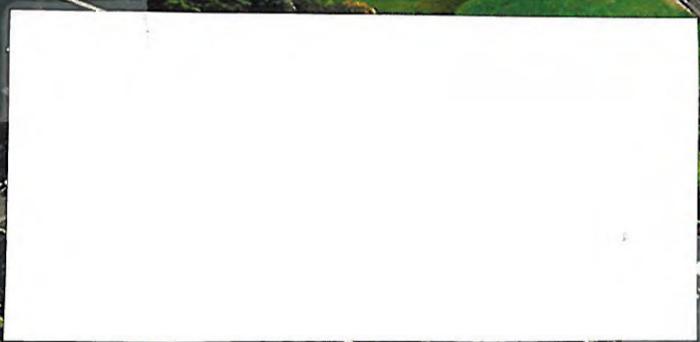
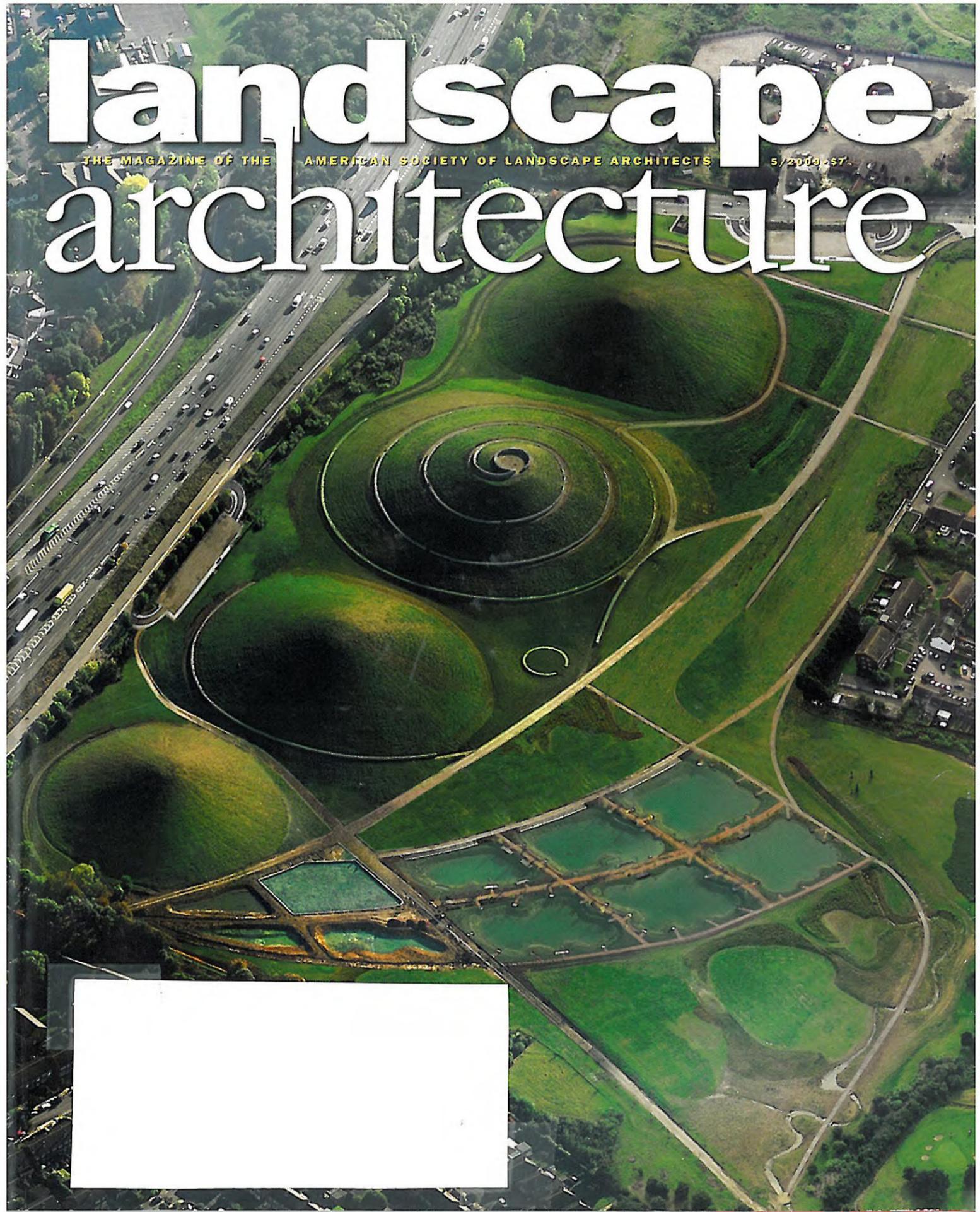


