

Kalorama Park & Playground Comments

(via Survey Monkey & DCGov Email Account of Kenneth Diggs)

COMMENT #148 (Email)

Dear Director Shanklin:

During the meetings on the Kalorama Park redesign and remediation, a community member questioned the fact that, without picking one of the 3 design options listed on the online "monkey survey", one couldn't submit comments; in fact, there was no way to oppose the redesign at all, as many wished to do. Reminded of this fault, Mr. Diggs then offered another possibility--email comments, with short bulleted items. As I hope the following words will reveal, serious complex issues *can not* be presented in bulleted phrases. Design, park usage, park history, relationships of elements--these all require extended discussion. So I am writing my comments to you instead, with a cc to Mr. Diggs and others.

Many have written to you about the dramatic visual impacts of the plaza redesign, with the plaza and its unique character as one of a series of geometrically designed "rooms". I agree that redesigning the plaza would, in effect, be taking the heart out of this design, of what functioned, in a very real way, as the park's "living room." From the beginning, it has been staggering to me that a few self-selected people have attempted the only-ever major redesign, without any understanding or respect for the National Park Service spaces. NPS is the best in the business and everyone ought to tread lightly, to (as Carl Sandburg said in his poem *The Fog*) come in on little cat feet. Instead, they've come in with hatchets. It *must* be DPR's obligation to protect this special design--one of DPR's jewels--with the support of those who realize just how special this park is. As a crucial part of the park's design, the plaza must be kept intact.

But my concern in this writing, in addition to the visual aspects lost in the redesign, is the impact on recreation, specifically two elements: the loss of appealing spots to sit and to picnic; and the loss of open space for distinct types of free-range play and larger events for all ages.

To understand the drastic redesign changes to bench and table placement, it is necessary to know the locations and park usage now. Currently, there are 3 benches just to the north of the plaza, just off of--but part of--the plaza redesign. All three are in complete shade nearly all day, overlooking a beautiful expanse of grass and trees toward the National Cathedral. Most good weather days, they are always occupied--a favorite spot for sitting, and probably the most consistently used. Within the plaza itself, there are currently 4 benches, situated at the 4 corners, which provide open space, privacy, and half-day shade from 4 hawthorn trees. (I should add here, that the trees *used to* provide shade--and spring flowers and fall berries--until one by one, over the last several years, they died.) The 2 picnic tables (one in the large playground, the other just down the north slope beside the plaza) host different groups of people during the half days each is in shade, from nannies setting snacks on the table, to googlers using the flat surface for their computers, to morning breakfasters with coffee, to a complement of large-group birthday parties and gatherings. The table to the north of the plaza is beautifully situated on a grassy slope with trees close by.

For 20 years, while gardening near these benches and tables, I have watched people follow the shade from bench to bench, from table to table. It is a prime reason why people chose one table or bench over another. But frequently, on a Sunday afternoon in the prime hours between 11 and 4, people *would bring their own tables from home and set up under the shade of the oval's sawtooth oaks, while 3 picnic*

tables sat empty. On one particular June day, I saw 2 large groups there at the same time while the 3 tables waited for someone to come and sit. (It may sound like I'm making this up, but it's been noticed many times, by me and others.) Everywhere in the world benches and picnic tables are placed in the shade, under trees, for the obvious reason that deliciously cool spots close to nature are where people want to be. This is the current situation, with most benches and tables in part shade some of each day.

But in the redesign, how do the benches and tables fare?

To assess just how, shortly after the plaza redesign "unveiling" on October 9th, three of us tramped around the plaza (the redesign on an iPad) measuring and aligning, accounting for the loss of shade from the four trees scheduled to be removed, and calculating the effect of new trees. And we concluded: *all 8 benches and both picnic tables will be in full sun.* And there are more problems. While the benches just to the north of the plaza will still have the same enchanting view, they are situated too close together, with a sidewalk right in front of them, in addition to no shade. Those in the plaza, besides being without shade, are bunched together, facing the large children's playground, hardly an inviting place to sit. The picnic tables suffer the same fate: no shade, with 3 tables crowded together within 60 or so feet (a new one for the large playground, to replace one moved to the plaza, has been requested). And they are without close proximity to the grass and trees our park users so desire. It will cost perhaps tens of thousands (maybe more) to make sitting and picnicking less desirable.

The second loss to recreation is the dramatic shrinkage of open space in the center of the plaza, primarily by the placement of large boulders (which properly belong in the playground) and the larger size of bench and tree areas.

Over my many years in the park, I've often wondered just what NPS had in mind for the plaza, an area related in its geometric design to the other "rooms", but different in that the kinds of activities it allowed weren't restricted by either type or age. With no written notes, it's only speculation from observing how it *has* been used. I've watched for 20 years, others go back further, one [REDACTED], [REDACTED], has described music concerts several nights a week all summer in the late 60s, early 70s. So with respect to designing the plaza, I'm guessing that NPS looked around and, having created two playgrounds and a community garden, realized they needed a different kind of space, one that would be for all ages and accommodate lots of easy sitting, pushing baby buggies, bouncing balls, creating oversize chalk drawings, setting a sprinkler in the middle for kids to run through on hot summer days. Just a few random memories, to indicate how lively it has been, and how it really functioned as the heartbeat/center of the park, accommodating a whole lot of free-range things people wanted to do. But I think NPS also had in mind larger events--why else leave so much open space? And indeed, in past years, there have been a wide variety. Movies, with the screen set up in front of the rec center, families bringing their lawn chairs, the plaza serving as the seating area. A festival of crafts and kids' activities, with a dozen or so tents (I was under a tent doing face-painting for five-year-olds, winging it as best I could). This past Halloween was a sad reminder of the grand Halloween occasions, when a hundred or more people crammed the plaza for the parade of costumes and a haunted house constructed of cardboard by several mothers. And inside the rec center, kids blindfolded while they dipped their hands into a ghoulish bowl of brains--spaghetti cooked up by one of the mothers. And the past three years? The site manager sitting in a largely empty space with a bag of candy.

The "barren" look described as the reason for a plaza redesign simply fails a proper assessment of the reasons for the barrenness, namely the loss of the trees, which provided both the architecture and shade, and the loss of recreation formerly provided by DPR staff (three of us contacted a DPR staff supervisor

about this but didn't even receive an acknowledgment of receipt). Yes, the plaza has gone dead, but it is folly to come to the conclusion it needs a redesign. A knowledge of the park's past is critical and there are people who know the history and park usage, but none were at the table while two landscape architects and the Fund's president pushed first for permeable pavement and then a succession of enormous changes--all stemming from the misguided notion that permeable pavement was a necessity. It now seems that permeable pavement has also severely limited the design possibilities. [For a more detailed description, see [REDACTED] email of November 12 , with the subject line "Kalorama Park redesign/permeable pavement plans". For those who did not receive this, I suspect [REDACTED] would forward on request.]

DPR needs to save the National Park Service design and give the plaza the restoration it needs and deserves. This would also save a truckload of money and put an end to neighborhood friction. At a minimum, it needs the replacement of the 4 glorious hawthorns, the two small shrub areas, the removal of a willow oak that not only is ruinous from a design perspective but may have been the cause (or one of the causes) of the trench drain failure. And then, repair the broken/clogged trench drain, which worked perfectly well for 50+ years until it either was completely clogged or broken, perhaps damaged during the first anti-erosion project (the timing seems more than coincidental here). Repair the damage to the soil caused by the overflow of the trench drain. These are not vast projects, but they would bring back both the plaza's visual beauty and bring back its reason for being--the people who give it life.

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