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A River Runs Through It: Community Access to the Bronx River in Tremont and Hunts Point

Matthew Bodnar

May 2011

Rivers that run through urban areas are often neglected and forgotten. This is because the primary services that they provide for major cities are transportation and shipping. Many urban waterways have become polluted as a result and fail to reach much of their potential. New York City's rivers and waterfronts are not typically a place where people seek recreation in the form of swimming or boating, except for a few places such as Coney Island, City Island, and Rockaway Beach. Other waterways that could be assets for their communities are also sometimes overlooked. After living in the Bronx for three years, the only knowledge that I had about the Bronx River was that it ran through the forest in the Botanical Gardens. It was not until the fall of 2010 that I learned that there was much more of a history to the river that flowed through the gardens and had a parkway named after it.

While spending a semester doing volunteer work with the Bronx River Alliance's restoration crew, I saw many places throughout the Bronx along the river that I probably would have never visited had I not been a volunteer. I helped to clear fallen trees out of the river in the northern part of the Bronx in Shoelace Park on one occasion and ventured all the way to the south Bronx where I assisted the crew with building the structures for an oyster farm off the shore of Soundview Park. I learned more about the river that was only minutes from my home during this experience and I also saw many parks that I never knew existed. I was intrigued by the contrast between the dense urban environment of the surrounding neighborhoods and the peaceful parks along the river. These events inspired me to further investigate parks in the Bronx.

All parks provide services for their communities based on what facilities they may contain. Parks with ball fields, basketball courts, and skate parks are inviting to people who enjoy outdoor recreational activity. Playgrounds in parks draw parents with their children.

Some parks benefit from their natural landscapes, which could include a river, a lake, or a mountain. Sometimes landscape architects actually attempt to recreate these landscape features in parks that they are designing. The parks along the Bronx River provide services that typical neighborhood parks have as well as some of the natural beauty of the river. I was interested in what people use these parks for and how, if at all, they utilize the river. I was also curious about the way that people perceive their parks and what their recommendations to improve them are. Thus, I began to conduct research about the parks along the Bronx River. I initially researched the history of the Bronx River and the construction of the parks and the Bronx River Parkway. Then, I chose two of these parks, each with different features and amenities, to study. I recorded observations about how the parks are used by people who visit them. I also interviewed several people to hear their ideas about the park, its uses, the way they perceive it, and how they think it could be improved.

Chapter 1: History of the Bronx River

The Bronx River drains an area of 56.4 miles and has tributaries that stretch for over 80 miles (Dunkak, 2007, p.9). However, the river has been altered greatly by both natural and human forces throughout its existence. The first of these forces to affect the river were those of the natural world. The Bronx River used to empty into the Harlem River until a massive piece of ice changed the course of the river causing it to flow south through the Botanical Gardens and empty into the East River between Clason's Point and Hunts Point (Dunkak, 2007, p. 9). The surrounding landscape was also shaped by natural events. Sediment accumulated while the river was covered by the ocean 600 million years ago and formed three types of rock which are currently found in the Bronx River Valley: Manhattan schist, Inwood limestone or dolomite, and

Fordham gneiss (Dunkak, 2007, p.9). Since the culmination of these events, the Bronx River has primarily been shaped and altered as a result of human factors.

Native American tribes such as the Weckquasgeek and Siwanoy reached the Bronx River Valley over 8,000 years ago but the first permanent settlements in the region developed in the 13th century (Dunkak, 2007, p.10). These original settlers hunted in the river valley and used birch bark to make kettles, tulip trees to build canoes, and white oak bark to create remedies (Dunkak, 2007, p.10). The Weckquasgeek and Siwanoy tribes resided in the valley alone until European colonization reached this region of the New World. In 1623, the Dutch settled on the island of Manhattan and began trading with the Weckquasgeek for furs until most of the fur bearing animals in the area, such as beaver, otter, mink, and wildcats, were all extinct by the end of the 17th century (Dunkak, 2007, p.10). The Dutch colony continued to expand as a new influx of immigrants arrived in Manhattan.

The first European settler in the Bronx River Valley was Jonas Bronck, who named the river Bronck's River (Dunkak, 2007, p.10). This is where the name of the borough and the river originate. Previously, the Native American tribes in the region referred to the river as "aquahung", which means high bluffs (Dunkak, 2007, p.10). Jonas Bronck purchased 500 acres of land from the Native Americans in 1639, however, he was found dead in 1643, most likely because of a feud with the tribe that he had purchased the land from (Dunkak, 2007, p.10). The next settlers to enter the Bronx were the English, who took over the colony from the Dutch. English settlers arrived in 1664 and created the manors of Fordham and Morrisania on the west side of the river and smaller farms were built on the Bronx River's east side (Dunkak, 2007, p.11). The colonists built mills and other forms of infrastructure to assist with the production and transportation of goods. In 1670, the first bridge, Williamsbridge, was constructed over the

Bronx River and is now part of Boston Post Road (Dunkak, 2007, p.11). The construction of this bridge provided a link that facilitated the shipment of goods from the small farms in the eastern Bronx to the markets in Manhattan. The colonists also built mills along the Bronx River to harness the power of water. These mills were used to turn grain into flour, logs into lumber, and raw tobacco into snuff (Dunkak, 2007, p.11). Tobacco was shipped from the south to mills in the north to be converted into snuff. Peter and George Lorillard owned a snuff mill that is located on the Bronx River in what is now the Botanical Gardens (Dunkak, 2007, p.12).

The quality of the Bronx River and the watershed became polluted throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as more immigrants moved into the river valley. By the 1880s, residential sewage and industrial waste flowed through the river as a result of urban development along the banks of the river and throughout the watershed (Mason, 2009, p.191). The degraded state of the river was the first of several factors that led to plans for the restoration of the Bronx River. In response to the threats to the public health of people living in the watershed, the Bronx Sewer Commission was formed to study the feasibility of constructing a new sewer system to prevent sewage and waste from entering the river and water table (Mason, 2009, p.191). J.J. Croes, the engineer commissioned to conduct this study, recommended not only that the city build a sewer along the Bronx River, but also a roadway and park reservation on top of the underground sewer system (Mason, 2009, p.191). This recommendation started the movement to form a parkway commission that would be responsible for the massive parkway project.

Several important figures played crucial roles in gaining support for a park and parkway building project. Additionally, several of these people would later become members of the Bronx River Parkway Commission. William White Niles, who was also a member of the Bronx Sewer Commission, visited Dr. Hornaday, the director of the New York Zoological Society, in

Scotland in 1901 and saw the River Ness for the first time (Mason, 2009, p.192). He was amazed that a river could flow through a built community and remain as clean as it was when it exited as when it entered (Mason, 2009, p.192). Upon returning to the Bronx, he became determined to launch an improvement effort. Dr. Hornaday and the head of the New York Zoological Society, Madison Grant, saw the impact that the polluted Bronx River had on wildlife as birds began to die in the Bronx Zoo (Mason, 2009, p.192). This threat to wildlife in the Bronx Zoo was another factor leading to the establishment of a commission to clean up the river. William White Niles, Dr. Hornaday, and Madison Grant lobbied for a state-funded parkway that would run along the Bronx River from the Bronx Zoo northward to what would become the Kensico Dam in Valhalla (Mason, 2009, p.192). Niles, who had been elected to state legislature in 1895, drafted a bill to establish a parkway commission and after several sessions, the bill passed (Mason, 2009, p.192).

