

# The Clason Point Experiment

Row-house communities account for one-fifth of all public housing in the United States. Many medium-size cities like Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., have a significant number of row-house developments, and in smaller cities like Indianapolis, Fort Worth, and Oklahoma City, public housing for families with children was primarily built as row houses. From a Defensible Space point of view, this was a good first step because developers created housing with no interior public spaces. However, many of these projects prevent residents from controlling the spaces outside their homes because the units were so poorly positioned on their grounds.

Most residents come to public housing with no previous experience of maintaining a home of their own. Few have ever had the opportunity of identifying the land outside their home as their own. Housing management knows this history, but rather than adopt a policy of guiding residents toward the assumption of responsibility, most authorities assume that their residents are inadequate to the task and accept the notion of their dependency.

I became interested in testing this basic assumption early in my Defensible Space work and looked for the opportunity of dividing up and assigning the previously public grounds of a housing project to individual residents. I wanted to learn whether residents would adopt these areas as their own and assume responsibility for maintaining and securing them. Actually, I had even greater hopes that after this reassignment of grounds, residents would look out their windows and see the public street, not as a distant environment, but as an extension of their own private lawns, and, therefore, under their sphere of influence and scrutiny.

My second interest in this experiment was to provide low-income residents, in their successful efforts in improving the grounds around their own homes, with living testament to the success and permanence of their individual efforts. Finally, I hoped that this success would change the attitudes of housing management about residents' ability to affect change and take control.

The opportunity to radically redesign the grounds of a row-house project and to reassign it to residents was given me by the New York City Housing Authority in 1969. I say, given to me, but it took a great deal of convincing. After I had prepared the plans for the modification of the project, the authority changed its mind and withdrew its support. This was because they had made a recent decision to tear it down and build highrises on the site. I begged and pleaded, but to no avail. I finally had to go to our research sponsor, the U.S. Department of Justice, to ask them to intervene on our behalf. The housing authority acquiesced, and I am endlessly grateful to them. For what would have been the impact of my first Defensible Space writings without Clason Point? I tell this story only to prepare those who would follow me for the struggles they face. The management of the New York City Housing Authority used to say that I knew exactly how hard the floors of their building were from having been bounced off them so many times.

Although I have modified many row-house projects since Clason Point—and many have proven even more successful—I chose to use Clason Point here, as the example of this kind of work, because it was an important first step, and there were many things I did wrong that are worth pointing out.



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**Figure III-1:**  
*Clason Point as seen from street, before modifications. Note the overflowing garbage dumpster at left.*

Clason Point is a 400-unit public housing project located in the South Bronx, a comparatively high-crime area of the city of New York. It consists of 46 buildings that mostly contain row houses. Smaller walkup units for seniors are located at the ends of some buildings. At 25 units per acre, this is a dense project by row-house standards. Such a high density was achieved by limiting off-street parking to 0.15 spaces per unit.

The project was built as munitions workers' housing during World War II when few people had cars. It was constructed of exposed cement block in an army barracks fashion. Although it was supposed to have been torn down after the war, the housing authority kept it running until 1969, which is when I first learned about it.

The project was then suffering a 30-percent vacancy rate because of its rundown condition. Its open, unkempt grounds and the unfinished, cement block buildings made it stand out against the surrounding streets of privately owned, red-brick row houses. The project bore the stigma of public housing, and public housing meant that it was owned by the public and residents' rights were confined to the interior of their units. One had the impression that intrusion by strangers would go unchallenged.