landscape architecture

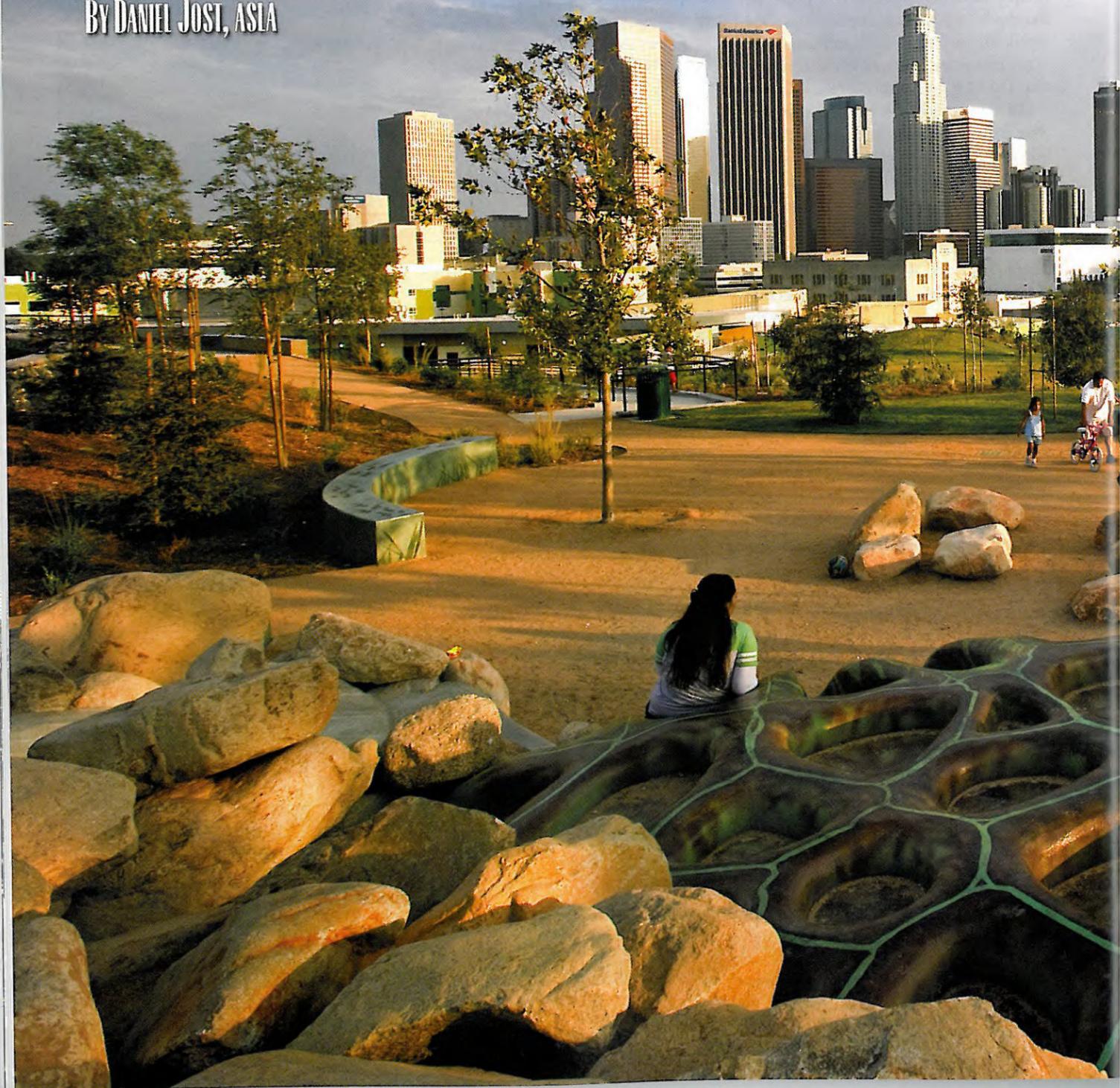
THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS 5/2019 \$7



MITIGATING PAST INEQUITIES

In Los Angeles, a new park on a former oil field brings nature into a park-starved neighborhood.

By DANIEL JOST, ASLA



CONTENTS



Elements like these green roofs make most of Vista Hermosa park in Los Angeles permeable.

82

PUBLISHING | 66

Publish and Be Seen

Landscape architects are using books as marketing tools.

By Lake Douglas, ASLA

TECHNOLOGY | 74

A Geospatial Approach To PDF's

New types of PDF's are allowing GIS data and maps to be shared more easily.

By James L. Sipes, ASLA

SHARED WISDOM | 102

Drawn to Design

Ace Torre, FASLA, sketches as a catalyst for ideas. By James Richards, ASLA

Mitigating Past Inequities

In Los Angeles, a new park on a former oil field brings nature into a park-starved neighborhood.

By Daniel Jost, ASLA

82

Northala Fields Forever

Northala Fields, the largest park to be built in London for a century, is an exemplar of sustainable construction and design.

By Tim Coulthard

94

BOOKS | 116

PRODUCT PROFILES | 118

DISPLAY AD INDEX | 120

BUYER'S GUIDE INDEX | 121

OPINION | 134

In a Tough Job Market, Reasons to Persevere

If your dream job isn't available, consider some alternatives.

By Michael Van Valkenburgh, FASLA

TOM LAMB/LAMB STUDIO

IT IS A WARM WINTER EVENING at Vista Hermosa Natural Park, and dusk is fast approaching when, suddenly, I hear children singing. About 30 children and a few adults surround a small fire, and a park ranger leads them as they belt out a familiar campfire song: "The other day, the other day, I met a bear..." Marshmallows are passed around, and for a second, I feel as if I'm at a summer camp or a national park. But Vista Hermosa is no wilderness, and it's unlikely I will meet any bears here. I'm in the center of the United States's second-largest metropolis, on the western edge of downtown Los Angeles.

Vista Hermosa is the first new park built in this area in more than 100 years. Activists have long decried the city's lack of park space. A 2004 study by the Trust for Public Land showed that

merely 33 percent of the children living in the city of Los Angeles can walk to a park within a quarter mile of their house. That means more than 650,000 children do not have convenient access to green space where they can run and play. Compare that to Boston, where 97 percent of children live within walking distance of a park, and New York City, where the figure is 91 percent.

The disparity between rich and poor, whites and minorities is particularly appalling. According to a 2003 study by researchers at the University of Southern California, neighborhoods where whites make up more than three-quarters of the population averaged 31.8 acres of parkland per 1,000 people, while areas where Latinos, African Americans, and Asians were the largest racial group averaged 1.6, 0.8, and 1.2 acres per 1,000 people, respectively.



Children play on Vista Hermosa's new playground, which includes logs and large animal sculptures. The park, a project of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, has an amazing view of the downtown Los Angeles skyline.

