plans to show Walters and SMMC the range of what was possible. Not many site analysis maps indicate gang territories. Hester's did: The Compton-Slauson intersection is a boundary for four different gangs. Hester, who has published books on community participation in design (see Resources), began to be concerned—not so much about the gangs' existence, but because park plans were developing without real grassroots input. Although Walters and staff from her com-



LAWRENCE R. MOSS & ASSOCIATES, PLAN

THE SITE PLAN, above. Note native vegetation, below.

community office supported the idea of a natural park and had given several ideas about what it should look like, Hester decided that many more members of the community should be directly engaged. Edmiston, familiar with the idea from greenbelt work, readily agreed to sponsor a series of public meetings.

Meetings at local schools and the site, however, produced

disappointing results. So did door-to-door visits, another technique that had worked well in the middle- and upper-class neighborhoods adjoining SMMC's greenbelt. It was Marion Coss, one of Hester's students, who realized that meetings only got opinions from meeting goers and that door-to-door approaches elicited more suspicion than feedback. Coss spoke fluent Spanish and clearly had an intuitive sense of how public discussion happens in Hispanic cultures. She suggested that they set up a

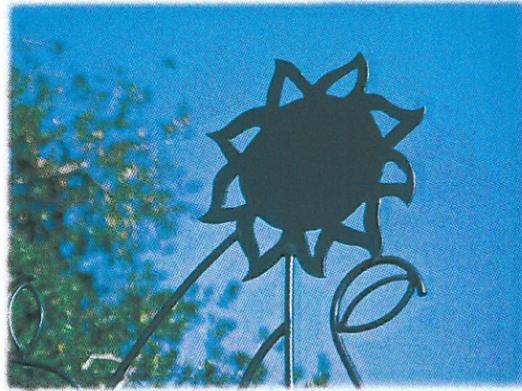


table in the "Supermercado" across the street from the site. There, hundreds of people stopped and talked to Hester, Coss, and Ira Johnson, an African-American student on the team. "Marion's suggestion was brilliant. I'd still be there," says Hester ruefully, "trying to get people to open their doors."

Connecting with nature was not the first desire anyone expressed. Safety was. Hester recalls at least one hour-long meeting, supposedly about designing a park, at which "the only thing discussed was the Los Angeles police and a desperate feeling of lack of safety." Careful listening to these concerns had to precede any discussion of park facilities. The designers somewhat reluctantly agreed to fence the park completely, and SMMC offered to house

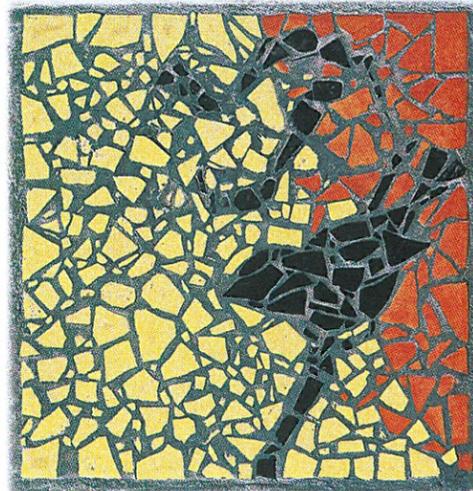


a ranger on site, as at other SMMC properties. Resolving safety issues built support for the park and trust for the design team; thereafter, Hester says, "the citizens were very clear" about their priorities. Although ball courts and other built facilities were on the list, the community quickly decided that nature education was a higher priority. "We've got some ball courts, maybe not enough," one community member told Edmiston, "but we can't find nature here."



Walters, a long-time educator and former school board member, realized the educational potential of a nature center in the city. She knew that nature was important to her constituents, notes Hester, "even if they might not articulate it in the first round of discussions."

From community priorities the conceptual design evolved. To balance safety with welcome, a gate was planned on each side of the park. The five-hills concept emerged as an answer to several neighborhood wishes, surrounding



a place of refuge while leaving plenty of inviting (and security-enhancing) views into the park from the street. Varied slopes would create microclimates to support native species. But creating the hills was a problem: The utility dumping ground had left site soils contaminated, so they could not be used.