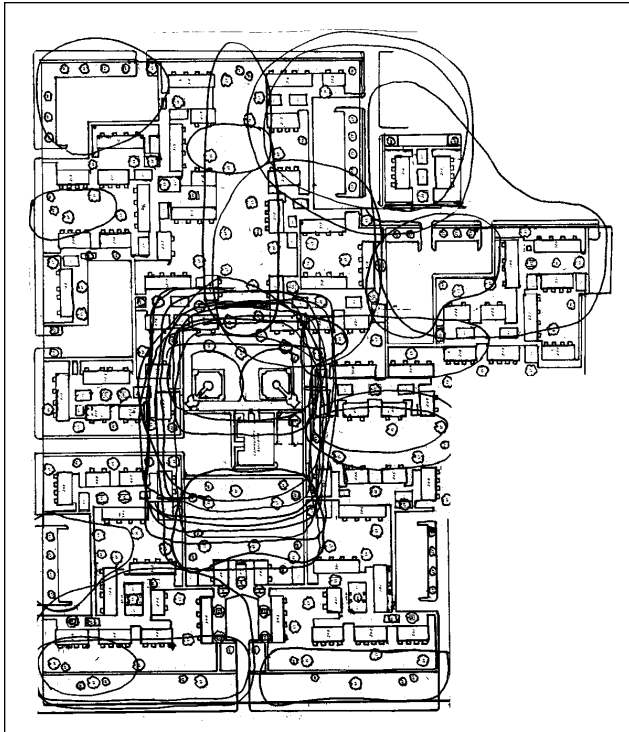
Thirty-two percent of the project was occupied by elderly whites, 29 percent by African-American families, and 24 percent by Puerto Rican families. Intergenerational and interracial conflict was common on the undefined public grounds. Interviews I conducted with residents revealed that they were fearful of being victimized by criminals, both during the day and in the evening; they had severely changed or curtailed their patterns of activity as a result of the new presence of gangs and drug dealers; and they felt they had no right to question strangers as a means of anticipating and preventing crimes.

Teenagers from surrounding streets used the grounds as a congregation area, instilling fear and anger in many Clason Point residents. To better understand how residents perceived the project, I asked them to draw maps of those areas they thought most dangerous. Most residents drew the same kind of map. The only area they thought safe was the one immediately around their home. Everyone also declared the public open space in the center of the project as the most dangerous.



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**Figure III-2:**  
*Interior grounds of Clason Point before modifications.*



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**Figure III-3:**  
*Composite of fear maps  
produced by residents.*

The housing authority had a small modernization budget available for improving the project. It was slated for adding a stucco surface to the cement block to reduce penetration of cold air, replacing the roofing and boilers, and adding a little play equipment. I hoped we could stretch these dollars significantly to change the look and function of the entire project. The physical modifications I planned for Clason Point had these goals:

- To increase the proprietary feelings of residents by subdividing and assigning much of the public grounds to the control of individual families and small groupings of families through the use of real and symbolic fencing.

- To reduce the number of pedestrian routes throughout the project so as to limit access and to intensify the use of the remaining walks. Only those walks that passed in front of the units would remain in use, and these would be widened to allow them to be used for play and sitting areas. New lighting would be added to improve visibility and to extend the use of the walks into the evening.
- To intensify tenants' surveillance of the grounds by giving them a greater identification with the grounds.
- To improve the image of the project by resurfacing the exterior of the existing cement-block building and by further identifying individual units through the use of varying colors and resurfacing materials.
- To reduce intergenerational conflict among residents within the project by assigning specific areas for each group to use.

■ **Redefinition of grounds**

Using 6-foot-high fencing that looked like iron, but was actually inexpensive hollow tubular steel, I created real barriers to define and secure the rear yard areas. The number of families grouped in each rear yard cluster was determined by the existing layout of buildings. The clusters ranged from as few as 12 dwellings per cluster to as many as 40.