So when Vista Hermosa Park opened in the poor Latino neighborhood of Temple Beaudry last summer, it was a major victory for those who view parkland as a civil right. “[This park] sends a message,” proclaimed Assemblyman Kevin De Leon, “that regardless of who you are, regardless of where your parents came from, regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of your legal status, you deserve access to nature.”

As with much of the new parkland in and around Los Angeles, Vista Hermosa is a project of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, a state agency, and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), a joint powers authority linked strongly to the conservancy. Since it was created in 1980, the conservancy has preserved more than 65,000 acres of parkland throughout Southern California. As the conservancy’s executive director since the beginning, Joseph T. Edmiston, Honorary ASLA, has had a hand in all of those projects (see “When Cities and Conservation Collide,” *Landscape Architecture*, July 2004). He is also the director of the MRCA. Edmiston says the secret to the agency’s success is an energetic staff and their single-minded focus on increasing access to parkland.

Their aggressive pursuit of partners has also helped. At Vista Hermosa, they partnered with the school district, which owns the land, the city of Los Angeles, and other government and nonprofit entities to fund the park’s construction and maintenance. But securing the land for Vista Hermosa was not all handshakes and making friends. It required taking stands and wading into murky political waters where most bureaucrats would not tread.

A Toxic History

The park’s completion last summer and the opening of the adjacent school this past fall mark the end of one of the most controversial development projects in the city’s history—the infamous Belmont Learning Center project. It was in the midst of this controversy that the idea to use part of the site for the park took shape.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) used its powers of eminent domain to create a 35-acre parcel in Temple Beaudry, clearing many houses and knocking down a local church without much community outreach. While the methods were controversial, the classroom space was much needed. The Belmont Learning Center was going to be the first new high school built by the overcrowded school district in nearly 20 years. The plans were unique—officials planned to help finance the school through the construction of high-rise apartments

and a shopping mall on site. Some lauded these plans as a shining model for future development, but instead, Belmont Learning Center became known as a toxic mess and the most expensive school in America, eventually costing more than \$400 million.

During the planning stages, the school district had not been forthcoming about environmental problems on the site. Like much of the neighborhood, the project sits atop the 800-acre Los Angeles City Oil Field, which was once the largest active oil field on the West Coast. By the 1920s, the area had been developed with single-family houses. However, many of the oil wells were never properly capped, and highly toxic hydrogen sulfide and explosive methane existed in dangerous concentrations deep below the surface and could potentially percolate upward.

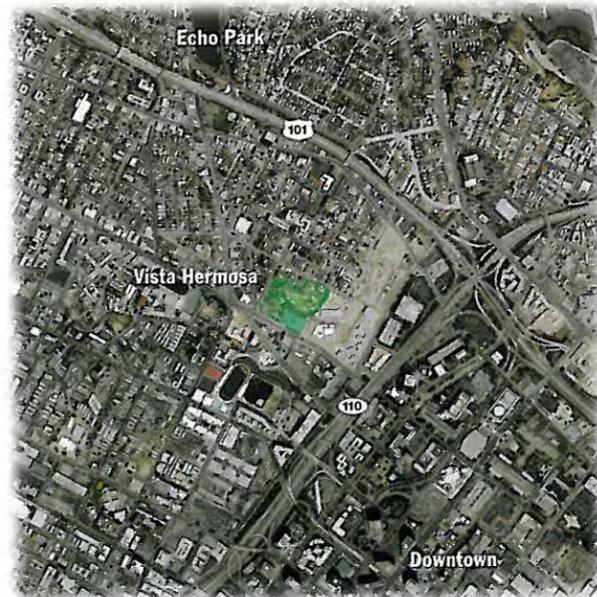
The school district had bought the property knowing the risks, but the district leaders figured any problems they ran into could be resolved along the way. People had, after all, been building on the oil field for years. But in the fall of 1998, they were forced to suspend construction temporarily after a state environmental agency informed the school district that pockets of methane under the site were more extensive than previously thought.

Then, a series of exposés in the local press created fears about the site’s safety and angered the public, who eventually forced out the school superintendent and the school board members who had supported the project. In January 2000, the new school board voted to kill the project, despite the fact that the building was 60 percent finished and approximately \$150 million had already been spent. The board members feared litigation; they were not convinced the site could be made safe.

For years, the project site sat unused, its half-finished buildings wrapped in plastic. But the technology for remediating the site was available, and it wasn’t particularly esoteric. The concentrations of methane and hydrogen sulfide found at the surface were not dangerous, and the gas beneath the surface was not under pressure. There would be no problem as long as the gas was not allowed to build up in an enclosed space, and active and passive venting systems, used to prevent the buildup of dangerous gases, were already in use throughout Los Angeles County. “It was just a matter of willpower,” remembers Edmiston.

Advocating for a Park

The site in Temple Beaudry first caught the attention of Edmiston and others at the conservancy in December 2002. The conservancy’s first urban park, the Augustus F. Hawkins Park in South



Merely 33 percent of the children living in the city of Los Angeles can walk to a park within a quarter mile of their house.

A bench located on a small berm offers one of the most romantic places to sit and stare at the Los Angeles skyline. The park is gated and closes around dusk.



GOOGLE EARTH, THIS PAGE, TOM LAMB/LAMB STUDIO, OPPOSITE

lower field as a native meadow than to its current use for active recreation. During the construction process, seeding a meadow was determined to be too complicated and time-consuming, given a neighborhood that was itching to use its park, so the area was planted with lawn instead. While the multipurpose field is much loved, the way it drains toward the center is not ideal.

