Preserve and Play

Preserving Historic Recreation and Entertainment Sites

athletic clubs ▪ dance halls ▪ amusement parks ▪ spas ▪ bowling alleys ▪ arcades ▪ gazebos ▪ resort hotels ▪ bandstands ▪ golf courses ▪ fairgrounds ▪ carousels ▪ municipal parks ▪ recreation centers ▪ boardwalks ▪ ski lodges ▪ storyland parks ▪ ice arenas ▪ vacation homes ▪ gymnasiums ▪ roller coasters ▪ stadiums ▪ public gardens ▪ summer camps ▪ outdoor theaters ▪ swimming pools ▪ boathouses ▪ grandstands ▪ YMCAs and YWCAs ▪ playgrounds ▪ race tracks ▪ athletic clubs ▪ dance halls ▪ amusement parks ▪ spas ▪ bowling alleys ▪ arcades ▪ gazebos ▪ resort hotels ▪ bandstands ▪ golf courses ▪ fairgrounds ▪ carousels ▪ municipal parks ▪ recreation centers ▪ boardwalks ▪ ski lodges ▪ storyland parks ▪ ice arenas ▪ vacation homes ▪ gymnasiums ▪ roller coasters ▪ stadiums ▪ public gardens ▪ summer camps ▪ outdoor theaters ▪ swimming pools ▪ boathouses ▪ grandstands ▪ YMCAs and YWCAs ▪ playgrounds ▪ race tracks ▪ athletic clubs ▪ dance halls ▪ amusement parks ▪ spas ▪ bowling alleys ▪ arcades ▪ gazebos ▪ resort hotels ▪ bandstands ▪ golf courses ▪ fairgrounds ▪ carousels ▪ municipal parks ▪ recreation centers ▪ boardwalks ▪ ski lodges ▪ storyland parks ▪ ice arenas ▪ vacation homes ▪ gymnasiums ▪ roller coasters ▪ stadiums ▪ public gardens ▪ summer camps ▪ outdoor theaters ▪ swimming pools ▪ boathouses ▪ grandstands ▪ YMCAs and YWCAs ▪ playgrounds ▪ race tracks ▪ athletic clubs ▪ dance halls ▪ amusement parks ▪ spas ▪ bowling alleys ▪ arcades ▪ gazebos ▪ resort hotels ▪ bandstands ▪ golf courses ▪ fairgrounds ▪ carousels ▪ municipal parks ▪ recreation centers ▪ boardwalks ▪ ski lodges ▪ storyland parks ▪ ice arenas ▪ vacation homes ▪ gymnasiums ▪ roller coasters ▪ stadiums ▪ public gardens ▪ summer camps ▪ outdoor theaters ▪ swimming pools ▪ boathouses ▪ grandstands ▪ YMCAs and YWCAs ▪ playgrounds ▪ race tracks ▪ athletic clubs ▪ dance halls ▪ amusement parks ▪ spas ▪ bowling alleys ▪ arcades ▪ gazebos ▪ resort hotels ▪ bandstands

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Preface

Historic preservation does not often come to mind when one thinks of recreation and entertainment. Yet many types of facilities that help fulfill our desire to relax or play, such as beaches, playgrounds, sports stadiums, and amusement parks, may be quite old. In the present day, there are numerous resources associated with entertainment and recreation dating to the Industrial Revolution or before; many more are historic through products of the automobile age.

It is remarkable that some of these properties, structures, and landscapes have changed little over time and still offer the enjoyment of long-established leisurely activities. Other entertainment and recreation facilities have evolved over time and represent a continuum of changing public taste and interests. What these structures and places share, however, is the legacy of how Americans have eagerly embraced and pursued avenues for relaxation and play.

Unlike many traditional historic properties such as house museums, shops along the main streets of small towns, railroad stations, court houses, and hotels, it can be more difficult to assess recreational and entertainment facilities as to their historic significance and character. Even more challenging is how to preserve those that have survived remarkably unchanged and, for those properties that represent a continuum of change, how to operate them today while respecting their historic significance.