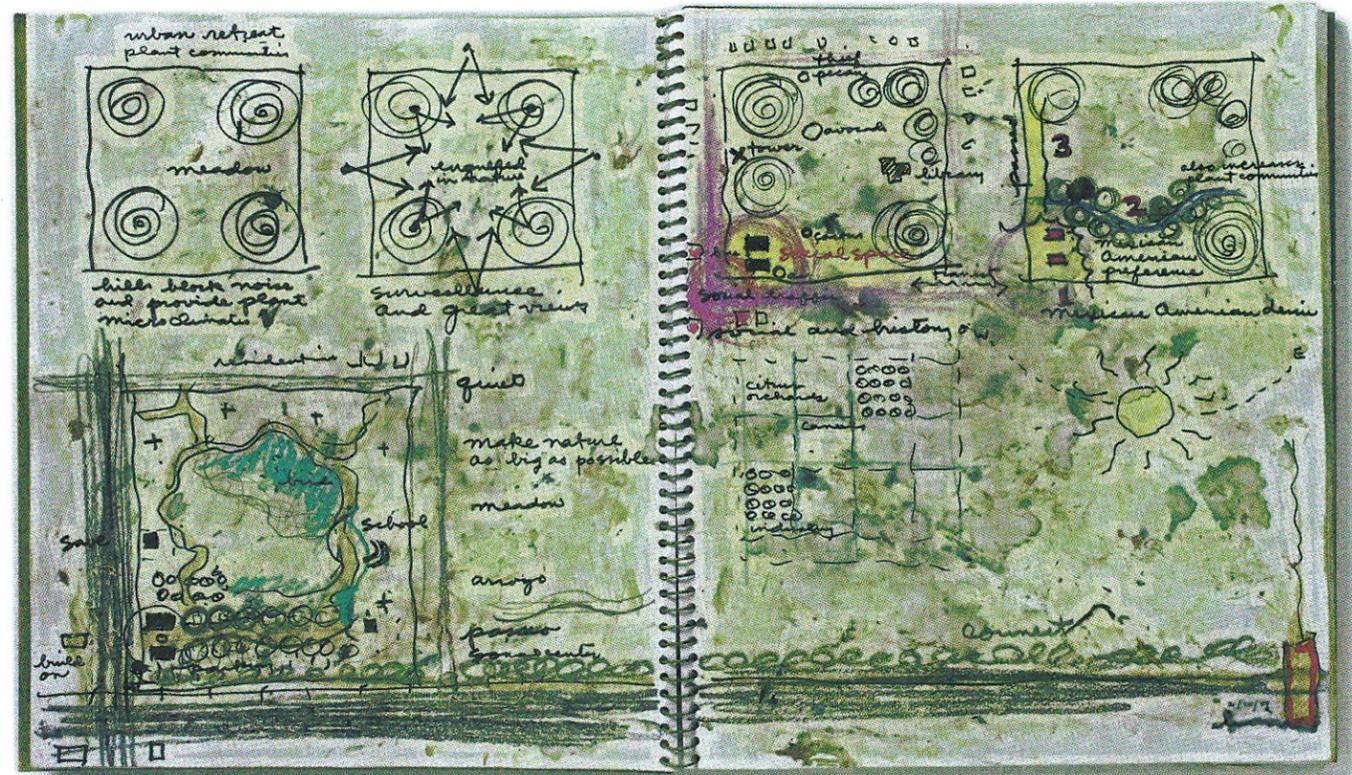
One of the few predictable results of collaboration is serendipity. As the designers were questioning how to get the huge volume of soil the hills would require, heavy rainstorms caused landslides in the mountains above Malibu, 30 miles to the northwest near SMMC's offices. An earthmoving contractor, called in to haul away 3,000 cubic yards of landslide, was at a loss. "That's how, quite literally," Edmiston says, "the Santa Monica Mountains came to Compton-Slauson."

By this time, another key concept had emerged: quality construction. Edmiston insisted that this park had to be "good enough to be the envy of any neighborhood in this city," Hester and Landregan recall. As a result, Moss & Associates was brought on, as was ArtShare Los Angeles, an "arts incubator" that trains kids in public art techniques like mosaics. Moss was selected "because they had done a lot of really good high-quality craftsman-like public works," says Hester. Moss, says Jeff Hutchins, "really wanted this one" for just that reason.

Hester and Moss's staff continued the collaborative approach. Working from Hester's concepts, they held a number of on-site design meetings, at least one in a tent. Architects from Jenkins, Gales & Martinez, community representatives, and SMMC rangers and educational staff were involved in the design meetings, as was Edmiston, whose fierce interest in every detail made him honorary lead designer.