The landscape architects' desire to create a small wetland on site was also never realized. The property is still owned by the school district, which has strict requirements for water features. To pass muster, the water needs to be crystal clear and the bottom of the pool needs to have a nonslip surface in case someone walks in. Early plans for releasing stormwater from a nearby storm sewer into the park were also abandoned because the water quality was too poor and there was not enough funding to clean it before it was released, says Margulies. However, there is a small pond near the amphitheater, designed to LAUSD guidelines, that kids like to play in.

Naturalistic native plantings are found throughout the site. "The intent was to re-create portions of the Santa Monica Mountains through different planting areas," says Romero. "The minute we put the trees in, it was like creating a new subdivision for birds. We had birds fighting for trees," remembers Landregan. Even though the trees are not yet grown in, many visitors had good things to say about the plantings. "I recognize a lot of the plants from when I go hiking out in the Simi Valley," remarked Stephanie Hathaway, who was visiting the park for the first time. "There's a lot of natural sages. The smells are just wonderful."

But plantings are not limited to natives; nonnatives including bougainvillea are used to provide color. "Perception is important," says Margulies. "[The conservancy] wanted to make sure the park would look attractive and have plants flowering on opening day. Some of our natives are a little more subtle."

The naturalistic plantings in the park are used as a learning tool by the MRCA, and designers hope they can be incorporated into lessons at the high school next door as well. (No longer wrapped in plastic, the school buildings were retrofitted with systems that vent and monitor underground gases and are now complete and filled with students). The MRCA's junior ranger program teaches younger kids who visit the park about plants, animals, and environmental issues. It prepares them for trips out into natural areas, so they know what is safe and what is unsafe. A program called "Transit to Trails" offers inner-city children and families, many of whom don't have access to cars, monthly field trips from Vista Hermosa to the beach and the Santa Monica Mountains.

Through the new park and the programs the MRCA provides, the neighborhood is coming together more tightly as a community. Ranger Soto says she hasn't encountered any issues with gangs, and neighbors seem to be less fearful as time goes on. "Initially, people worried about walking in the dark back home, but now people have made friends with their neighbors in the park so it's not real-

ly a big deal," she says. "Kids who weren't friends before are now friends. Seeing that really gives you a rewarding feeling." *LAMB*

Resources

■ *No Place to Play: a Comparative Analysis of Park Access in Seven Major Cities*, The Trust for Public Land, 2004. Available online at www.tpl.org/tier3_cd.cfm?content_item_id=14565&folder_id=266.

■ "Toward a Sustainable Los Angeles: A 'Nature's Services' Approach," University of Southern California Center for Sustainable Cities, March 2003. Available online at <http://college.usc.edu/geo/graphy/ESPE/publications/natureservices.html>.

■ "The School That Wasn't," by Susan Anderson; *The Nation*, June 5, 2000. Available online at www.thenation.com/doc/20000605/anderson.

■ "The Bolshevik Who Beat Belmont," by Ralph Frammolino; *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, January 7, 2001.

■ "Vista Hermosa Park Opens," by Teresa Watanabe; *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2008. Available online at <http://articles.latimes.com/>

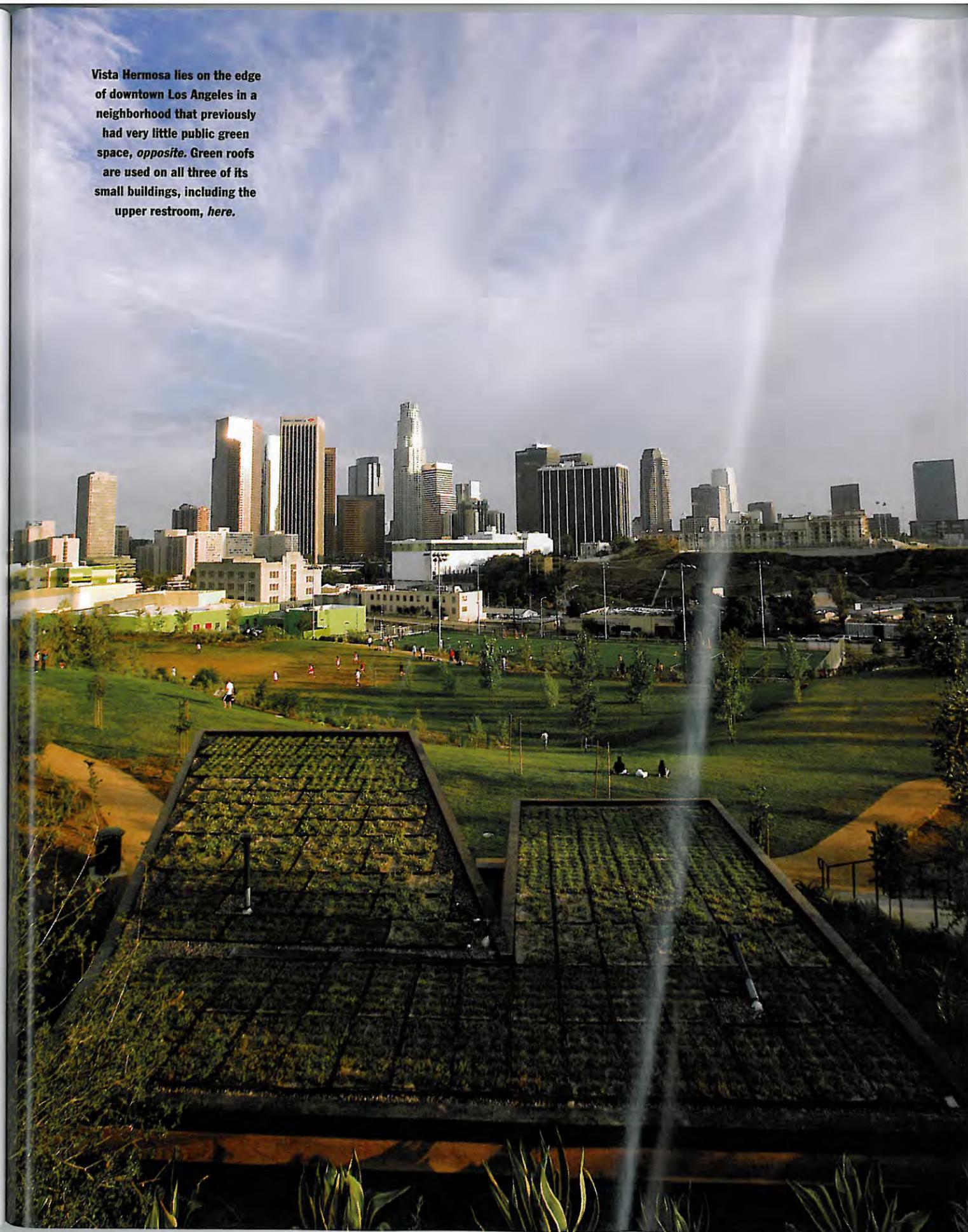
2008/jul/20/local-me-park20.