The Bronx Parkway Commission mandated the following goals as part of the project: clean up pollution both in the river and on the land, create a reservation, form a commission encompassing Westchester and New York City, and build a roadway (Mason, 2009, p.187). The construction of the Bronx River Parkway would be a regional planning effort that involved building multiple types of infrastructure, including transportation, public health, recreational, social, economic, and administrative (Mason, 2009, p.177). The project also drew greatly from preservation ideology of the time in which some areas would be selectively preserved and others destroyed (Mason, 2009, p.182). The biography of the members of the Bronx River Parkway Commission explains some of the motives that the members of the commission had during the implementation of the project. James G. Cannon, a member of the Bronx River Parkway Commission until his death in 1916, was a banker and a Westchester real estate developer

(Mason, 2009, p.193). Cannon's real estate company, Scarsdale Estates, was founded in 1898 to develop housing and build a golf club in Westchester and was also a contributor and vendor of land that would be used for the park reservation (Mason, 2009, p.193). Therefore, James G. Cannon's involvement in the Bronx River Parkway Commission showed that he was anticipating a growth in suburban development as a result of the creation of the parkway and park reservation (Mason, 2009, p.193). Another member of the commission, Madison Grant, who was also one of the founders and head of the New York Zoological Society, was a lawyer, a nature conservationist, and a writer who was a proponent of eugenics and scientific racism (Mason, 2009, p.194). Grant believed in the superiority of the northern white European race and wrote books about the inferiority of nonwhite people, including Jews and Italians (Mason, 2009, p.194). He also lobbied for immigration restriction to prevent more immigrants from moving to the United States and was involved in efforts to save the California Redwoods and the Alaskan wild (Mason, 2009, p.194). Madison Grant therefore intended to displace ethnic community while clearing slums along the Bronx River. He wanted to restore the river to its natural state by cleaning up pollution using native flora and fauna in the landscape as well as removing people that he did not view as purely American (Mason, 2009, p.194). Madison Grant led the Bronx River Parkway Commission throughout the duration of the project and chaired weekly meeting for twenty years (Mason, 2009, p.195). The presence of Madison Grant and James G. Cannon on the Bronx River Parkway Commission had a definite impact on the way the project would be implemented and how it would be viewed.

The first goal of creating a parkway and park reservation was to clean up the Bronx River. However, river restoration and environmental clean up were uncommon at this time. The Bronx River Parkway Commission examined efforts to restore the Charles River in Boston and

Wissahickon Creek in Philadelphia (Mason, 2009, p.199). The project to clean up the Charles River was called the Muddy River Improvement, which intended to improve the sanitary quality of the river as well as to prevent flooding (Mason, 2009, p.199). Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the designers of Central Park, was involved in this project, specifically in reclaiming the land in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood by planting indigenous plants to restore the marsh on which the neighborhood sat (Mason, 2009, p.199). The Commission also drew greatly from Olmsted's nineteenth century park ideology, in which naturalistic design, transportation design, and large public works projects were combined to achieve social reform and increase real estate development in the area surrounding the park (Mason, 2009, p.199). To achieve these goals, the Bronx River Parkway Commission would first have to find sources of funding.

The Bronx River Parkway Commission lacked a direct source of funds from the state legislature and it also lacked the ability to issue bonds (Mason, 2009, p.199). As a result, funding was contributed by local governments from New York City and Westchester. These local governments had the ability to issue bonds to fund the project, unlike the Commission (Mason, 2009, p.199). Three quarters of the funding came from New York City while only one quarter of the funding came from Westchester (Mason, 2009, p.199). This is particularly interesting because the majority of the land that would be included in the reservation was located in Westchester (approximately three quarters in Westchester and one quarter in New York City) (Mason, 2009, p.199). However, the Bronx River Parkway Commission argued that the city would benefit more from the river cleanup than Westchester and should therefore cover more of the costs (Mason, 2009, p.199). However, because a larger area of the reservation was located in Westchester, they benefited more than the city did from the project because of increased land values and tax revenues (Mason, 2009, p.199). The disproportional benefits given to

Westchester County did not go unnoticed. In 1917, bills were drafted to abolish the commission and they were charged with a misuse of public funds, however, the commission's political connections helped them avoid being dissolved (Mason, 2009, p.200). With funding secured, the Bronx River Parkway Commission then needed to acquire the land that would be used for the parkway and reservation.

In 1906, the commission began property acquisitions (Mason, 2009, p.183). The Bronx River Parkway Commission claimed that buildings and communities formed in the later half of the nineteenth century in the river valley were "blighted" (Mason, 2009, p.213). This therefore justified the commission's intentions to evict people from their homes and begin the process of clearing the land. Mason notes that even properties that were not in poor condition were often condemned and cleared if it was necessary to make space for the project (Mason, 2009, p.215). Once the commission gained the title to a parcel of land, they immediately began to raze the land and tear down buildings to encourage nearby property owners to sell (Mason, 2009, p.215). The majority of the 370 buildings cleared were residential and a third of all properties acquired were condemned (Mason, 2009, p.215). There were also differences between the way the commission perceived the value of these properties and the way the owners did. The commission selected an architect to appraise the property and the land, however, this appraisal did not account for the costs of moving or lost business revenues (Mason, 2009, p.217). Additionally, if a price could not be agreed upon, the commission would condemn the property in order to acquire it and many people were left without sufficient funds to relocate (Mason, 2009, p.216). For example, the commission purchased a church for \$16,540 even though Reverend Joseph A. Marinaro said that he would need at least \$30,000 to relocate and construct a new building (Mason, 2009, p.221).

By the end of the land acquisition period, the commission had acquired land from 1,400 different land-owners (Mason, 2009, p.183).

Many people were displaced during the construction of the parkway, including workers who helped to construct it. Much of the seasonal workforce who worked on grading the river, building lakes, planting, topsoiling, seeding, paving, and building was comprised of Italian immigrants who living in the communities that surrounded the river (Mason, 2009, p.198). One such community that was displaced was a cluster of 104 buildings in White Plains owned by Italian and Sicilian immigrants (Mason, 2009, p.219). The Bronx River Parkway Commission treated these laborers as expendable while they placed great trust in the hands of the engineers and landscape architects working on the project (Mason, 2009, p.198). For example, from 1920-1921, landscape architect Gilmore Clarke's salary increased from \$3600 to \$4200 while the hourly wage of immigrant laborers was reduced from fifty to forty cents (Mason, 2009, p.198). The commission's public works team helped to create a reservation of over 1,000 acres that followed a sixteen mile strip of the river (Mason, 2009, p.189). The displaced laborers built a 40 foot wide roadway that ran parallel to the Bronx River and the Harlem Railroad with 37 bridges and viaducts crossing it (Mason, 2009, p.189-190). They restored the river by dredging and cleaning eight miles of it, straightening six miles of it, and by stopping 154 sources of point pollution (Mason, 2009, p.189). Additionally, they helped to remove billboards, 370 buildings, and other structures that were in the way for the construction of the reservation (Mason, 2009, p.190). Therefore, Madison Grant successfully managed to clean the river physically and aesthetically while also displacing immigrants who he viewed as inferior. Not only did he do this, but he also hired the immigrants who he intended to displace in order to help with the process.