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**Figure III-4:**  
*Six-foot-high tubular steel fencing defines the collective rear yards of residents, allowing them to place picnic tables and other outdoor furnishings there for the first time.*

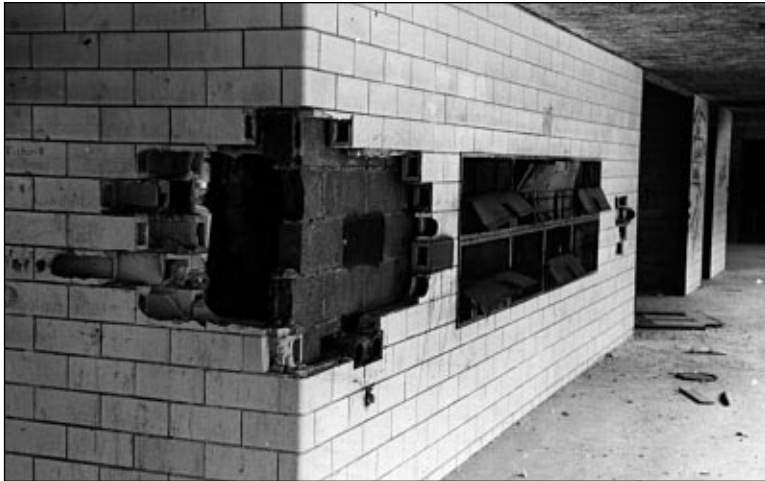
The 6-foot fence defined 50 percent of the previously public grounds located at the rear of the units for the private use of individual families. The low concrete curbing, placed adjacent to the public walk in front of the units, served to redefine an additional 30 percent of the public grounds as private front lawn. These were symbolic barriers. It should be noted that both the fencing and curbing only defined collective areas, not individual front or rear yards. If residents desired to further define the boundaries of their own front or rear yards, they had to install their own individual side fencing. Most of the residents chose to do so after the first year.



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**Figure III-5:**  
*Collective front yards are defined by the new concrete curbing. A new combination lighting, seating, and planter helps residents use and identify with the central walk.*

To improve the usefulness of pedestrian walks and to attract residents to them, I designed a combination planter-seating-lighting element that would be placed in the center of the walk at intervals of about 40 feet. This new, decorative lighting served both to highlight the main public walk and to make the benches usable at night. The lighting also improved residents' surveillance potential and resulting feelings of security.



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**Figure III-6:**  
*Vandalized tiles and  
mailboxes in a highrise.*

A small battle ensued with the housing authority about the decorative lighting. They had never allowed themselves to use anything like it before. They found my lights too low and too delicate, and therefore too vulnerable to vandalism. Their rule was to provide highway-type lighting fixtures that were so high they could not be easily reached. These had plastic covers that could withstand being hit by stones.

I argued that the residents would take pride in the new fixtures with their spherical glass globes and would not want to vandalize them. The housing authority again acquiesced—against their better judgment—but the new fixtures looked glorious at night. They provided a row of soft,

domestic scale lighting that showed the way to the front doors of the units. The new lighting was not vandalized.



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**Figure III-7:**  
*Small play nodes—as little  
as a basketball hoop and an  
adjacent bench—are  
located to serve small  
clusters of residents.*

Housing authorities sometimes get into an escalating spiral by advocating vandal-resistant products. These products are so institutional looking, one expects to see them in prisons. As an example, I cite the large yellow tiles that are commonly used in corridors (figure III-6).

These materials are an unflattering reflection of the residents. They are so demeaning, they invite vandalism. Of course, once they are vandalized, the housing authority embarks on a new search to find even more

vandal-resistant, and inevitably, uglier materials to replace them. At Clason Point, I broke out of that cycle by saying, with my fixtures, that the residents were special. The quality of the fixtures reflected on the residents. They evoked pride and care. The residents did not want to see them vandalized.

At selected intersections along the primary paths, I created play nodes for young children and teenagers. I put benches next to these play areas to allow other children and adults to sit and watch the play activity.