■ The environmental impact report and other official documents for Vista Hermosa are available online at www.laschools.org/vista-hermosa/documents.

PROJECT CREDITS **Owner:** Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles (Richard Alonzo, District F superintendent; Rick Hijazi, senior project manager; Tom Watson, health and safety; Edmundo Rodriguez). **Client/lead agencies:** Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy/Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, State of California (Joe Edmiston, Honorary ASLA, executive director; Stephanie V. Landregan, ASLA, chief landscape architect; Barbara Romero, project manager/community liaison, Amy Lethbridge, MRCA education). **Additional oversight:** Division of State Architect, State of California (Frank Chia). **Landscape architecture/prime consultant:** Mia Lehrer + Associates, Los Angeles (Mia Lehrer, FASLA, design partner; Esther Margulies, ASLA, managing partner; Jeff Hutchins, ASLA, project manager). **General contractor:** Los Angeles Engineering, Covina, California (Ron Halquist, project principal; Theodore Posch, project manager). **Civil/structural engineering:** KPFF Inc., Los Angeles (Rick Davis, civil principal in charge; Kumar Halbe, civil project engineer; Aaron Reynolds, structural engineer; Devlin Thomas, structural engineer). **Electrical engineering:** Nicolas Abanto. **Architect:** ERW Design, Malibu, California (Elaine Renee Weissman). **Irrigation:** Sweeny + Associates, San Diego (Daniel Zumallen). **Pond consultant:** EPD Consultants, San Pedro, California (Kevin Poffenbarger). **Mitigation engineers:** SCS Engineers, Long Beach, California (Mike Leonard, senior technical manager); Meredith & Associates Inc., Los Angeles (Thomas Dolan, senior engineer). **Construction specifications consultants:** Jerry Orland. **Cost estimating:** C. P. O'Halloran Associates Inc., Westlake Village, California (Ciaran O'Halloran). **Gate and fencing artist:** Brett Goldstone, Brett Goldstone Inc., Los Angeles. **Public art (signage, etc.):** Art Share, Los Angeles.

"Initially, people worried about walking in the dark back home, but now people have made friends with their neighbors in the park so it's not really a big deal."

Vista Hermosa lies on the edge of downtown Los Angeles in a neighborhood that previously had very little public green space, opposite. Green roofs are used on all three of its small buildings, including the upper restroom, here.



TOM LAMB/LAMB STUDIO, OPPOSITE

Mia Lehrer + Associates' design for Vista Hermosa Park includes (A) a synthetic turf soccer field, (B) a children's adventure area/playground, (C) an informal seating area called the grotto, (D) a large picnic area, (E) an entry plaza, (F) permeable concrete parking lots, (G) a park office building,



KEY	
	Chaparral
	Grassland
	Oak woodland
	Lawn
	Detention lawn
	Riparian zone
	Green roof
	Drought-tolerant demonstration garden
	Synthetic turf
	Permeable concrete

(H) an outdoor classroom, (I) two restrooms, (J) a water feature, (K) a loop path surrounded by native plantings in most places, and (L) a bowl-shaped lawn area that encourages infiltration and provides a place where locals can play sports.

The conservancy did not try to shove a plan down community members' throats; they asked what the community wanted.

Central Los Angeles, had been a huge success, and they were looking to replicate that success throughout the city (see "The Wilds of South Central," *Landscape Architecture*, April 2002). Edmiston was scouting other sites in the neighborhood with Jose Huizar, then a school board member, and Ed Reyes, a city councilman, when he spotted the shrink-wrapped buildings of the Belmont Learning Center and the large area of open space next to them. "What's that?" Edmiston asked, and they went over to look. Could this be the space they were looking for?

A few months later, the school district announced new proposals for the Belmont Learning Center site. A popular new superintendent backed a plan to sell off the existing buildings and build a small high school on an empty section of the site. But Huizar believed they could get the classroom space they needed faster by finishing the buildings they'd started. Inspired by the conservancy's work,

Huizar met with Edmiston to see if they would be interested in developing a park on the site. There was only a small window of opportunity, so the conservancy would have to move quickly. Stephanie Landregan, ASLA, its chief landscape architect at that time, called Mia Lehrer + Associates (ML+A) to organize a charrette. ML+A, a Los Angeles-based firm, had worked on a few other projects for the conservancy and had a master services agreement with them.