Hester had already conceived of a

CONSTRUCTED to be "the envy of any neighborhood," the park includes nature-themed iron and mosaic work, left and above, by ArtShare, neighbors, and kids.



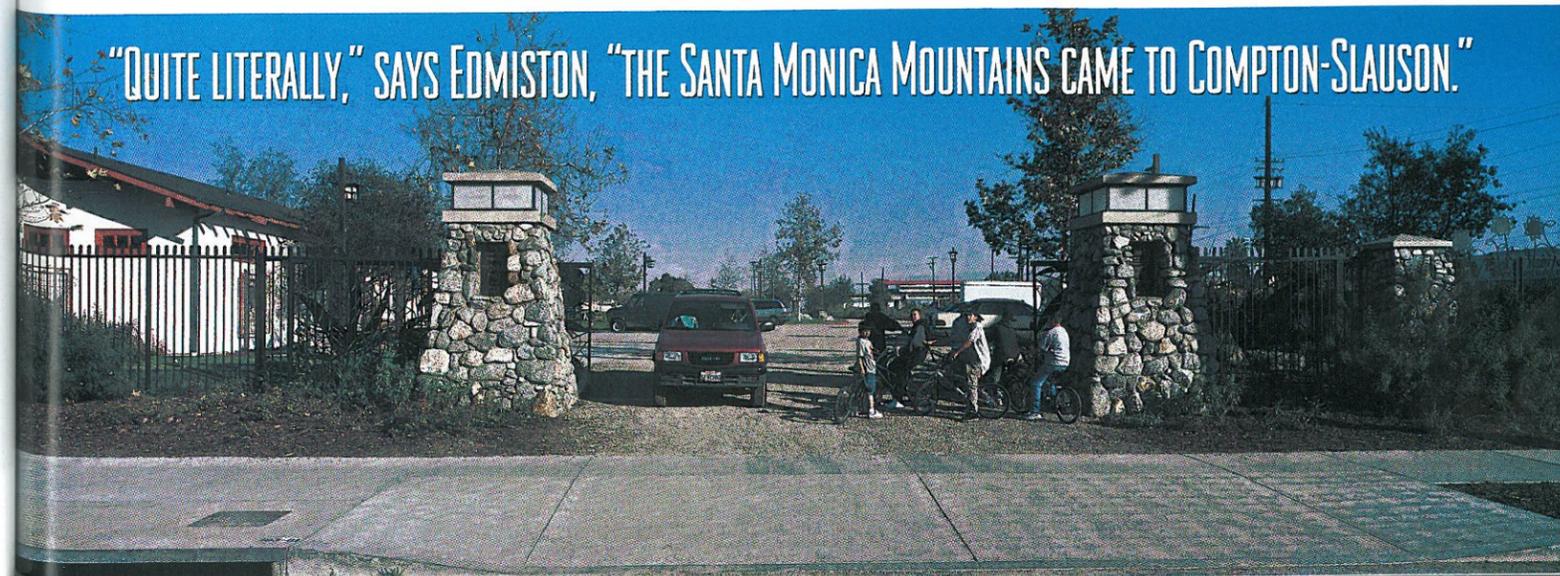
combined exhibit/education center and ranger residence at the park's main entry, with a separate restroom and maintenance building flanking a "zocalo" or Mexican-style courtyard. The courtyard layout remained, but the styling of the buildings changed as Edmiston, Landregan, and others noted that the best historic buildings in the neighborhood were more Craftsman than Spanish Mission. River-rounded cobbles and battered columns, typical of Craftsman designs, consistently support the buildings, trellised walkways, and custom iron gateways around the site. Fortunately, says Landregan, "the architect took direction wonderfully from us landscape architects." Outside the courtyard, shapes and plantings became more organic: A symmetrical avenue leading from the courtyard into the center of the site became

FROM THE BEGINNING of the project, Randy Hester used his field sketchbook to jot down key design ideas as the design evolved. He calls this spread "the single most important synthesis, early in 1997... the concept of hills with meadow in the middle and the social space with the paseo on the south." The small sketched plan on the left-hand page is the genesis of the plan for the park. Below, local kids are framed by one of the park entrances.

less regular, and gardens near the education center evolved to suggest a horticultural past. Since many visitors would be children, SMMC's experience suggested adding an outdoor "mud room" for washing up after gardening or crafts or native-plant activities, to save wear and tear on the restrooms.