Preserve and Play: Preserving Historic Recreation and Entertainment Sites, held in Chicago in May 2005, was the first national forum to explore and promote successful ways of preserving historic resources associated with America's leisure activities. The idea for the conference grew out of discussions that I had over the years concerning the plight of so many historic recreational resources. Within a broader context, these discussions were directed toward understanding why the historic preservation and recreation fields are too often viewed as having divergent goals. Opportunities for cooperative efforts were clearly being unrealized and successful endeavors rarely given the recognition they deserved. The conference provided an opportunity to address these and other concerns at a national level, through the participation of more than fifty speakers and with attendees from the United States and abroad.

The Preserve and Play conference covered a broad range of resource types with properties dating from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Befittingly, the conference was held at the InterContinental Chicago Hotel, an opulent high-rise building constructed in 1929 as the Medinah Athletic Club, a luxury men's club that was forced to close soon thereafter due to the Great Depression. Later used as a hotel, the building, along with its original junior Olympic swimming pool, has been rehabilitated in recent years with the aid of federal historic preservation tax incentives. For the conference, the building served as a reminder that while historic resources cannot always be preserved for their original purpose, in many cases it is possible to adaptively reuse such properties while preserving their historic character.

Speakers and participants at the conference readily embraced the idea that individual resource types, such as swimming pools or dance pavilions, have certain unique qualities in terms of operation and preservation, while there is also much to learn from experiences with other resource types. Assessing significance, effective planning strategies, garnering public support, alternative programming and marketing techniques, creative financing and operation, and material conservation are some of the many topics discussed at the conference and addressed in these proceedings.

In an effort to share further the information provided at the conference, three of the principal co-sponsors, Technical Preservation Services of the National Park Service, the National Council for Preservation Education, and the Historic Preservation Education Foundation, undertook this publication of papers provided by many of the speakers. The Graham Foundation generously provided financial support for this book. I share in

the wish of the many people who were involved in the success of the conference that the readers of these proceedings will find the papers both informative and encouraging.

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Introduction

Every day millions of Americans go about working, sleeping, and eating, but what we do during our free time is often the most cherished part of our lives. We seek recreation alone or in groups. And we value our discretion to use portions of the day in whatever fashion we wish. In many ways this choice lies at the very heart of what we understand by the word freedom, and expresses our innermost desires and dreams.

Recreation may involve some aspects of carefree play, a character-defining feature of childhood that allows us to enter another world where anything can happen. Our imaginations are stretched and transformed by this play, and leisure is truly experienced. Most recreation is purposeful and structured, however, whether it involves physically passive activities, like theatre going, or active pursuits, such as sports.

There are a tremendous number of historic facilities dedicated to leisure and recreation in the United States. It should come as no surprise that the preservation movement in our county has a growing concern with these properties. The emergence of new threats to historic recreation sites demands increased attention, and responses are developed to meet these challenges. To better insure that these properties can be preserved and their designs respected, we must understand how they were formed, evolved, and continue to change.

During America's early history as a largely agrarian country, villages, towns, and cities had little to offer in the way of public pleasure grounds beyond town and church squares. William Penn's 1682 plan for Philadelphia included five open squares, and James Oglethorpe's 1733 scheme for Savannah featured twenty-four small squares, a public garden, and a common, but these ideas were more notable on paper than in fact. In the mid-nineteenth century romantically designed graveyards such as Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery provided a place for peace and restful contemplation. Romanticism also inspired the 1857 Greensward scheme of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux for Central Park, famous as a setting for promenading, riding, ice skating, boating, lawn bowling, bicycling, and band concerts, as well as active sports.

Similar romantic park designs followed in San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., as well as dozens of smaller cities. Often major investments in urban parks were facilitated by fairs and centennials. But smaller parks, more accessible to most adults and children, would not become commonplace until the closing decades of the nineteenth century with the advent of the trolley car, which allowed people to commute readily from the center city to the suburbs.

More important in the minds of children and educators were the public schools in each district of the city or village, because schoolyards provided most children with their first designated sites for recreation. The beginning of the "play movement" can be traced to the Boston area in the 1820s. Brookline, Massachusetts, became the first community in the country to approve funds specifically for grounds dedicated to play purposes. Boston was the first to imitate the seashore with the establishment of sand gardens, later known as sand boxes, in the mid-1880s. Other efforts at creating model playgrounds in slums in inner cities made a considerable impact nationwide.