That weekend, Mia Lehrer, FASLA, visited the site for the first time with conservancy staff. Immediately, she was struck by the amazing view of downtown. "Vista hermosa," whispered Lehrer, who was born in El Salvador. *Vista hermosa*, Spanish for beautiful view, became the name of their proposal and a guiding force behind their design. Landregan and designers at ML+A worked long hours, producing a conceptual plan for the site and renderings that would sell the idea. Concepts were faxed back and forth between the de-



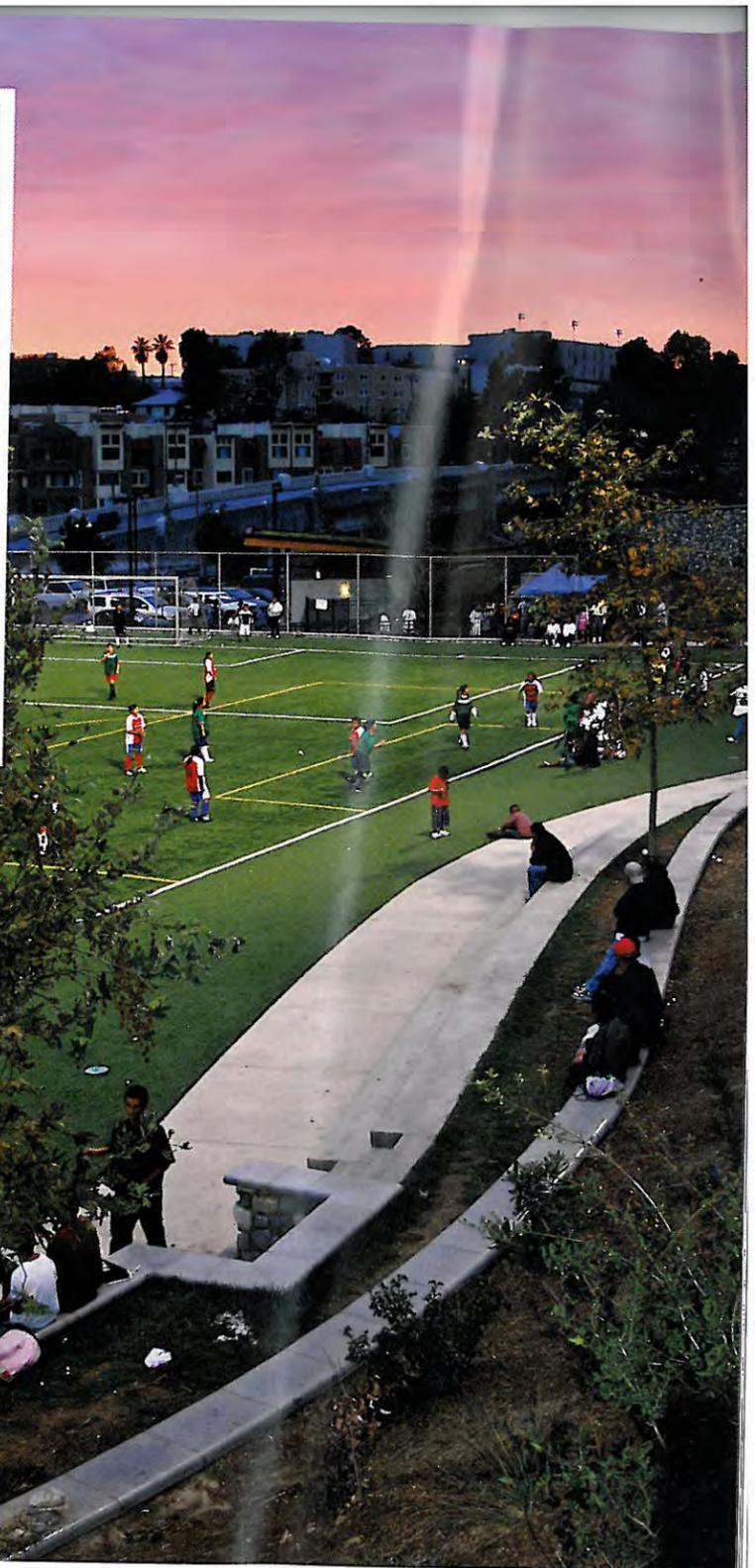
A girl runs across the giant snake sculpture in the children's adventure area, opposite. Organized soccer teams dominate the large turf soccer field, right. Rough-surfaced retaining walls with a faux river rock veneer, above, are designed to have a national park character and do not seem to attract graffiti.

They like to run. They like to roll. It's not necessarily just swinging on a swing."

Sustainable Features

Since protecting natural resources is an essential part of the conservancy's mission, "we tried to put in as many sustainable elements as we could," says Romero. Every effort is made to keep water from running off the site. "The majority of the park is permeable—99 percent of it!" declares Lehrer. Green roofs cover the two restroom buildings and the park ranger's office. Decomposed granite is used for most of the paths and gathering areas. Permeable pavers are used near the entry, and permeable concrete is used for the parking lot. Only the concrete ramps aren't permeable.

To slow the water as it runs down the site, the lower field is graded like a bowl. Water that gathers in this bowl-shaped area is diverted by pipe to a 20,000-gallon cistern under the parking lot, which is used to irrigate some of the plantings on the site (the rest are irrigated using city water). But there is also a strong



emphasis on infiltration; the pipe is undersized so that water has a chance to soak into the ground and replenish the aquifer that is an important source of water for the region. "In Los Angeles, we try to infiltrate whenever we can," says Margulies. "It's a radical sea change from five years ago."

The bowl shape and the undersized pipe are vestigial design features that relate better to the original plan for planting the

TOM LAMB/LAMB STUDIO, LEFT; DANIEL JOST, ASLA, RIGHT

COURTESY MIA LEHRER + ASSOCIATES



field is fenced separately from the more naturalistic parts of the park, so it can be limited to schoolchildren during the day and stay open for night games held under the lights. Drawing on community input, the designers located it at the south end of the site, where its bright lights would be less of a nuisance.