One must ask how a commission with such unjust motives was able to pull off such a feat. This task was done by reconstructing the historical memory of the area and by using before and after photographs to aid the commission's cause. The Bronx River Parkway Commission recounted early historical narratives about Jonas Broncks and the early European settlers in the valley as well as stories about events that took place in the valley during the Revolutionary War (Mason, 2009, p.205). They also cited Joseph Rodman Drake's poetry about the river as well as R.L. Pyne's paintings of the river that portrayed the river as a romantic, pastoral subject (Mason, 2009, p.206-208). The commission idealized the distant memories of the river up until the construction of the New York and New Haven railroads in 1844 and argued that the period in between 1840 and 1890 was characterized by a blighted, polluted, and degraded landscape (Mason, 2009, p.207-208). They did so through the use of photographs. The before pictures of developments along the river were deceptively taken in the winter and portrayed the worst aspects of those communities (Mason, 2009, p.211). Pictures that were taken throughout the construction of the parkway and upon its completion were always taken on sunny days and featured the beautified landscape that the commission had helped to create (Mason, 2009, p.211). By deceiving the public, the commission was able to gain support for a project in which many people were treated unjustly.

Chapter 2: Site Analysis

The area of the Bronx River that is the focus of my study begins directly south of the Bronx Zoo. This area is unique because this part of the river was not affected by the Bronx River Parkway project, which began north of the Bronx Zoo and continued to the Kensico Dam (Mason, 2009, p.192). As a result, the area that directly surrounds the Bronx River is much more urban and developed than the Bronx Park reservation to the north of the Zoo. However, the

South Bronx Greenway is currently under construction and upon its completion will provide crucial links between the parks in these neighborhoods.



The first park that I will be examining in my case study is River Park. River Park is located on the corner of East 180th Street and Boston Road. The park features a view of the river as it exits the Bronx Zoo, including a waterfall at the north side of the park. The river flows south under East 180th Street and enters a part of the river known as West Farms Rapids. The park consists of four main sections. As one enters the park at its only entrance on the northeast corner of East 180th Street and Boston Rd., one can see picnic tables on grassy areas on either side of the path, a playground and wash station to the north, and an area to the right to view the river. River Park has many benches along the path that runs along the water to allow viewing of the river and the waterfall. There is also a fence near the river bank with a sign that says “No Swimming.” Additionally, there are several picnic tables and grills for barbequing near the entrance to the park, which can be seen on either side on the main path in aerial view of the park

below. The park has recently been renovated and features a wash station as well as new playground equipment, such as swings and a jungle gym. Dogs are not allowed in the park and it closes at dusk. I also noticed that the park was closed during the winter when snow was covering the park and its paths. The activities that the park provides will surely influence the use of the park. The playground is intended for the use of children and the benches, which are directed toward the river, are surely meant for sitting and watching the Bronx River. Additionally, I would imagine that the picnic tables and barbeques attract larger groups during the summertime.



As a result of the Greenway being under construction, the closest park to River Park on the south side of the zoo is Concrete Plant Park, which is located between Westchester Avenue and the Bruckner Boulevard. However, until the greenway is completed, walking between the parks along the river is not an option. West Farms Rapids Park, which runs from East 180th Street to East Tremont Avenue, is currently closed for construction and blocked by a fence. The

path running along the river was being reconstructed and it appeared that the Parks Department was in the process of laying down stones for a pathway. This park can be accessed right next to the East 180th Street bridge next to the Lampert Houses as well as on East 179th Street. Because I could not follow this section of the greenway, I continued walking south on Boston Road until I reached West Farms Road, which runs parallel to the Sheridan Expressway. Starlight Park, which is currently under construction as well and is estimated to open in 2012, runs parallel to the Bronx River on the opposite side of the Sheridan Expressway. As a result, to access the park from the west side of the river requires crossing the blue steel 174th Street Bridge over the expressway. I walked across the bridge and caught a glimpse of construction workers building a small pedestrian bridge in the park that will connect the east and west riverbanks. However, the only access points to the park that I noticed on the east or west sides of the river were from stairs on the 174th Street Bridge. There was very little pedestrian traffic on the bridge the day I walked across it and both stairwells were fenced off, preventing access to the park.

As I continued walking south on West Farms Road, which is dominated primarily by auto body shops, a large storage facility, and a Department of Sanitation headquarters, I reached the intersection of Westchester Avenue and Whitlock Avenue, where the 6 train Whitlock Avenue station is located. The 6 train travels west on Westchester Avenue and then turns onto Whitlock Avenue continuing south. Concrete Plant Park is located on the south side of Westchester Avenue on a portion of the street where the 6 train runs overhead, which can be seen below. Additionally, directly west of the park are Amtrak's Northeast Corridor tracks, followed by the Sheridan Expressway, and Whitlock Avenue. This intricate tangle of infrastructure can easily cause one to overlook the entrance to Concrete Plant Park on Westchester Avenue, which looks



like a small access road but is marked by a New York Parks Department sign. The first time I visited the park, I spent several minutes walking around this area until I noticed the entrance. There is also an entrance on the southern side of the park, which leads to the Bruckner Boulevard, which is also a very busy road that runs next to the Bruckner Expressway.

Concrete Plant Park is located on a seven acre site that use to be home to a concrete batch mixing site (New York City Department of Parks and Recreation). Cement manufacturing began on this site in 1945 and ended in 1987 when it remained abandoned until the park was completed in September 2009 (New York City Department of Parks and Recreation). This waterfront park is unique because silos, hoppers, and conveyor structures from the remains of the plant were left standing as a reminder of the park's history. Additionally, another interesting abandoned building is located above the Amtrak train tracks. The Westchester Avenue Station, which used to be a one of the Bronx stations on the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad, was built in 1908 and designed by Cass Gilbert (Gray, 2009). The station is elevated above the train tracks on a steel frame and has been on the New York Landmark Conservancy's list of endangered buildings for several years (NYTIMES). The decaying train station and the remains of the old concrete plant are both a testament to the history of the area.

Concrete Plant Park will link Starlight Park to the sections of the greenway south of the Bruckner Expressway. It has one main path that is ideal for biking or walking and a promenade with seating that allows people to observe the river. Seating in the park varies from simple benches to lounge chairs to tables for playing chess. Concrete Plant Park is an interesting place to sit and watch the river because the Department of Environmental Protection regularly removes floatable debris from a "skim boom" that collects this debris before it enters the East River. One can observe the DEP boats removing debris from the skim boom with extendable metal arms that



pull debris onboard the boat. The park also allows for waterfront access with a boat loading point located at the southern end of the park.