### ■ Resurfacing of buildings

As part of the effort to remove the public housing image of Clason Point, I opted for a slightly more expensive resurfacing treatment that would make the stucco look like brick and stonework. This finish could be applied in a range of different colors, and rather than choose the color combinations myself, as most architects would insist on doing, I had the contractor put up a wall of samples and let individual tenants come and select their own colors. This became an event out of all proportion to its significance. Entire families came out together to stand before the sample wall to debate among themselves and with their neighbors what colors would be best for the units in their row house. This was exactly the kind of involvement with, and commitment to, the improvements I was looking for.

I hoped that resident involvement in the process would increase their sense of individuality and proprietorship and that this would not only result in greater care and maintenance but in increased watchfulness and greater potency in dealing with gangs and drug dealers.



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**Figure III-8:**  
*Wall of samples showing residents the range of wall surfaces and colors available to choose from for their units.*



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**Figure III-9:**  
*The central area at Clason Point before modifications. This area was identified by residents and police as the most dangerous of the project.*

### ■ **Redevelopment of the central area**

In the premodification interviews, tenants identified the central area as the most dangerous part of the project. This, they claimed, was where pushers congregated, where neighborhood addicts came to meet connections, and where one was sure to be mugged at night. On further observation, I found that the area was also used by teenagers, of both sexes, who congregated in one corner of the square after school. Younger children would occasionally throw a ball around here, but because the ground was uneven, intensive ball playing was difficult.

As Clason Point was almost devoid of play and sitting areas, I decided to transform this no-man's land into an intensive community recreation area for all age groups. By peopling it with young children, parents, teenagers, and the elderly, I felt the residents could expunge the drug dealers. Because this central area was also located at the intersection of a few of the newly created walks, I thought I could turn it into a heavily travelled, well congregated, and inviting area by treating it with the same lighting, play equipment, and seating I had provided elsewhere.



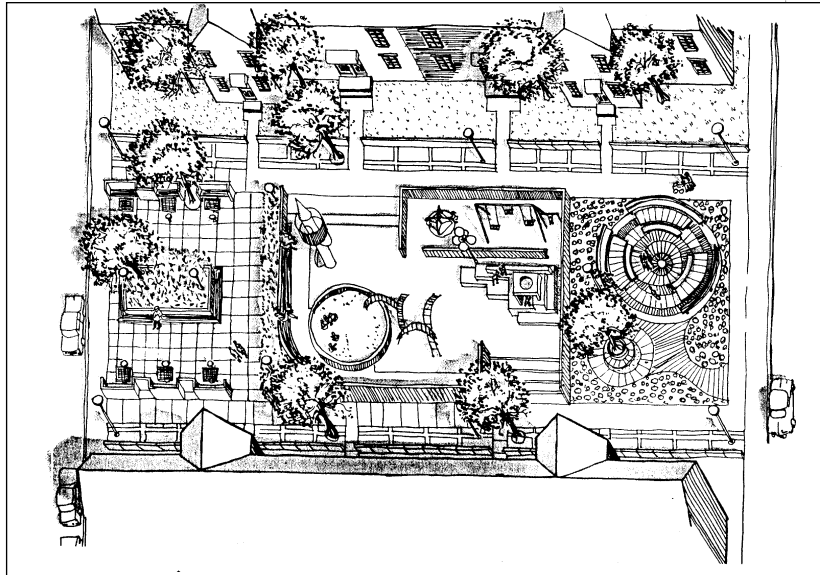
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As the area was to serve three different age groups, I tried to create three zones that would each have a different look and character. I designed the area for the elderly in a conservative, orderly, and restrained manner. In contrast, the teenage area was designed using curvilinear patterns, intense colors, and large bold rocks. These two areas, representing the prime contenders at any housing project, were separated by a large, defined central play area for younger children.

I had hoped that all this activity would transform this dormant and frightening area into the most alive and safe area of the entire project—that it would become the new focus of Clason Point.

I had hoped, too, that my first step in defining the collective front and rear ground areas would encourage residents to further define them into their own individual yards. Would they see the opportunity to install their own side fences and plant grass and shrubs? The housing authority certainly had no intention of doing that. As it was, they saw the new curbs and fencing as barriers to their large mowers.