Moss's office was charged with implementation and carried collaboration into that arena, too. Stephanie Landregan worried her friends by staying on site, in South Central, from 7:00 AM until midnight for a couple of months.

That allowed her to field adjust designs as well as supervise neighborhood volunteer workers and ward off perverse city ordinances. "To do a park that wasn't standard," she says, "we fought the city over sustainability every day." Jeff Hutchins describes Landregan as





NO ONE TAKES THE NAIVE VIEW THAT THEY HAVE RECREATED NATURE ON 8.5 ACRES.

“walking softly and carrying a big hammer,” a role he took over when she joined the SMMC staff. “Most contractors want to do a good job,” says Hutchins. “If you care enough, they’ll work with you.”

Landregan and Hutchins both see the designer’s role as “opportunistic,” incorporating talent and serendipity as they become available, without losing an overall wholeness. ArtShare Los Angeles, for example, brought some 140 students and 65 community members to paint tiles and design mosaic benches for an amphitheater. Two ArtShare artists, Barry Wyatt and Robert Beckwith, built 2,400 linear feet of wrought-iron fence. In iron and tile, themes of wild plants and animals give the work of all these individuals a sense of common vision. Landregan, who spent several years as an exhibit designer at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History, even influenced indoor natural history exhibits created by Exhibit Works.

On-site “opportunism” dictated the use of recycled materials; for example, crushing existing concrete as aggregate for the parking area. Three large oaks and a whole cactus garden (donated by the Huntington Gardens) were “recycled” by transplanting them to the park. Careful supervision was also critical to the survival of on-site specimen plants, including a grove of pecans and walnuts, several large avocado trees, and a 100-year-old *Cereus* cactus.

Site furnishings, far from being hideously vandal proof, carry the Craftsman theme into lighting, benches, and a few picnic tables. But the park, like its neighborhood, is eclectic. A fountain driven by a half-size agricultural windmill spills down one of the hills; atop another is an incongruous (but popular) war memorial with twin mini-cannons. Raised planter tables for kids’ activities are surrounded by totem-like scarecrows that lend a folk-art feeling. Commemorating a library believed to have occupied the

site years ago, an artificial ruin crowns the easternmost hilltop, a perhaps unintentionally poignant reminder of buildings ruined in riots. Its walls are inscribed with quotes from George Washington Carver, the Huichol Indians, and Jesse Jackson, all in Edmiston’s elegant calligraphy. Only on this ruin is there any graffiti, sparks of illegible color among the maxims of the wise.

New as it is, the park is already happily used by families from the neighborhood and beyond. Paths spiral up the new hills—a few showing distinct desire line shortcuts worn into the soil. Hutchins, however, sees these postoccupancy changes as opportunities for the design to grow into itself and become real. Just as the desire lines show where people want to go, a “drainage problem” in one area indicates an opportunity to create another microhabitat, joining wetland areas already created. “If you don’t deal with those things,” says Hutchins in true collaborative spirit, “it drives a wedge between the client, designer, and contractor.”

“I actually see like this wave spreading out from here,” says Luke McJimpson, Hawkins Park’s resident ranger, referring to the park’s social outcome. From creating jobs and after-school programs to changing attitudes within and outside the neighborhood, this natural project is having clear cultural impacts.

More than 50 neighborhood residents were hired for temporary work during construction. Several, like Hawkins Park maintenance’s Alfredo Leon, have become permanent SMMC staff members. Others, like local resident Lorenzo Mateo, already worked for SMMC at other sites and transferred to Hawkins Park. Contractors were also required to hire from the community.

Angelina Aguilar lives a couple of blocks from Hawkins Park.

The daughter of Salvadoran and Mexican immigrants, she got her first job teaching kids about wildlife and gardening in the park’s youth programs. With part of her salary she takes a monthly load of food, clothes, and toys to Enciñada, Mexico. For Thanksgiving, she and McJimpson planned a delivery of turkeys.