Chapter 3: Park Usage

The initial component of my case studies of River Park and Concrete Plant Park involved recording observations about park usage. First, I would take note of outside factors that might affect who uses the park and whether the park gets used at all, such as the weather conditions, the day of the week, and the time of the day. Next, upon entering each park, I would survey the entire park and record how many people were there and what activities they were using the park for. I also took note of whether people were alone or with company. Additionally, I recorded how many park users were male and female and categorized them into three age groups: children, teenagers, and adults. By doing this, I was able to determine the activities that certain age groups or genders most commonly come to the park for.

Over five days of observations in River Park, I observed a total of 100 people using the park. On the day with the fewest people, which was a cold afternoon on a Friday in March, there were only 6 people in the park. The day that I observed the most people was a warm Saturday in April when there were 36 people in River Park. The park was most often used by female adults. Over the five-day observation period, I recorded a total of 25 women using the park. After female adults, the park was used the most by children, of which I counted 22 boys and 17 girls. Following children, adult males were the next most common group of people that used the park. I counted a total of 16 men in the park throughout my observations. Teenagers were the age group that used the park the least. I noted that there were only 11 teenage girls and 9 teenage boys in the park throughout the five days of recording observations.

Adults were the largest group of park users. However, what they use the park for is different than what children and teenagers use the park for. Additionally, 15 of the 41 adults that I observed appeared to be with their children, which I would assume is the primary reason why they are there. I noticed only 7 adults that were alone in River Park. The most common activity among those who were by themselves was sitting and looking at the river. Some other activities were done while engaging in these two activities. For example, I noticed one person eating lunch, another taking pictures of the river, another reading a book, and another listening to music on the benches near the river. It seems that almost every adult who comes to River Park without children is attracted to the lower area of the park near the river for its view of the waterfall. Out of other adults who were with others, but who were not with their children, the most common activities were either walking and talking or sitting and talking. I noticed a number of older couples that would sit on the benches near the river, or on the benches on the middle level to talk while looking at the river and waterfall.

River Park features a scenic view of the Bronx River and a waterfall and upon my first visit, I imagined that this would be one of the park's main attractions. I counted a total of 22 people sitting on benches near the river or looking at the waterfall from the overlook.

Additionally, I saw 6 people in the park taking photographs of the Bronx River. Therefore, my data confirms the fact that the river and the waterfall are attractions provided by River Park.

Likewise, throughout all the interviews that I conducted in River Park, everyone that I spoke with mentioned the beauty of the river and the relaxation provided by the natural landscape.

River Park also has a play area with swings and a jungle gym that I hypothesized would attract parents with their children. My initial reactions to the park were proved by the data that I collected. Of these 100 people, 28 were children or teenagers using the playground structures. Additionally, another 15 people appeared to be the parents of these children who were either watching on the playground from a nearby bench or pushing them on the swings. 14 other children and teenagers used the park for other recreational activities, such as riding bikes, jumping rope, or playing catch with a football. However, these activities were observed mainly on weekends or on weekdays after 2:00 pm. This is due to the fact that children and teenagers, who use the park for these activities, are in school during the weekdays until around that time. For example, on the day that only 6 people were in the park, there were no children in the park. This was most likely due to the fact that my observations were recorded between 12:30 and 1:00pm on a cloudy, cool Friday afternoon. However, during this day, 4 of the 6 people in the park were teenagers, which suggests that they could be playing hooky or visiting the park during a lunch break.

Another interesting aspect of park usage that my data reveals is that most people go to River Park with a friend or family. I only noticed a total of 9 people who appeared to be alone in

the parks. Additionally, not including parents who were with their children on the playground, I recorded a total of 30 people who were walking, sitting, or talking with someone else. Many people who sat on the benches near the river were often with at least one other person.

Additionally, teenagers, the age group that used the park the least, were almost always with friends while at the park. Out of the 20 teenagers who I observed in the park, only two were alone. All the other teenagers I saw in the park were in a group of at least 2 people. This suggests that teenagers come to River Park with the primary purpose of socializing with their peers.

Concrete Plant Park attracts a different group of park users based on the activities that the park provides. Unlike River Park, the view of the Bronx River in Concrete Plant Park is not something that one would consider beautiful or scenic. The river in this section of the Bronx is surrounded by industry, auto salvage yards, infrastructure, and parking lots. Additionally, the park also lacks a playground and therefore fewer children and their parents use the park.

Throughout four days of conducting observations in Concrete Plant Park, I counted a total of 60 people in the park. Surprisingly, the day when there were the fewest people in the park was a Sunday afternoon in March around 2:00pm. I observed only two people in Concrete Plant Park on this day and both were using the park as an alternative to walking down Whitlock Avenue, which runs parallel to the park on the opposite side of the train tracks and the Sheridan Expressway. One person was walking their dog and cut straight through the park and the other was jogging and did the same. Despite being a cloudy day, I was surprised that the park was almost empty on a weekend afternoon. However, on a warmer sunny Saturday in April, I witnessed the park at its busiest. I counted a total of 28 people on this day who were there for a variety of different uses, such as sitting, talking, dog walking, and kite flying. Concrete Plant

Park was utilized the most by male adults. I observed a total of 21 men using the park throughout the observation period. The group of people who used the park the most after men was teenage boys, of whom I counted 19. I saw 10 women in the park on these days and 9 teenage girls. Additionally, I only saw one child in the park throughout those four days, who was with her family. I would attribute this lack of mothers and their children to the absence of any kind of play space in the park that caters to the needs of children. The only services that Concrete Plant Park provides in terms of recreation are the paths, grassy lawns, and the river, which cater to activities that children are less likely to engage in, such as jogging, biking, or fishing.

The most common activities that Concrete Plant is used for are sitting near the river, walking, dog walking, and other recreational activities. I saw a total of 26 people sitting on the benches, chess tables, and lounge chairs near the river throughout the observation period. There were several people who were alone and were looking at the river or listening to headphones, but the majority of these people with at least one other person and appeared to be having a conversation. Additionally, I saw a couple that had brought a stereo with them and they were listening to music while relaxing in the lounge chairs. The second most common activities that I witnessed in the park were recreational activities. Popular activities among teenagers in the park were skipping rocks and skateboarding. Recreational activities that were popular among adults include biking, fishing, jogging, and flying kites. I grouped all of these activities together and saw a total of 18 people enjoying the park for its recreational benefits. The next most common activity in the park was walking. I saw a total of 15 people walking through the park and 8 of them had a dog with them. Unlike River Park, Concrete Plant Park allows dogs in the park, which one can see attracts a different group of park users and brings a new activity to the park.

However, in one of the interviews that I conducted, there was a complaint about people neglecting to pick up after their dogs, which could be a reason why River Park forbids dogs from the park.