The designers balanced the formal soccer field with informal lawn areas. Carlos Calderon, a 14-year-old who lives nearby, says

swings and stuff," remarked Dorit Dowlerguero, who was there with her eight-year-old daughter. But her daughter, Liberty, liked the turtle, a grassy hill nearby, and having a place where she could run.

Romero does not believe that manufactured play equipment is essential. "We have surveyed kids about what they like to do in parks," she says. "They say they like to jump. They like to climb.

he comes twice a week to play football or soccer, but he rarely gets a chance to play on the fancy turf field. The soccer field is only free for a half hour each day, according to Judy Perez Soto, a park ranger with the MRCA. Even during the summer months when school is not in session, the field is locked during the day, and at night it's reserved for league play managed by the city's department of recreation and parks. Soto says the soccer leagues charge a fee, which many children in the immediate neighborhood can't afford. Other landscape architects would be wise to consider how they can design spaces that provide opportunities for athletes not involved in team sports.

While the older children gravitate toward the fields, young children play in an adventure play area designed to get them in touch with nature. "It was

Romero does not believe that manufactured play equipment is essential.

meant to be unconventional," says Lehrer. "Kids make their own fun. They play with sticks and stones, scramble up and down a streambed, and climb on [sculptures of] animals native to the area." Prop artists from the local movie industry were brought in to work on a giant snake and a turtle that has a small slide attached to it. The snake is used as an unusual balance beam and children scamper along it.

When I visited on a Saturday afternoon, five kids were hanging out here. While a few children chased one another around, taking advantage of obstacles like logs and boulders, most were just hanging out in the crevices of the turtle. "We do wish they would have more

TOM LAMB LAMB STUDIO



signers and Edmiston, who critiqued their plans from his home.

They presented to the school board the following Monday. Huizar was excited about the proposal, but the other members of the school board initially gave it a lukewarm response.

Unwilling to give up, they took their plans to the community to see if they could get enough grassroots support to move the project along. They only had a few weeks before the school board would vote. Huizar's office, which was familiar with the main stakeholders in the community, helped set up meetings in local schools.

Unlike the school district's previous attempts over the years, the conservancy did not try to shove a plan down community members' throats; they asked what the community wanted. Lehrer remembers one of those early meetings, held in a tent on land overlooking the site. "We told them there's a very strong possibility for a park," she recalls. "What are your hopes for what can happen?" Many of the community members speak Spanish as their first or only language. Lehrer and Barbara Romero, a planner with the conservancy who managed the project, are both fluent, and this helped create a level of comfort and trust.

The main challenges were convincing community mem-

The grotto, above, provides an informal council ring for gatherings such as campfires. A group plays bocce ball in the relatively flat decomposed granite area in the center of the grotto, below.

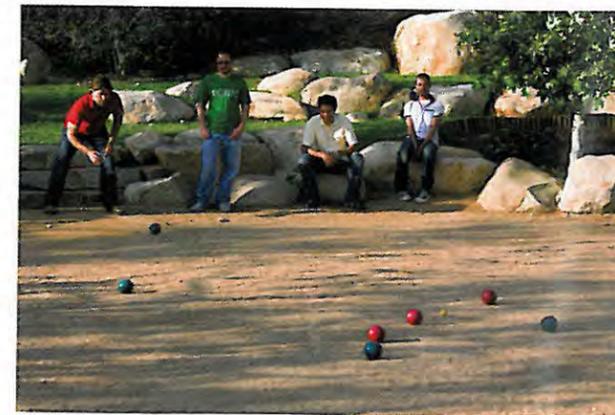
bers that the gases could be mitigated and that the conservancy was working in their interest. "People were concerned the park wasn't going to be for them," recalls Landregan.

In addition to the meetings, the staff at the conservancy also organized field trips for stake-

holders and elected officials. They bused them to the Augustus F. Hawkins Park and their parks in the mountains to show them what the conservancy was capable of. They took them to other developments around town that had successfully mitigated underground gases. And they explained how having a park on part of the site was ideal, as it would allow the gases beneath to disperse.

Edmiston, Huizar, and Reyes worked on selling the park to other local leaders, and soon the state senator, the state assemblyman, and even the mayor had come out in favor of building a park. But

the decision was the school district's to make, and Superintendent Roy Romer was not budging. Romer was not a small-time bureaucrat; before being named as the superintendent, he had been the governor of Colorado and the head of the Democratic National Committee. He'd been brought in to reform the school district, and he'd been allowed to rule it with somewhat of an iron fist, says Edmiston. He did not like the conservancy stepping on his



TOM LAMB LAMB STUDIO

turf. "He calls me up and says, 'I don't care if you get the governor and all these people; you're not going to have your park,'" Edmiston remembers.

However, the conservancy's efforts were working. One by one, the necessary votes were secured, and two days after Romer told Edmiston he would lose, the school board voted for the park—with the superintendent supporting it. It took another year to solidify the plan, but the conservancy was eventually granted a 20-year lease for 10.5 acres.