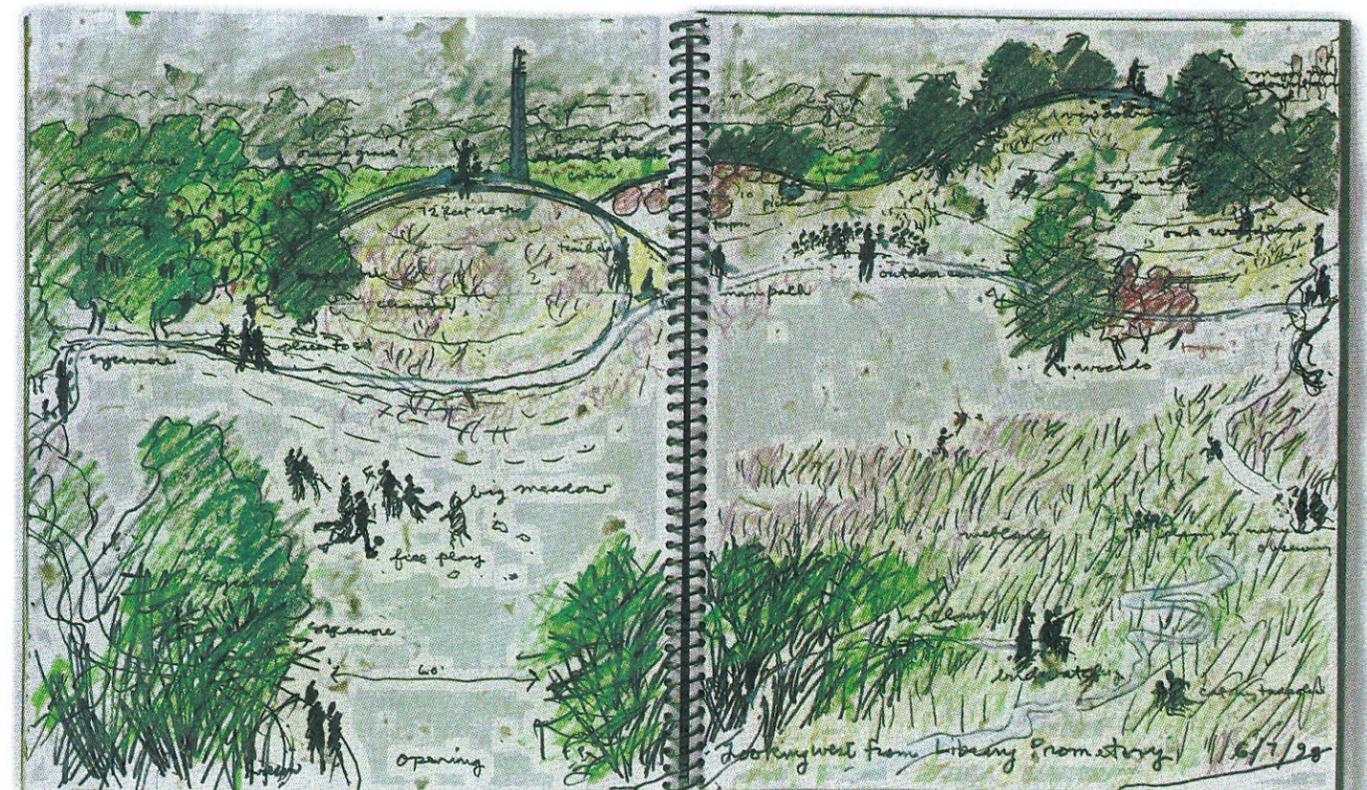
The youth programs in which both Aguilar and McJimpson teach grew from SMMC’s experience in nature and science education programs. A homework club helps neighborhood children of all ages; a junior ranger program, a Saturday science series, gardening and crafts activities, and a travel club are among the regular offerings, as well as special events in the park’s amphitheater. Similar programs are common in remote national or state parks, but they are new—and enthusiastically received—in South Central.

These programs offer a safe haven, something to keep kids off the street and help them stay in school, but there is another, deeper hope embodied in the schedule of activities. Like ArtShare’s public art projects, many Hawkins Park activities take South Central kids (and adults) to other neighborhoods and bring school tours and visitors to the park. Tracy Kelly, ArtShare’s director of programs, explains that this broadens horizons for South Central

CALIFORNIA WETLAND plant communities, left, are among those represented. Note the wetland/rock channel to contain stormwater. A sketch, below, from Hester’s sketchbook shows the continued evolution of the design. “Very close to final plan,” says Hester, “view to downtown, outdoor class, orchard, habitat niches, paseo all in place.”

kids but does something else too: “Some of the visitors are kids from Beverly Hills who’ve been taught to fear South Central.”