Concrete Plant Park attracts a different group of park users because the park is fundamentally different than River Park. Because the park lacks a playground, parents do not bring their children to the park as much as they bring them to River Park. As I mentioned earlier, I only saw one child in the park throughout my observations. Additionally, because the park allows dogs, many people with dogs take them for a walk there. Another interesting difference between the two parks is that I saw far more people spending time in Concrete Plant Park alone. 19 of the 60 people I observed in the park were by themselves. The people who were alone were either sitting near the river or engaged in a other activities that they can perform on their own, such as biking, fishing, jogging, or dog walking. Although there were several children riding bikes in River Park, the bikers in Concrete Plant Park were not just biking in circles around the park, but rather they were biking through it and using it as part of their bike route.

Mark Francis, a professor of Landscape Architecture at UC Davis, conducted a similar study of park users, park usage, and the meanings attached to open spaces in the 1980s. The sites he selected were a neighborhood park in downtown Sacramento, California and two nearby community gardens. Francis used a behavior mapping technique in order to record the total number of garden and park users and uses over a seven month period in 1983 while also conducting interviews with garden organizers, park officials, park and garden users, and non-users who lived or worked in the neighborhood (Francis, 1987, p. 102). The neighborhood park that was the topic of study was Fremont Park, which takes up one square block and features a

large lawn and many trees (Francis, 1987, p.102). The park was also renovated in 1974 and again in 1977 to include a playground, more benches, barbeques, and a drinking fountain (Francis, 1987, p. 102). The two community gardens that were Mark Francis's topics of study, Ron Mandella and Southside Gardens, featured organized plots that could be leased by gardeners for \$11 per year (Francis, 1987, p.103).

Mark Francis explains how the use of the neighborhood park and the community gardens is affected by the population in the surrounding area. The location of the gardens and the park is near a downtown redevelopment area where there are parking lots for office buildings and residential neighborhoods that house low-income families and some young professionals (Francis, 1987, p. 104). As a result, the largest group of park users were children with their parents followed by office workers who came to the park on their lunch breaks and older men and homeless people who sat on benches near the middle of the park and drank (Francis, 1987, p. 104). Mark Francis recorded a total number of 790 park users and 206 garden users throughout the seven-month period (Francis, 1987, p. 104). The most popular activities in Fremont Park were children's play, followed by talking, eating or drinking, and walking while the most popular activities in the community gardens were gardening activities such as weeding, bed preparation, and harvesting followed by talking and walking (Francis, 1987, p.104). Additionally, he found that nearly three quarters of park users were under the age of 30 while only one quarter of garden users were of the same age (Francis, 1987, p. 104). He also discovered that most people use the gardens alone while Fremont Park had a more even split between those who used the park alone and those who went to the park with others (Francis, 1987, p.105).

The results of Mark Francis's study are interesting because I had similar results about the park usage of a neighborhood park that has similar amenities. River Park also features benches for sitting and a playground for children. As a result, the most popular activity in River Park was also children's play. This was observed primarily on the playground structures like the jungle gym and the swings but also throughout the park as many children rode bikes or played catch with each other. The next most popular activities were sitting, talking, and walking. These are similar to some of the most popular activities at Fremont Park, such as talking, sitting, and eating, or drinking. I did noticed several people eating in River Park and I learned from interviews that the picnic tables and barbeques are frequently used in the summer months, however, it was not one of the most popular activities that I observed. One could also attribute the popularity of eating in Fremont Park to the people who worked in the nearby office buildings using their lunch breaks to eat in the park. Additionally, Francis explained that the elderly men and homeless people who sat in the middle of the park were often drinking. I spoke with a woman who worked as a social worker in the neighborhood and often went to River Park on her lunch break to eat, however, the neighborhood does not have many office buildings like downtown Sacramento is and therefore this type of park user was not as common in the Bronx. Additionally, River Park is used primarily by younger people; however, the split is not as drastic as Mark Francis's findings in Fremont Park. Francis found that nearly three quarters of park users in Fremont Park were under the age of thirty while I found that only 59% of park users in River Park were teenagers or children. However, as I previously mentioned, a large number of adults in the park were there with their children, which would help to explain the large number of adults in a park with amenities geared toward children.

Francis also found that there was close to an even split between people who went to Fremont Park alone and between those who went in groups. Out of the 100 people that I observed in River Park, only 9 were alone and of those the most common activities were sitting near the river and walking. Even in Concrete Plant Park, where there was a greater percentage of people who used the park alone, only about one third of park users were alone. Mark Francis explains that the users were typically older and more likely to be alone in the community gardens because gardening is a slow paced activity that parents rarely attempt to involve their children in (Francis, 1987, p.107). The adults who were alone that I observed in Concrete Plant Park were often also engaged in slower paced activities that require a certain amount of attention and skill. For example, I saw several people fishing and flying kites and none of them were children or teenagers. Although Concrete Plant Park is drastically different than a community garden, it does tend to attract older people who enjoy slower paced recreational activities.

Park users and park usage are deeply affected by the services and facilities that parks provide. River Park in the Bronx and Fremont Park in Sacramento both contain playgrounds which attract a large number of children and their parents for the activities of recreation and children's play. Additionally, they both have numerous benches that attract adults who are seeking a place to sit and relax. River Park has an amenity that Fremont Park lacks, which is the Bronx River. The benches near the river were always the most crowded and sitting on these benches were the second most common activity. Concrete Plant Park lacks a scenic view of a river and Fremont Park does not have any natural attractions besides grass and trees, however, many people still use the park to sit on benches. Thus, proper seating is necessary to encourage park usage. Additionally, although Concrete Plant Park also lacked a playground, teenagers and adults used the park for other recreational activities such as fishing, kite flying, biking, and rock

skipping. The uses of the community gardens that were the topic of Mark Francis's study were also dictated by the activities provided by the landscape. Gardening activities were the most common because the plots allowed users to engage in an activity that other parks could not provide. Thus, the use of an urban outdoor space is directly tied to the opportunities that the space provides for the users and likewise will attract a specific group of users accordingly. A park with a playground attracts parents and their children. A park with a scenic overlook attracts a type of park user who seeks a pleasant place to sit. Similarly, benches and seating in general keep people in parks for extended periods of time and provide them with the opportunity to enjoy such things as a beautiful view of a waterfall. Barbeques and picnic tables are utilized by families and friends in the summer. Accessible waterfronts attract park users who enjoy fishing and rock skipping. The usage of parks and the people who use them are a result of the diversity of activities that the park can provide.

Chapter 4: Park Perception

Throughout recording observations about park usage in River Park and Concrete Plant Park, I spoke with a number of park users to learn more about why they came to the parks and what their perception of them was. I asked questions about what activities they used the park for and what activities they observed other people engaging in. I also asked them if they visited any other parks in the Bronx and if this park was within walking distance from their home. Additionally, I spoke with people about the topics of park accessibility and safety as well as ways that they thought the parks could be improved.