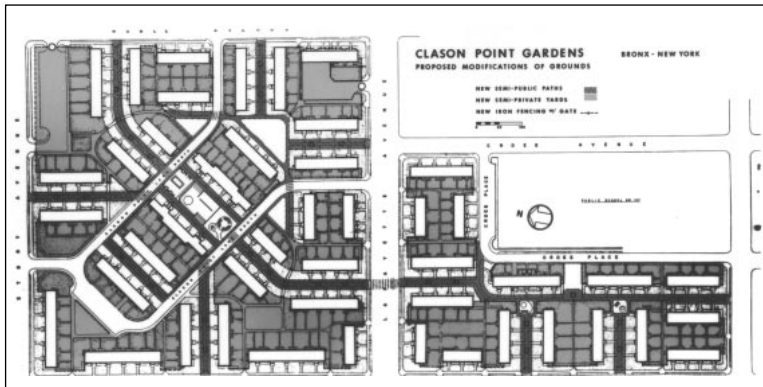
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**Figure III-10:**  
*Plan for the conversion of the central area into a facility serving, from left to right, the elderly, young children, and teens.*



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**Figure III-11:**  
*The central area as modified. Note that the extended front yards of neighboring homes now border the central area, bringing more under residents' control.*



**Figure III-12:**  
*Revised plan of Clason  
Point showing 90 percent  
of the grounds assigned to  
individual families.*

I anticipated that once residents realized that no one else had access to these areas, they would begin to place their own things in them. This would make them possessive of them, and they would begin to take care of and guard over them. This proved to be the case.

But I also created areas requiring joint maintenance that were assigned to groups of 8 to 12 families. These had little to no success. They were only cared for when one adjacent family took it upon itself to do so. If that area was then misused by another adjacent family, the family that was taking care of it abandoned their effort. The lesson here is: Try to subdivide all the grounds and assign every scrap of it to individual families.

The reassignment of public grounds was undertaken with the intention of expanding the domain that residents felt they controlled and in which they felt they had the right to expect accountability from strangers. I theorized that this reassignment would lead residents to watch the users of the grounds and walks more carefully and to set up in their own minds expectations about what kind of behavior would be acceptable in these areas. As a psychologist on my staff put it, “This reorganization of grounds will set up a dependent relationship between spatial organization and social expectations, and we should find that the informal expectations on the part of residents will become more exacting and differentiated. By eliminating the functionless no-man’s land that no resident can control, we should also reduce crime and fear of crime. Tenants should feel they now had the right to impose social controls and pressures on strangers and neighbors.” I could not have put it better myself.

### ■ Effectiveness of the modifications

The first year after the modifications took place at Clason Point, the residents raked the topsoil of the grounds in front of their homes and planted the grass seed that was made available to them by the housing authority.

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To the surprise of many residents, the grass came up in abundance, and the ground surface changed from packed dirt to a carpet of green.

Residents then began to demarcate their own front and rear yards by putting up smaller, intervening fences—in many instances, the better to distinguish their patch of success from their neighbors' inadequate efforts.

Not to be outdone, unsuccessful residents plowed up the hard ground once again, added mulch which was again made available by the housing authority, and reseeded more carefully. In fact, they had acquired the knack of putting in seed, watering, and fertilizing by watching their successful neighbors do it. To the delight of those residents new to gardening, the grass came up by itself in the spring of the second year and was even more lush than the year before. This prompted residents to invest in small shrubs, trees, flowers, and garden furniture.