Hawkins youth programs have other great results, says U.S. Forest Service (USFS) landscape architect Rudy Retamozza, director of a USFS program called Greenlink that helps urban communities connect to nearby forests for recreation, grants, and even short-term employment (see Resources). “The times I’ve gone [to Hawkins],” he says, “I’ve been really impressed with the change in the kids’ perception of the government—more respect for what





PROGRAMS at Hawkins Park attract city residents to naturalist programs for children, top. Another early drawing, below, from Hester's sketchbook shows the paseo/social space on the left juxtaposed with wild hills and meadow to the right. "This was the key drawing," says Hester, "that caused everyone to say, 'Yes! Let's do it.'"

"SOME OF THE VISITORS ARE KIDS FROM BEVERLY

we can do." Greenlink also helps give city kids opportunities to camp out. One camp out next year is planned for Hawkins Park.

Every week, a free bus takes anyone who wants to go from Hawkins Park to other SMMC parks in the mountains, half an hour to an hour away. To Joe Edmiston, this "portal" function may be Hawkins Park's most important. Making conservancy park access easy for inner-city people breaks an insidious boundary between the city as a kind of environmental sacrifice zone and the surroundings where nature is conserved. Bringing what Edmiston calls "a verisimilitude of nature" into the city provides a focus that attracts interest to larger examples of conservation.

Neither Edmiston nor his staff takes the naive view that they have

recreated nature on 8.5 acres. "It's not large enough,"

says Edmiston, "to be a real natural environment. It's to get people to say, 'Hey, this is exciting, where do we go for more?'" Says Landregan, "We knew we'd succeeded in convincing the neighborhood that native plants are wonderful when we had a few park plants go home with people!"



HILLS WHO'VE BEEN TAUGHT TO FEAR SOUTH CENTRAL"

Trini Juarez, regional landscape architect for USFS, sees SMMC's Saturday Mountain Bus helping inner-city groups learn more about nature, conservation, and stewardship. Historically, ethnic minorities have had low rates of visitation to national and state parks and conservation areas, prompting stereotypes about lack of interest in nature (and calls to cut funding for the parks). Using inner-city nature parks as portals can increase minority visitation, but Juarez sees another value as well. "The premise is that stewardship is greater than just the undeveloped outdoors," he says, "and the hope is that conservation concepts are transferable" back to where people live.

Juarez emphasizes that transferring concepts, or educating people, or building a community park, are all about establishing two-way relationships. "When a program or project is done for Anglo communities, we talk about partnerships," he says. "With other groups, there's a tendency to talk about outreach or civil rights—very paternalistic."

In other words, SMMC's goal of bringing nature to the inner city needed its counterpart in South Central's desire to have nature in the neighborhood. For those who study ethnic-group attitudes toward nature conservation, or who try to repeat Hawkins Park's apparent successes, this is a critical lesson.

"There's this notion," says Juarez, "that underserved ethnic groups have no affinity for the outdoors." The South Central

community's request for a natural park casts doubt on that stereotype, as does a growing body of research (see Resources). Hester studied the demographics of support for SMMC bond issues and

found that spending for conservation and parks had the overwhelming vote of "the poorest, most ethnic neighborhoods in Los Angeles." USFS researcher Deborah Chavez and her colleagues did a sophisticated study of why different Los Angeles residents did or did not use nearby forests and natural areas. The study reveals complex influences, including ethnicity, economic status, how recently the individual immigrated, and whether they perceive the parks as exclusive territory of other groups. Chavez says Hawkins Park is "a wonderful project" and hopes that SMMC or others will undertake quantitative research on the changes the project brings to South Central.

Two fascinating, though unquantifiable, observations about the way gangs treat Hawkins Park reflect some unexpected attitudes toward nature. "The word I got," says Hester, "was that there is no gang that's going to desecrate this kind of natural place." Ranger McJimpson backs Hester up. "The gangbangers will walk through, but they won't fight in the park," he says. **LA**

Kim Sorvig is a research assistant professor of architecture and planning at the University of New Mexico.

PROJECT CREDITS

Landscape architects: Randolph Hester, U.C. Berkeley, and his firm, Community by Design, (Continued on Page 101)