Not Just Nature

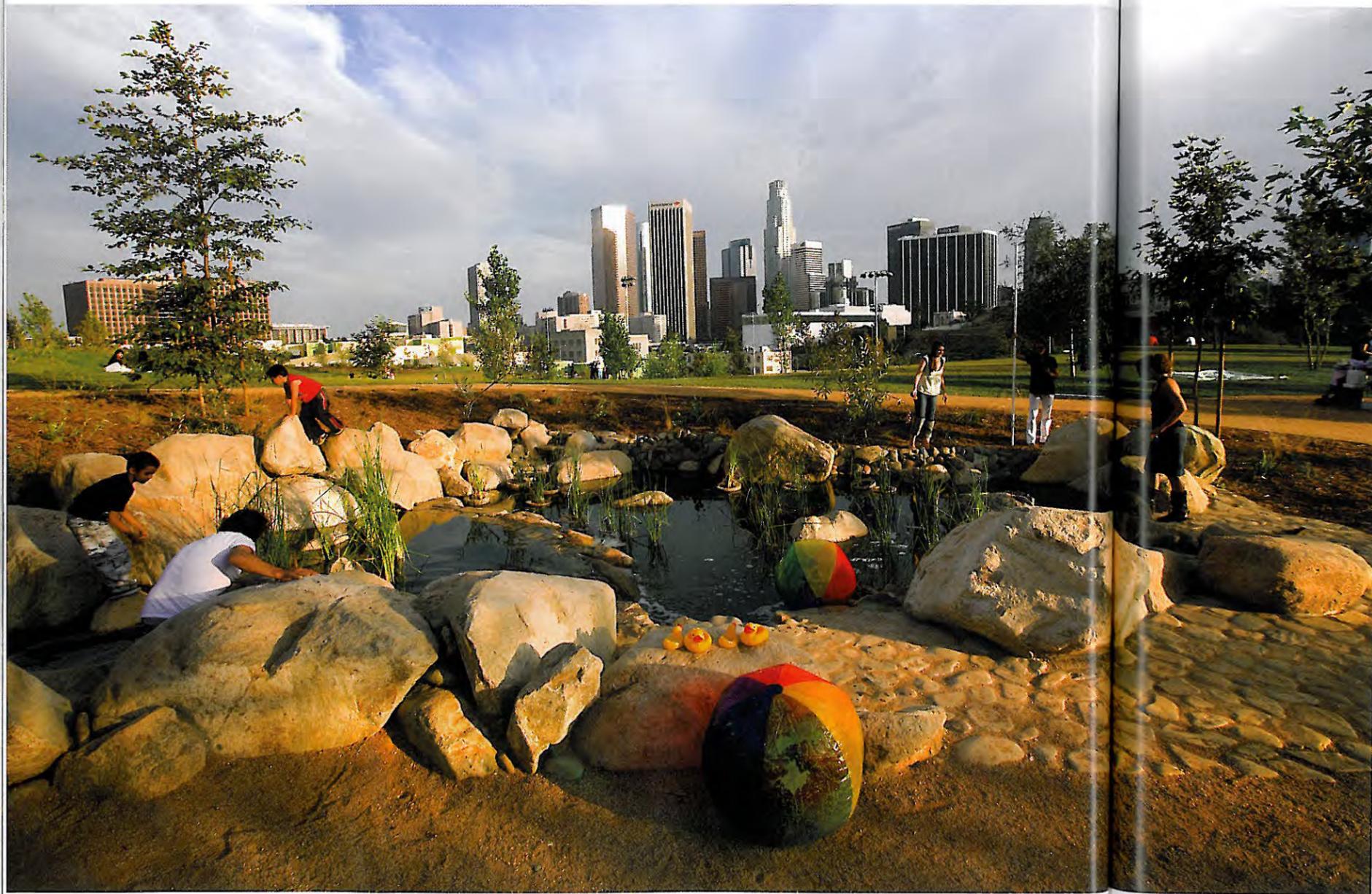
But what kind of park would Vista Hermosa be? The conservancy specializes in parks where city dwellers can experience nature. "We generally don't do active recre-

ation," explains Romero. But it was clear from the beginning that passive recreation alone would not suffice here. Through their community meetings, the design team learned that an empty field where the local children played soccer had recently been fenced off.

"There was no negotiating a soccer field," remembers Lehrer. "They wanted that, period. There were even discussions whether there should be three soccer fields, and we should just forget the park." But there were other unmet needs within the local community aside from places to play soccer. Walking trails were also needed, as were places to have outdoor celebrations. The landscape architects brokered a compromise, providing a single soccer field on the site. The rest of the park

The conservancy specializes in parks where city dwellers can experience nature.

TOM LAMBLAMB STUDIO



would be developed in a more naturalistic way to accommodate many different users.

Vista Hermosa sits on a fairly steep site with a 60-foot change in elevation from top to bottom. When the designers first visited, it had been graded into three distinct terraces with sharp drops between them. ML+A regraded the site to make the landforms softer. "We had a huge earth-moving operation—something our agency had never done," says Landregan, because the conservancy usually works with less-impacted sites.

To keep costs down, ML+A tried to avoid using retaining walls as much as possible and worked to reduce the amount of soil exported off site. That was really challenging, according to ML+A managing partner Esther Margulies, ASLA, due to the mitigation method used throughout the park. To prevent gases from being trapped and building up just below the surface, the top 18 inch-

es of topsoil were stockpiled, an 18-inch layer of sand was spread over the entire site, and the topsoil was laid down on top of that. The sand layer was introduced so that the gases will be able to percolate horizontally if areas of the topsoil become compacted. As it reaches the top of the soil, the gas vents into the air where it rises up into the atmosphere or is carried away by the wind. It is not able to concentrate to dangerous levels. Under the park buildings and the school next door, membranes prevent the gases from entering the buildings, and venting systems prevent their accumulation beneath the buildings.

Today, grading helps to separate different areas of the park so that it can serve many types of users simultaneously. Sitting around a campfire organized in the informal stone amphitheater, you are not disturbed by the teams playing soccer, the children playing on the playground, or the jogger winding around the other side of the loop path, and you cannot see the cars parked in the parking lot below.

This sense of separation that is desirable during the day is less desirable at night. Because visibility is not particularly good into the site from the street, the park is fenced off and closes at dusk. The artificial turf soccer



Passive recreation opportunities abound at Vista Hermosa including searching for frogs at the water feature near the grotto, opposite, walking through naturalistic areas, below, and picnicking, left. "Culturally, people in the Latino community like parks for quinceneras, weddings, and other celebrations," notes Mia Lehrer, FASLA.

