

# THE Y-PLAN FOR YOUTH INSIGHTS

## and THE McCLYMONDS MINI PARK

by Deborah McKoy and Walter Hood



Conceptual diagrams prepared with students at McClymonds in order to reveal the site's many histories, from left to right: 1) Searching for a site's poetics; 2) Constructing a narrative; 3) Picturing a historical and personal timeline.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of Kevin Aaron, Class of 2003, Department of City & Regional Planning, who worked diligently to make McClymonds mini-park redesign a reality for the youth of West Oakland.*



above: Walter Hood working with McClymonds students.

left: Kevin Aaron working with McClymonds students.

Under the guidance of the innovative UC Berkeley-based Y-PLAN, 40 youngsters from McClymonds High School in West Oakland have created preliminary designs for a unique and inviting neighborhood gathering place, transforming what the City of Oakland called "one of the six most dangerous parks in Oakland." To accomplish this, the teenagers partnered with 20 city planning, design and education graduate students to create a plan, win support of community agencies, and develop the once drug-infested property just 20 feet from their school. Today, not only the park but the participating individuals and organizations are being transformed by their successful experience.

The Y-PLAN (YOUTH-PLAN, LEARN, ACT, NOW) is an award-winning classroom and community-based research project through which graduate students engage in Bay Area community development projects by teaching city planning

and design to local high school students. The project is at the core of the Institute of Urban and Regional Development's new Center for Cities and Schools, founded by McKoy and doctoral student Jeff Vincent. The center's vision is to bridge the fields of education and urban policy to create equitable, diverse, and livable cities and schools.

Underlying the strategy of both the Center and the Y-PLAN is the knowledge that public space is a powerful identity-forming presence in the lives of urban teenagers. They understand the rhythm and nature of places in unique ways, defined by the way they use the area and the social relations that are generated there-not by what other "experts" deem important. The Y-PLAN process validates these insights and the powerful contributions young people can make to improving public spaces. The program helps them translate their unique under-

standing of the places where they live, play, or go to school into proposals for improving their environment.

The Y-PLAN begins with a 10-week mentorship class in community development, taught by the graduate students. Working with their graduate student partners, the high school students develop plans and then present them to a jury of civic leaders and professional designers. Past panel reviewers have included CED Dean Harrison Fraker, City and Regional Planning Chair John Landis, Councilwoman Nancy Nadel, CED alumni such as Amanda Kobler, also a former Y-PLAN participant, and many local residents. The goal of the final presentation is not only to get feedback but also to galvanize support and stewardship for the youth's ideas.

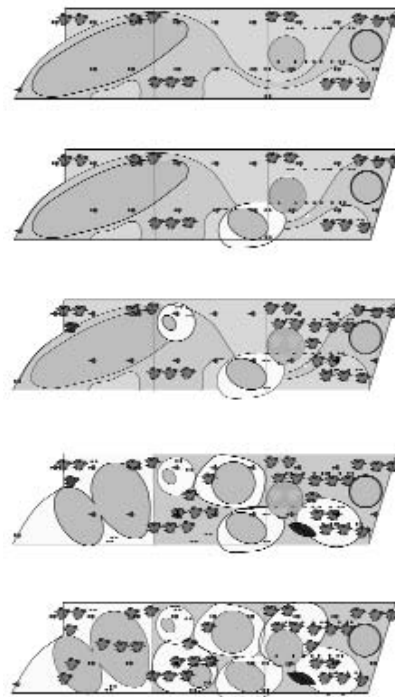
That is exactly what happened in May 2002, when the jury involved in a Y-PLAN project to redesign an abandoned

mini-park in West Oakland decided to join with the youthful participants in realizing their vision. Besides their sense of accomplishment, the teenagers, too often alienated from public processes, learned the invisible mechanisms and practices of urban change: what they have done once, they may be able to do again. All of them benefited from their close working relationships with possible role models, and one, Yahya Abdulmateen, is now a freshman in CED. Talking about the Y-PLAN experience he said:

"Getting the opportunity to work with college students on something that I had such high interest in was a great experience. I got to experience what the design process was for architects. I enjoyed working with people who had the same career interests as myself...

The Y-PLAN helped me to get a better understanding of planning and architecture as a whole. It also provided me an architectural mentor by introducing me to Professor Walter Hood. I stepped onto the Berkeley campus feeling like I had an advantage."

In the end it was the compelling insights discovered by the local high school students in the Y-Plan experience that persuaded Walter Hood to take on the challenge of bringing the project into a built reality. Hood believes that "a static master plan is ultimately a useless goal - what we strive to do is find a dynamic set of operations that gives hope and vision to citizens' desires. It is not about a finite image. The community invests in a process that delivers design dreams."



above & right: A sequence of "community operations" create an evolving framework, leading to the proposed final phase. Cesar Chavez Park, Walter Hood.

Hood's dynamic approach to community design is best illustrated in his designs for Cesar Chavez Park. The phasing diagrams show how the park will evolve over time with each community "operation", leading to phase (5) illustrated in the model and plan. What distinguishes Hood's work, however, is not just involving the community in a "dynamic set of operations" but in his search for the "poetic moment". As Hood explains, "working with communities is not only meetings, brainstorming and design charrettes, but involves funding ways to elevate particular ideas so they reach a poetic moment in material form."



In working with the students, school officials and residents at McClymonds Mini Park, Hood had them write "narratives" about the place, draw a "timeline" of the site's history, and identify "objects" of meaning to its history and story. In the process, the community (and Hood) discovered ideas of deep significance that lead to the following major design ideas:

1. Expanding out into 26th Street to enlarge the park and closing through traffic.
2. Removing a large portion of fencing that faces the park and building movable gates developed in coordination with local artist.



3. Planting a linear promenade of trees that stretch across the entire school grounds connecting the north and south streets.

Hood and the community have proposed a framework for change to the public space around McClymonds High School that if successfully implemented, will be unprecedented. Through a process of design activism, the integration of the school back into the community may be possible. This could not happen if not for the work of students in the Y-PLAN who provided the inspiration to re-imagine the streets and park of McClymonds.

*Deborah McKoy, Ph.D. is the Director of the Center for Cities and Schools.*

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left: In the final design of the McClymonds Mini Park, a permanent allee of trees is transformed by each class, which plants a tree for each freshman in a planting bed (below) and removes them four years later as seniors. The allee becomes a chronicle of growth and change of the school.