The first interview I conducted fell into my hands as a couple asked me to take a picture of them in front of the waterfall at River Park on a Sunday afternoon in March. After taking their picture, I asked them about their experiences with the park. The man explained that he

grew up in West Farms and visited the park frequently when he was younger. He said that he rarely visits the park anymore, however, he wanted to show his girlfriend the location of where many of his childhood memories were formed. He explained that when he was young, many people would swim in the park, especially at night. He pointed to the fences around the edge of the river with signs that state “No Swimming” and explained that these did not exist when he was growing up in the neighborhood. He said that he would frequently hear stories about people drowning in the river at the park when he lived in West Farms, including a few people that he knew. When I asked him about safety, the man explained that the park had always been a dangerous place at night and described it as “crazy” and a “jungle.” When I asked why it was dangerous he explained that many people would do drugs in the park at night and that it was also usually the time when people drowned. His girlfriend, who did not grow up in the neighborhood, explained that she would feel uncomfortable being in the park during day if she was not with her boyfriend who was familiar with the area. When I asked the couple about the design of the park and accessibility the man explained that the area was well served by public transportation and that many people who visit the Bronx Zoo often stop in the park to look at the waterfall and the river. He said that because he no longer lives in the neighborhood, he rarely comes back to visit the park, other than to look at the Bronx River and revisit childhood memories. He said that he does often visit Pelham Bay Park, which he claimed was the nicest park in the Bronx. He explained that it made you feel like you were outside of the city and had great views of Long Island Sound. When I asked him if he had any recommendations to improve the park, he responded by saying that the fences around the river were a good idea to deter swimmers. However, he did not have any recommendations for improving the park because he said that his childhood memories were obscuring his perception of what the park could

potentially be. The interview was very insightful because it was the perspective of someone who had grown up in the neighborhood and had left. This stop in the park was a trip down memory lane for the man and he seemed disturbed by some of his darker memories about the park, especially when he explained that he could not formulate an ideal vision for the park because of his past experiences there. Perhaps his perception of the park that was formed during his childhood influenced his decision to move elsewhere.

Another interview that I conducted in River Park was on a Wednesday in April around lunch-time. I noticed a woman who was eating her lunch on a bench overlooking the river and I asked her for an interview. She explained that she lived on 230th Street but was employed in West Farms as a social worker. She explained that she often comes to the park on nice days during her break to eat her lunch or to sit near the waterfall and watch the river. She said that it was a peaceful place to be on a weekday afternoon. However, she said that she has never visited the park at any other time or for any other reason and explained that she prefers to go to Central Park or take a trip upstate if she wants to enjoy nature. She said that the main activities she had observed in the park were children playing and people eating their lunch on the picnic tables. She also said that having barbeques near the picnic tables was a great idea and said that she had seen them used during nicer days. Additionally, she thought that the park could be improved with better landscaping and more flowers in the barren in between areas of the park. She also explained that she did not think the park was a friendly or social place. However, she said this is typical in the Bronx because more people tend to keep to themselves. The social worker thought that the park was easy to access by public transportation with the 2 and 5 trains nearby as well as plenty of buses. She also said that the location was convenient because it is located right next to the Bronx Zoo. When I asked the woman about safety, she explained that she had never visited

the park in the evening or night, when she imagined that it could be dangerous like most parks in the Bronx. However, she felt very safe there during the day and pointed to the windows from the Lambert Houses, which surround the park on two sides. She explained that all the windows facing the parks help to keep eyes on the street as well as eyes on the park, and thus the projects function as a crime deterrent during the daytime.

Another interview that I conducted in River Park was on a warm Saturday afternoon in April. I noticed a couple sitting on a park bench overlooking the river and requested an interview. The man had lived in the neighborhood since 1968 and the two of them still reside there today. They explained that they visit the park very frequently, especially in the summer. They explained that when it is warm, they have picnics and barbeques with friends and family. The man also said that he occasionally visits in the winter and told a story about this past winter when he took a photo of the frozen river and waterfall, made postcards from the picture, and sent them to his friends and family. He said that he also brings his children in the winter to sled on the hill in the southern section of the park. They also said that many people bring their children as well, who often ride bikes and play on the playground. They both kept stressing the concept that the park was a very family-oriented place. They stated that they especially enjoy when there are programmed events, such as public movie screening in the park in the summer. The man said that he comes alone very often as well to “sit, read a book or newspaper, have a few drinks, and smoke a few cigarettes.” He explained that the park helps him to “get peace of mind, relax, and forget about everything.” He also said that he had canoed down the river one time and enjoyed seeing it from that perspective.

They both said that they had often observed people fishing there often and many people swimming. However, they both warned about how dangerous it is to swim in that section of the

river. The man explained that many people had died swimming there, including several close friends. He mentioned that last year two teenagers, a brother and sister, drowned while swimming in the river. He said that the boy was drowning and the sister tried to help him but fell in with him. He said that it is very dangerous to swim there because the river is about ten to twelve feet deep in the middle near the waterfall and only three to four feet deep on the sides. Therefore, many children who are swimming do not expect the river to drop off to those depths. He also explained that there is a swirling whirlpool effect in parts of river near the waterfall that can easily pull somebody who is not a good swimmer underwater. He noted that it was dangerous in shallow parts of the water as well because it is easy to get stuck in the muddy river bed and there is broken glass everywhere that people often dive on and get injured. The couple also explained the other dangers that the park presents. They both agreed that the park is safest during the day. However, they both had witnessed occasions during the day in which tourists from the Bronx Zoo ask someone to take a picture of them in front of the waterfall and the photographers runs off with the camera. They explained that River Park is very dangerous at night but it has improved since the park began to close at dusk. However, the man explained that many people hop the fence to get into the park in order to take and sell or buy drugs at night. They explained that they always have to keep on eyes on their children because there are needles everywhere. The man also noted that the surrounding Lampbert Projects are very violent and that teenagers who live there have no respect for adults. He said that they roll in posses and take advantage of people.

They both said that the fact that the park only has one entrance is a problem as well because it is easy to be cornered by one of these posses. This led me to ask them what recommendations they had for the park. The man explained that when he was growing up, there

used to be another entrance on the northwest side of the park. Since then, the Bronx Zoo had acquired that land. They both agreed that constructing another entrance or two is necessary. Additionally, they both thought that the park would benefit from better bathrooms. The woman thought that there should be a certain area for dogs, like the areas in Washington Square Park where people can let their dogs loose in an enclosed area. They also said that more activities in the park would change it for the better. They said that they would welcome the addition of more picnic tables and tables to place chess or checkers on. They also mentioned that the park could be better marked with signs, indicating whether dogs, skateboards, and bikes are or are not allowed. They also stated that the sign that says people without children cannot sit near the playground should be made more obvious to make the park safer for children. They also thought that the park could be made safer for children by repaving the paths. As we were having the conversation, children riding bikes and skateboards whizzed by down the hill around an area where there was a giant hole in the aged concrete. They both also requested the need to have water fountains that work, especially in the summer. The man said that if he were to run the park, he would build a basketball court, a handball court, and have volunteers organize and run programs in the park. He mentioned how great it is when there is live music in the park, however, he explained that “some jerk gets high or drunk and the police come.” They agreed that the presence of police in the park was necessary but that they only needed to stop by every few hours during the daytime. The man also reminisced about growing up in the neighborhood and hopping the fence at six in the morning to hold a picnic table for his family. He said that the park could get so packed in the summer, especially in July, that people cannot find a spot to sit.