The definitions of recreation and play became stronger as the frontier began to disappear and the country became more industrialized. A desire to preserve areas of wilderness led to the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. Yellowstone initiated a process by which vast portions of federally-owned lands were explicitly set aside to serve as public parks, where the public could experience wildlife and what remained of the frontier. Similar initiatives were also taken at the state level, further increasing the number of government-owned parks across the country.

Industrialization also played a role in advancing the popularity of team sports in America. With the reduction of the work day from ten or twelve hours

to eight hours, workers had more time for recreational activities. Though cricket was the most popular team sport during the mid-nineteenth century, it was baseball that became more popular than any other by the turn of the century. The success of baseball teams rested to a large degree on the early backing of industrialists and the vigorous competition between company teams, foreshadowing the rise of professional sports and the establishment of major leagues.

Participation in intercollegiate sports accelerated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with baseball, basketball, track and field, and football all becoming popular, although the latter was routinely castigated as too dangerous. These activities allowed young college men to prove their manliness, while young college women demonstrated their athletic talents in tennis, riding, and swimming competitions. Amateur organized sport was furthered by the reintroduction of the Olympics in the early 1890s, including running, wrestling, discus and javelin throwing, and weight lifting.

With the increasing news media attention on intercollegiate and Olympic competitions, the expansion of athletic facilities in high schools was almost inevitable. The advent of centralized school districts spurred the funding of facilities and coaches, providing most young people with their first quasi-professional sports experience. This had an enormous impact on organized sports as recreation because it expanded the role of physical education in the minds of the youth well beyond gymnastics and unstructured recess play. Years later, as adults, they participated in social networks that would support the construction of even larger private and public facilities.

Affordable, plentiful, and easily adapted, wood was the primary construction material for early recreational structures. However, fire took its toll, and safety played an increasingly important role in operations. When anticipating heavy use, designers of playground facilities and equipment sometimes used cast iron. With the increased investment in sports facilities by wealthier and often suburban communities, cast stone and concrete provided added durability, often celebrated as a matter of civic or school pride. By contrast, segregated playgrounds were often constructed of wood, even in metropolitan areas, well into the twentieth century. Racial segregation also extended to collegiate and organized sports, creating an even greater divide between the recreation resources made available to white and black Americans. The implications of the "separate but equal" approach to recreation facilities are just now beginning to be studied and understood.

The widespread availability of the automobile ensured that middle-class recreational activities could take place almost anywhere—in the suburbs, the country, the seashore, and the mountains. Depression-era work programs expanded and updated almost all recreational properties and had a tremendous impact on national, state, and municipal parks and public facilities. Thousands of archaeologists, architects, landscape architects, naval architects, artists, engineers, foresters, historians, and sociologists facilitated the expansion and improvement of recreational facilities under these federal programs.

Housing relocation programs during World War II included recreation for factory workers and their families. When peace returned, leisure was embraced with an unmatched enthusiasm. Booming postwar suburban developments brought recreation literally into the home, with informal living in the ranch house, the split-level, the beach house, and the rustic A-frame in the woods. Recreation was a key component of the relatively remote vacation homes built in the mid-twentieth century, whether in Squaw Valley, California; Aspen, Colorado; or in the Hamptons of New York. As front yards became less essential and were increasingly used for parking the family cars, backyards became centers for games and play. At the same time the television replaced the family hearth as the center of the home. In comparison, even greater mobility and increased leisure time spurred the expansion of park and recreation programs, encouraging families to leave their homes and increase their physical activities in new athletic facilities.

What is the future of these properties? Viewed from the perspective of government representatives and officials, the responsibilities are enormous. More than 800,000 acres of parks and recreation areas exist within city boundaries. Meanwhile, county, state, and federal agencies manage more than 300 million more acres, primarily for outdoor recreation.

The remarkable number of significant sites already recognized in leisure and recreational history is evident by the properties listed in the National

Register of Historic Places, and thousands of records created by the Historic American Buildings Survey and its sister programs. Statewide surveys and municipal inventories uncover even more resources, while review and compliance processes discover them where they are sometimes least expected. The breadth of sites and structures that have already been identified as significant is mind-boggling. The list includes resort hotels, lodges, bandstands, pavilions, spas, summer camps, and motels. There are trolley and automobile-related recreational facilities, such as amusement parks and drive-in movie theatres. Other performance venues include opera houses and theatres, community recreation centers, swimming pools, arenas and stadiums of all kinds, golf courses, zoos and horticultural gardens, swimming pools, bowling alleys, bathhouses, boardwalks, boathouses and marinas, and aquariums. Many of the major public convention halls, auditoriums, and other entertainment venues are iconic sites, linked to generations of Americans because of newspaper coverage and radio and television broadcasts.