Now there may be those who will wonder at what I have just described and, perhaps, take offense at it. Was this whole effort no more than a gardening course for public housing residents? I have even been accused of implying that low-income African Americans don't know how to grow grass. The whole exercise, of course, has nothing to do with gardening; it has to do with providing



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**Figure III-13:**  
*View of internal walk at Clason Point before modifications.*



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**Figure III-14:**  
*View of the same internal walk as in figure III-13 after modifications and residents' response with planting and further demarcation.*

**BEFORE****AFTER**

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**Figure III-15:** Before and after photographs of an area of Clason Point. The original layout provided no grounds in the front of units for individual residents. In our site redesign, the central green area, which was largely neglected, was removed and residents were given their own front yards, which they quickly improved. A play node is shown at front left.

people with the opportunity of taking control of the space and activities *outside* their dwellings, with giving them an environment to live in that enhances their self-image and evokes pride, and finally to allow them the opportunity to themselves improve their space so that their identity with it is reinforced. The bottom line is that by subdividing and assigning all the previously public grounds to individual families, we have removed it from the gangs and drug dealers.

In the third year after the modifications, the small shrubs had grown a few feet and the perennial flowers had expanded their root system and come up in abundance.

Residents now began to expand their concerns beyond their own front yard to the public sidewalks and concrete planter in the center of the walk. On a systematic basis, residents began to sweep the public sidewalks in front of their homes, particularly when it appeared as if the authority's maintenance staff were derelict in their duties. Residents had begun to see the public sidewalks as an extension of their dwellings.

We had anticipated that the residents' new assumption of grounds care would meet with a positive response from the housing authority maintenance staff because it would decrease their workload. The opposite was the case. The staff complained that the new curbing, fencing, and concrete planters prevented them from using their power equipment; too

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much work would now have to be done by hand. A few months after the completion of the modifications, the grounds supervisor at Clason Point put in for additional manpower to handle his new workload. We were informed of his request by an anxious director of housing management who had also hoped that the grounds modifications would reduce their workload. I suggested a site visit.

Following a site visit, the central office concluded that, if anything, the grounds staff could be cut back. This decision was not implemented immediately, however, for fear of antagonizing the union. The response of the grounds staff was to slow down their performance and allow garbage and litter to accumulate in the public walks and at the garbage dumpsters. Residents responded by cleaning up some of the sidewalks and dumpster areas themselves, for the first time in the history of the project. The slowdown by grounds maintenance personnel continued for 6 months and was finally resolved when the housing authority replaced the grounds staff supervisor with one who felt comfortable with a policy that allowed residents to care for the grounds themselves. The supervisor, in turn, redirected his staff's activity toward the maintenance of the public walks and play facilities. The following year, the project's grounds maintenance staff was cut in half and the extra men moved to a neighboring project.



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**Figure III-16:**

*The 6-foot fencing that defined the collective rear yards stimulated individual residents to further define their own individual rear yards. This removed much of the overall grounds of the project from access by criminals and gangs. It also limited the movement of those criminals who lived within a rear yard cluster.*

The overall crime rate in the development (including breach of housing authority rules) dropped by 54 percent in the first year. The premodification monthly average overall crime rate at Clason Point was 6.91 crimes per 1,000 residents and the postmodification average was 3.16 crimes per 1,000 residents. The average monthly burglary rate per year dropped from 5.15 per 1,000 residents to 3.71, a 28 percent change. The average monthly robbery rate dropped from 1.95 per 1,000 to 0.

The average monthly assault rate dropped from 0.53 per 1,000 to 0.31, a 42 percent change. The number of felonies during evening and night-time hours decreased by more than one-half. For the serious crime categories—burglary, robbery, and assault—the average crime rate was reduced by 61.5 percent.

The percentage of people who felt they had a right to question strangers on the project grounds increased from 27 to 50 percent. Residents' fear of crime was reduced even more dramatically than the actual crime rates and, for the first time in years, most residents said they had little fear of walking through the project grounds at night.

The project, which was 30 percent vacant before the modifications, not only achieved full occupancy, it acquired a waiting list of hundreds of applicants.