I also spoke with several people in Concrete Plant Park about the park and their perception of it. I walked into the park on a windy Wednesday afternoon in April and I noticed

two men flying kites. One seemed to be struggling to keep his in the air and was sitting on a chair trying to mend his kite. The man turned out to be visiting Concrete Plant Park for the first time. His friend and him had been looking for a place to fly their kites and stumbled upon this place which had ideal windy conditions. The man explained that while he had been there that day he noticed a few people jogging and biking. I asked him if there had been anyone fishing and he replied that there had not been but that he often saw people fishing at Hunts Point Park. He explained that he often takes his daughter there in the summertime and they fly kites or fish together. The man explained that he lived within walking distance from the park but lived closer to Hunts Point Park. He liked the way that the park was designed but thought that it was hard to see from Whitlock Avenue, the main road that runs parallel to the park. He suggested that building an entrance on that side would make the park more visible and easier to access. The man said that he did not have any experience with issues of safety at Concrete Plant Park but said that if it was similar to Hunts Point Park and other parks in the Bronx, it would not be a safe place at night. He said that the park would be closed but that there would still be people hanging around in the park. This was an interesting interview because the man was a first time park user in Concrete Plant Park. His opinion of the park and his ideas about how to improve the park were all formed in the few hours that he had been there that day. Additionally, upon returning to the park a week later, I saw the same man and his friend flying kites.

On another sunny afternoon in April I spoke with a man who was fishing in Concrete Plant Park. He explained that he fishes there all the time and tries to come everyday when the weather is permitting. He said that he has even caught some bass, but always throws the fish back after reeling them in. He also explained that he has other friends who all come to fish or just to relax for a few hours. He said that the most other common activities he saw in the park

were children and teenagers playing football and soccer. He also explained how at the park in Hunts Point there is programming for children where they learn to row a boat. He thought the park was a very friendly and social place and explained that it could be seen in the social activities people were engaged in, such as sports, sitting, and relaxing. The man also thought that the park was very accessible. He explained that he lived only 5 and a half blocks from the park and noted that it was a short walk. He also said that the 6 train provides another easy way to reach the park. He said that he also visits Hunts Point Park and City Island to fish. The fisherman thought that the park had the “perfect design” and explained that he liked how they had kept the original structures from the concrete plant. He also noted that the park did everything it needed to do, which he thought was to provide a place to relax and fish. His only recommendation was that it could be cleaner because sometimes people do not pick up after their dogs. It is interesting to compare the perspective of someone who uses the park on almost a daily basis with that of someone who was visiting the park for the first time. Both of them enjoyed the park for the activities provided by the natural landscape, such as fishing and kite flying. Additionally, they both thought that the most common activities in the park were recreational, such as biking, jogging, and sports. The man who was fishing had few complaints about the park other than people neglecting to pick up after their dogs, however, the first-time user mentioned some issues about accessibility.

Mark Francis also conducted interviews in his study of Fremont Park and the two nearby community gardens. He asked park and garden users as well as non-users questions about their attitudes and feelings toward the parks, what they like about it, and what they dislike about it (Francis, 1987, p.105-106). In Fremont Park, people most often said that they liked the way the park looked, found it attractive, and enjoyed the trees and quiet (Francis, 1987, p.105-106). Park

users in River Park felt the same way. Everyone that I interviewed there spoke about the beauty of the river and the peaceful qualities that the park offers. They described it as a relaxing place and spoke about the attractiveness of the waterfall. Mark Francis also explained that users of Fremont Park liked the playground and thought that it was beneficial for children (Francis, 1987, p.105-106). Likewise, the couple that I spoke with in River Park kept emphasizing the phrase “family-oriented” and explained how the park was great for children and family activity. Additionally, they explained not only the playground encouraged families to use the park, but also that the barbeques and picnic tables were a popular attraction as well. The biggest complaints about Fremont Park that Mark Francis found were that there were too many homeless people and that the bathrooms facilities could be improved. Similarly, the couple that I spoke with in River Park expressed the need for better bathrooms. However, from the information I gathered throughout the interviews in River Park, transient homeless usually do not come to the park during the day but are often inhabit the park at night. Additionally, the non-users of the park that Mark Francis spoke with viewed the transient homeless people in the park as an obstacle and reason for their non-use (Francis, 1987, p.106).

Like Mark Francis, I also asked park users about their perceptions of park safety, friendliness, visual quality, access, and their ideas about how to improve the parks. Mark Francis explains that the community gardens rated higher for friendliness than Fremont Park. Two thirds of garden users viewed the gardens as a place for positive social contact while only one third of park users felt the same about the park (Francis, 1987, p.107). Additionally, half of the park users used negative terms to describe the other people using the park while only one sixth of garden users used negative words to speak about other garden users (Francis, 1987, p.107). Only the couple that I spoke with in River Park thought that the park was a friendly and

social place and explained all the activities that families use the park for. The woman who was on her lunch break did not think that the park was a friendly social place unless you came with someone to socialize with as she explained that people tend to keep to themselves in the Bronx. Similarly, the man who grew up in the neighborhood but had since left did not think it was a place where people mingled with each other. However, in Concrete Plant Park, both people I spoke with thought that the park was a friendly social place. One man was flying a kite with his friend and the other was fishing alone but explained that he had many friends who he would often fish with. It is interesting because the community gardens shared a similarity in usage with Concrete Plant Park because they both attracted a larger amount of users who were alone than Fremont Park and River Park. Now, one can see they share another similarity which is people find them to be friendlier, more social places, possibly because people who are alone might be more likely to talk to someone that they do not know.

Mark Francis also spoke with park and garden users about the visual quality and beauty of those places. Non-users, as well as users, ranked the garden more highly in terms of visual quality and the word “beauty” was most frequently mentioned when describing the gardens (Francis, 1987, p.108). As several similarities between the perception and usage Concrete Plant Park and the community gardens were appearing, they differ fundamentally in terms of their visual quality. Neither of the people that I spoke with in Concrete Plant Park spoke about the place in terms of its beauty or visual quality, other than the uniqueness of the concrete plant structures. Rather, they visited the park because of the uses it provided. However, in River Park, everyone that I spoke with would speak about the beauty of the Bronx River and the waterfall. These are definitely features of the park that attract a certain group of users, particularly those who are not with their children on the playground. Additionally, the beauty of River Park added

to the peacefulness of the park. As one man said, the river and waterfall help him to relax and free his mind.

Mark Francis and I both asked park users about their perception of safety. One third of garden and park users rated each place “quite safe” during the daytime and non-users rated the garden higher for safety because of the fence surrounding it (Francis, 1987, p.108).