Recognition of these resources aside, their future is by no means secure. The forces of Nature and a number of problems of our own society's making are working to destroy them.

Whereas agriculture in the nineteenth century and manufacturing in the twentieth century provided the majority with employment, today neither predominates. This country continues to experience the rise of the service sector, which is increasingly centered upon leisure and recreation, including tourism. At first glance, this would seem to spell a rosy future for historic properties associated with recreational use because it reinforces the axiom that the best use of a property is the function for which it was originally designed.

Upon closer examination, a troubling problem arises: properties designed for recreation are being subjected to direct competition from those built for agriculture and industry that are being converted to leisure use. It is no surprise to see a dairy farm or ranch converted to a golf course, with its barns or corrals becoming a practice court. And provided a steel factory or an automobile assembly plant can be made environmentally safe, it might be effectively rehabilitated into a spa and health club.

This is not only a problem in rural areas of the country, but continues to be evident in the city, especially as local governments believe the downtown should serve as a primary entertainment center of the metropolitan area. Indeed, in many regards the history of recreation can be written solely by tracking trends and fashions in what, after World War II, became known as the central business district of urban centers. Vast amounts of public money continue to be poured into questionable proposals for new recreational venues, often with a decided emphasis on shopping opportunities.

In addition, the information that might be used to inform our views about the future of the past is often anecdotal and episodic. For example, the U.S. Department of Commerce defines recreation spending broadly by tallying the sales of electronics, radio and television, music, sporting goods, entertainment, gardening, books, boats, motor homes, and bicycles. Billions of dollars are spent on these items, but the relationship of this spending to investment in recreation facilities is difficult to assess. Moreover, this expenditure is only a fraction of the amount spent on transportation, housing, clothing, and food associated with leisure time activities. All of these factors are important in comparing the benefits of a new project against a preservation initiative, but the data is difficult to sort. Expenditures and employment patterns are important because recreation is a business, contributing to our economy at all levels.

In some instances, arguments for preservation may be strengthened by making use of life cycle comparisons. Team sports, specifically baseball, football, basketball, wrestling, swimming, and track and field are a major component of every twentieth-century school system, college and university, and professional league. Their facilities are enormous long-term investments. Those charged with the care and management of the historic properties are often ill-equipped to consider preservation-friendly alternatives. Left to school boards, college administrators, or team managers who have little interest in extending the use of the facility and a limited institutional memory, new funding that might become available is generally dedicated to new construction rather than rehabilitation.

Preservationists understand that community organizing is essential to saving historic properties. They also know that communities are not defined only by geography, but by interest. Indeed, often it is only by tying the immediate neighborhood to a broader constituency in the local city, county, and

surrounding region that the necessary personnel and financial resources can be assembled to build a strong consensus that moves the project forward.

The nonprofit organization often becomes the vehicle for that movement. One of the most striking aspects of this conference proceedings, evident more as subtext, is the impact of a growing number of organizations that support the preservation of recreational landscapes, districts, sites, structures, and objects of all kinds. In recent preservation history, this recalls the development of materials-oriented groups such as the Friends of Cast Iron and the Friends of Terra Cotta, and place-oriented organizations such as the Friends of Central Park. Spurred by organizations such as Save Fenway Park!, which is responsible for saving the oldest major league baseball stadium in the country, preservationists can successfully present viable alternatives to demolition. Impossible as it might seem, a preservation campaign can succeed in satisfying the wants and needs of the owners, investors, managers, players, vendors, spectators, broadcast media, surrounding property owners in the neighborhood, and residents of the area. Further, preservation efforts can successfully address safety and accessibility while using appropriate conservation techniques. As an example, the remarkable efforts of the Friends of Rickwood Field in promoting 200 games and other events each year have preserved this historic baseball field as a functioning resource.

Who is responsible for the future of these properties? We are. Elected officials, community leaders, local residents, private owners, and preservationists, must all become active, involved, and passionate about the preservation of historic recreational properties. Working together, our efforts in preserving these properties will be evident, not only in their appearance and integrity, but also in the continued pride of the communities that use them.

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