### ■ **Learning from experience**

Perhaps the most serious mistake I made was allowing the existing arrangement of buildings to determine the size of the collective rear yard groupings. Residents in the larger groupings had difficulty keeping the gates to their collective rear yard area locked. There was also more uniformity in the quality of maintenance of rear yards in the smaller clusters than in the larger. Had I realized how much variation would occur with the size of the cluster, I could have subdivided the larger clusters simply by running a 6-foot fence across them, and thus cut them in two. Whether to save the cost of a fence or from oversight, I had forgotten my own basic rule: the smaller the number of families that share an area, the greater the felt responsibility for maintaining and securing it, and the easier it is for people to agree on mutually acceptable rules for using it.

The most successful play and recreation areas proved to be the small nodes I provided to serve a small and distinct group of residents. The large central play area initially attracted a large population from all over the project—adults, children, and the elderly—and they did succeed in driving out the drug dealers. However, the large size of the area also produced turf conflict between the residents living immediately adjacent to it and those coming from the other end of the project. This soon resulted in the vandalizing of equipment by the distant residents who, at times,

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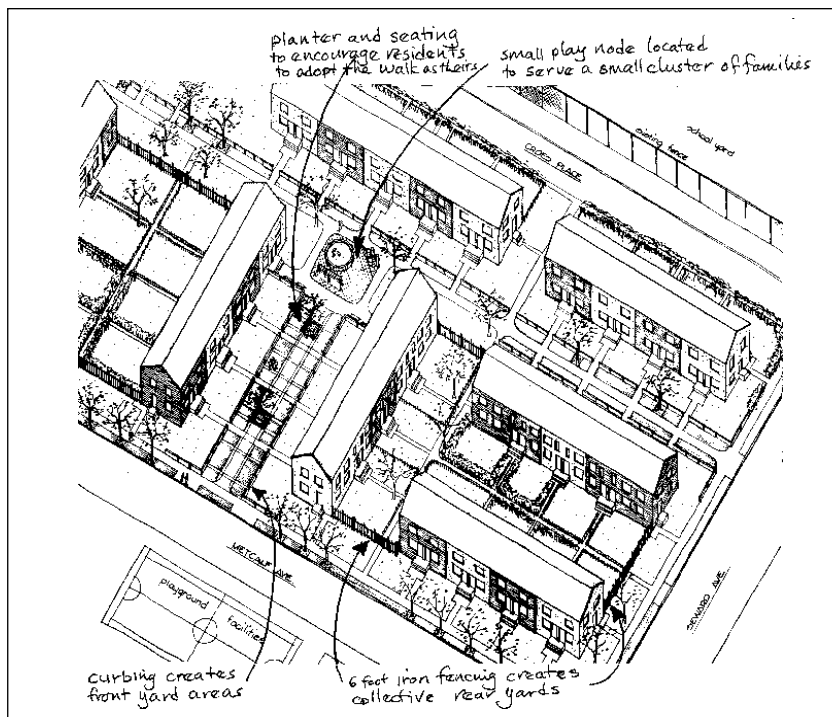
felt excluded. If they could not use it, no one would. It was also a mistake to try to create three zones within the one area to serve teenagers, young children, and elderly. The elderly soon found themselves overwhelmed and threatened by teenagers, even in the area specifically designed for them: that is, the one containing the formally designed checker tables and benches.



**Figure III-17:**

*Play node for young children: a sandbox and a climber located to serve a small cluster of families. Note how the new 6-foot fencing has prompted residents to produce gardens in their rear yards at left and the new curbing to create their own front yards.*

The lesson to be learned from this is that if one has the opportunity of placing 10 pieces of play equipment in a housing development, it is better to put 1 piece of equipment in each of 10 areas so that it is there for the specific use of a particular group of residents, than to group all 10 pieces in 1 central public area for the use of all residents.



**Figure III-18:**

*Aerial view of a small portion of Clason Point showing how 6-foot fencing was installed to create collective rear yards and curbing to define front yards. Note the location of the play node serving a small cluster of families.*