Additionally, some park users considered the park “unsafe” while not a single garden user felt this way about the garden (Francis, 1987, p.108). Everyone that I spoke with in River Park and Concrete Plant Park felt that the park was safe during the day, except for the man in the suit’s girlfriend who was unfamiliar with the area. However, almost everyone that I spoke with also said that the parks were unsafe at night. The couple in River Park spoke of people doing drugs in the park at night and the man in the suit mentioned it being a common time for people to engage in dangerous activities like swimming. One of the men that I spoke with in Concrete Plant Park said that people hang around the park at night at that he would not want to walk through while the other man simply said that if you are in the park at night, the police will come and give you a ticket. Therefore, he said he never sees people in Concrete Plant Park at night and that it is discouraged by the police.

Accessibility and design were both aspects of park perception that Mark Francis and I asked park users about. He found that access was rated higher for the community gardens and that people were sometimes discouraged by how far the parks and gardens were from their homes (Francis, 1987, p.108). Park users thought that the park could be improved with a water feature such as a lake or swimming pool, an updated playground with clean sand, and more trees and grass (Francis, 1987, p.109). Non-users of the park agreed that a water feature would benefit the park and also expressed a desire for cleaner facilities, more green space, a place to garden,

and the absence of homeless people (Francis, 1987, p.109). River Park and Concrete Plant Park both benefit from the fact that they have a natural water feature, the Bronx River. Although the view is certainly more beautiful in River Park, people who visit Concrete Plant Park also enjoy sitting by the river, skipping rocks, and fishing. The need for better bathroom facilities was also expressed by park users in River Park and they also mentioned the need for better pavement, more light fixtures, a place for dogs, and improved landscaping. In terms of accessibility, most people found both parks easy to access. However, in both parks I heard people express concerns about entrances. In River Park, there is only one entrance at the southwest side of the park and people requested the addition of another entrance or two. Additionally, in Concrete Plant Park, the man who was visiting the park for the first time spoke about how the park was difficult to see from the main road and thought that a third entrance would make people notice the park more.

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Closing Comments

Based on my observations and interviews with park-users, it is clear that the services that parks provide clearly impact how they are used. Creating more diverse uses in the parks and taking the recommendations of Bronx residents who use the parks into consideration could surely make them more successful and increase the number of park users. Throughout my experiences collecting data and speaking with people in the parks, I have formed several recommendations that I believe would improve the value of parks these parks as community resources.

River Park benefits from having a playground and natural landscape features such as the waterfall. It is also visually easier to access than Concrete Plant Park. However, there are several things that could improve the park. I agree with the couple that I spoke with in River Park about the need for more than one entrance. Not only would it make the park more

accessible, but it would also make the park safer. The couple warned of posses of teenagers that come into the park in the evening and often corner people. The design of the park makes it even easier to corner people because there is only one way in and one way out. The park is surrounded on two sides by areas where an exit could not be constructed, the east side of the park that runs along the river, and the northern side where there is a fence dividing the zoo and the park. However, the addition of a second entrance on the northwest side of the park before the border with the zoo would create a way for people to walk directly through the park and avoid the potential problem of becoming cornered. This would also provide easy access to the park for anyone living on Bronx Park South or leaving the zoo from its southern entrance on Boston Road. It would also provide direct access to the playground and the waterfall viewing area. Additionally, there is a site where a potential third entrance to the park could be added. On the southern side of the park, another entrance could be added on East 180 Street to the right of the original entrance. The existing pathway loops toward the road as one follows it down to the benches near the river. Constructing a path up the gradual hill to the road would add a third access point that seems logical based on the current design of the park. This third entrance would also be directly across the street from the entrance to West Farms Rapids and would help to make the Bronx River Greenway more seamless.

I mentioned that the river and the waterfall are great assets to River Park. People enjoy sitting on benches near the river to relax and pass the time. However, the park could benefit from added more landscape features throughout the park. There is a large grassy area between the path that runs through the middle of the park and that path that runs along the river. One person that I interviewed pointed to this barren area as being an ideal location to add flowers or other vegetation. Additionally, I only saw one teenage boy using this area throughout my

observation and he was kicking a soccer ball around. I agree that this area could be better utilized to add more beauty to the park in the form of flowers or other landscaping. However, I also thought that the couple's idea about adding an area for dogs similar to those in Washington Square Park would work here. River Park does not currently allow dogs, however, if there was a designated space for dogs that was fenced off from the rest of the park, they would be kept separate from the children on the playground and people eating at picnic tables. Additionally, as seen in the case of Concrete Plant Park, dog walking is a popular park usage in parks where dogs are allowed.

Other recommendations that I would make for River Park involve safety. I agree with the couple that I spoke with that the paths in the park need to be repaved. Much of the concrete was cracked and there were rocky areas that could be dangerous for children riding bikes or skateboards. The same couple also explained that there had been problems in the park with vandalizing the light fixtures. Incorporating metal screens over the lamps or using a more durable glass for the lenses would prevent this problem from occurring. Additionally, although the addition of fences around the river has deterred swimmers, on one day I noticed a group of younger teenagers hopping the fence and playing on the rocky landing near the waterfall. The fences could be raised an additional foot or two in certain areas to prevent people from being able to swim in the river and hopefully this would decrease the number of deaths as a result of swimming.

Concrete Plant Park provides a crucial link in the greenway and provides space for recreational activities. However, the park could attract more users from the group who use the park the least, children, by incorporating a play structure. The park has an open field on the northeast side of the park that would be an ideal spot for a simple play structure like a swing set,

a sandbox, or a jungle gym. If these amenities were available in Concrete Plant Park, I predict that more parents who live in the neighborhood would bring their children to the park.

Additionally, there is enough open space throughout the rest of the park that the addition of one of these structures would not prevent teenagers or adults from playing football or soccer.

The other issue that I see with Concrete Plant Park is accessibility. The park suffers from being stuck in between two major highways, an elevated subway, train tracks, and the river. Currently, there is no easy way to add a third entrance to the park in an area that is more visible. However, the site of the abandoned train station has potential to be a gateway to the park if it were ever renovated. The train station sits on the corner of Westchester Avenue and an entrance to the Sheridan Expressway. Additionally, the sight of the old building attracts ones attention much more than the current entrance further down the bridge. Ideally, I imagine that the building could be renovated into a Parks Department building that would have bathroom facilities and an information center that provides information about activities along the Bronx River, such as boating, fishing, and bike riding. Additionally, due to its location in the southern part of the greenway, the structure could be a place where people could rent bikes, kayaks, or canoes to further enjoy the river and the Bronx Parks system. The old train station is also currently elevated above the Amtrak train tracks. If the building were converted into a Bronx River visitor center, a bridge could be constructed to connect the back-side of the building to Concrete Plant Park. Therefore, people who are in the park would notice this building as a feature of the park and those who might not walk down Westchester Avenue or the Bruckner Boulevard would have a third, more convenient access.

The uses of parks and the people who go there are only as diverse as the services that the parks can provide. Parks with more amenities attract different types of park users, such as

parents with children, dog-walkers, and teenagers. There is a need for parks to be designed in a way that caters to many diverse uses. Additionally, community input from park users is an essential part of designing or renovating parks because they are the people who spend the most time there and are most familiar with a park's successes and shortcomings.

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