
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-06

Twin Oaks Playground 4025 14th Street NW Square 2823, Lot 803

Meeting Date: July 27, 2017
Applicant: Historic Washington Architecture
Affected ANC: 4C

The HPO recommends that the Board designate Twin Oaks Playground, 4025 14th Street NW, a landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a positive recommendation for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1920 to 1970.

The property meets National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia Criterion D (“Architecture and Urbanism”) for the architecture of its fieldhouse, embodying the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style and a building type that is an expression of urban planning significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia. Specifically, it is one of only a handful of 1930s park fieldhouses designed to resemble a Tidewater colonial hall-and-parlor house, and thus, one of the earliest purpose-built public recreation facilities remaining in a District of Columbia park.

The property also merits designation under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B (“History”) because it is “associated with historical periods, social movements, groups, institutions, or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia,” as a landmark of the development of the Petworth neighborhood and one of the oldest permanent playgrounds in the District of Columbia. It was one of the “white” playgrounds that desegregated prior to the racial integration of the recreation system, and an early (and continuing) community garden as the founding site and headquarters of the Washington Youth Garden program.

Background and evaluation

Twin Oaks Playground was established in 1920 to serve the rapidly growing rowhouse community of Petworth. There had been plenty of informal play areas for children in Washington in the past, but supervised seasonal playgrounds were first set aside in federal parks (such as the Washington Monument grounds, the Ellipse, and Reservation 126) in the 1890s. The city’s Victorian elementary schools frequently had play spaces in their basements, but it was not until after a 1908 report of the Schoolhouse Commission that elementary schools were

programmed with playgrounds, if there was available land.¹ The provision of such space for children, and the opportunity for play itself, was a Progressive Era innovation; exercise in the form of play was seen as an antidote for the enervating effects of industrialized cities. Play was an opportunity to cultivate the physical and “moral nature” of children, and playgrounds themselves constituted urban “breathing spots.” For obvious reasons, playgrounds were developed next to schools, but they often served a broader community. In the case of Twin Oaks, however, the playground preceded the adjacent elementary school, Powell (1929), by nearly a decade.

The new playground was unusual in that it consisted of two roughly equal parts straddling Taylor Street. Originally, Twin Oaks was little more than fenced lawns, with a clay tennis court on the northern section. It was not until 1933 that a permanent fieldhouse was planned on the south section, a result of newly available federal Civil Works Administration funds. In fact, the CWA, a temporary jobs program for skilled laborers, offered the city nine wading pools and three fieldhouses—but only two pools and one fieldhouse total for playgrounds for African-American children.

The fieldhouses were intended to provide storage for outdoor recreation equipment as well as offices for park managers, restrooms for the public, and space for indoor recreation and classes. Municipal Architect Albert Harris designed a prototype structure for Mitchell Park in 1931. Of frame construction, a story and a half tall with a full-width porch, it was based on the eighteenth-century Tidewater hall-and-parlor house. Six such structures would eventually be erected, five of which are extant. As public works, the designs had to be reviewed by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, which favored the Colonial Revival style as a suitably domestic expression for government facilities in residential neighborhoods. This specific flavor of the style was indeed domestic, and clearly shows the powerful contemporary influence of the Colonial Williamsburg restoration on the region’s architects at the time.

Two of the fieldhouses—the fourth and fifth of the series and the last while Harris still lived—were built simultaneously by the CWA during 1934, one at Lincoln Playground (555 L Street SE; landmarked 2016) and one at Twin Oaks. The Twin Oaks fieldhouse is a frame structure with three dormers and a full-width porch. Designed to appear as one and a half stories, its main room is the full height of the building, exposing the roof trusses. A 2014 survey of D.C. Parks and Recreation facilities determined this category of fieldhouse to be a historically significant type, and the Historic Preservation Office subsequently classified them as eligible for landmark designation. Two others have been designated, as has the related fieldhouse at Palisades Playground.

With the strict racial segregation of public facilities in Washington during the first half of the twentieth century, Twin Oaks, like other playgrounds, initially failed to serve their entire communities. They served either white residents or black residents, seldom both, meaning that the excluded race had to look elsewhere—that is, go farther from home—to use a suitable facility. As with schools, that meant that African American residents were the ones most often excluded and underserved. A 1945 decision to maintain racial segregation in playgrounds drew

¹ Perhaps the earliest public school playground was at Morse Elementary (R Street NW between New Jersey Avenue and 5th Street) before the turn of the century.

a considerable backlash, and in the late 1940s, the District Recreation Board began experimenting with opening to all children several “black” playgrounds. In 1951, it opened a few “white” ones to African Americans. As more blacks moved into Petworth, Twin Oaks became one of those playgrounds considered for integration, and it was desegregated in 1953, a year before the remainder of the system.

In 1963, volunteers at Twin Oaks established a garden demonstration center to teach children the skills and satisfaction of gardening. Headquartered in the fieldhouse, the effort grew into a Washington Youth Garden Council which partnered with Parks and Recreation to establish gardens at other parks and playgrounds, and at housing developments and other private properties. By 1977 the program had grown to include three centers and vegetable garden plots at 40 playgrounds throughout the city. In 1968, Lady Bird Johnson’s Beautification Committee bestowed its *More Beautiful National Capital Award* on the Twin Oaks Garden Demonstration Center. In 1970, Twin Oaks contained the largest number of individual garden plots of any community garden in the District and added the first youth-garden greenhouse in the park system. This landmark nomination thus includes the greenhouse as a contributing structure, because it is closely associated with the gardening program, and it terminates the proposed period of significance at the date of its construction.

The three noncontributing structures on the property are a concrete-block tool shed, an open picnic pavilion, and a compost structure that postdate the period of significance. The tall chain-link perimeter fence likely dates to within the period of significance and might be considered a nominally contributing element, but one subject to replacement as necessary.

Boundary

The park continues today as a community garden. The northern section of the playground is not included in the nomination, because it contains no structures but its own fence. The southern section conveys the significance of the site and much of its character.

Integrity

The fieldhouse retains good integrity while having some condition issues. The asphalt shingle roof has been replaced and requires replacement again. The broad weatherboard siding and other wood elements require repainting and are subject to rising damp and other rot. The dormers have been boarded. The brick end chimney and foundations are intact, as are the wood door and window casings. The greenhouse is in similar condition.

The landscape of a playground/park/community garden is obviously an important feature. Planned in a real sense, the garden plots have nonetheless changed in extent, layout and plantings over nearly 55 years, and these plots obviously overlay the original playground. So, while the overall green character is important, no individual planted elements stand out as historically contributing.