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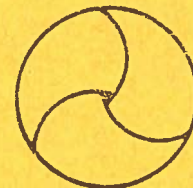
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**The Sharon Building:
The Transformation of Women's Recreational Needs
in the Late Nineteenth Century City**

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The Sharon Building

The Transformation of Women's Recreational Needs in the Late Nineteenth-Century City

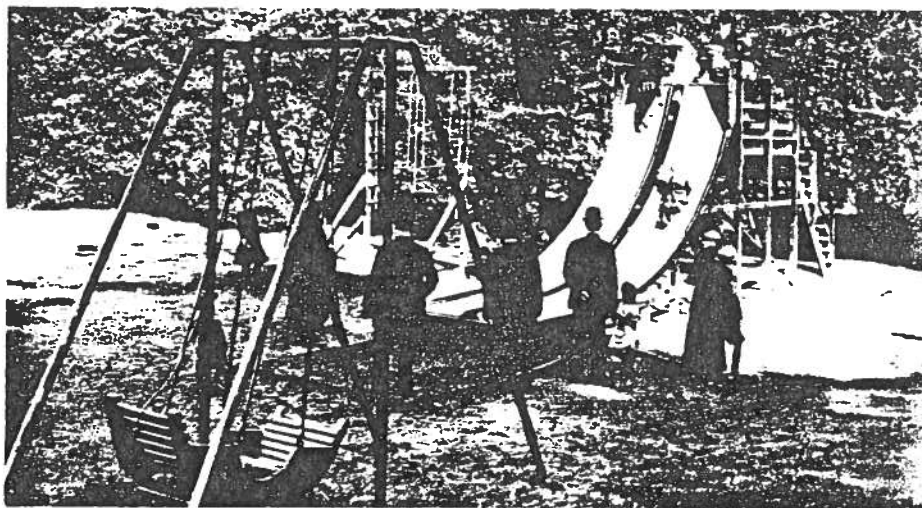
Galen Cranz

In the early 1880s, Senator Sharon from California willed \$50,000 to the commissioners of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park for the creation of monumental entrance arches bearing his name. The commissioners made a plea to Sharon's heirs, as formal marble arches were not in keeping with their vision of the park. Instead, they persuaded the heirs to build the Children's Quarter, consisting of a playground space and an informal sandstone building. This area was exclusively for children and their mothers.

The successful change in the interpretation of the Sharon bequest occurred at one of several pivotal points in American park history. This abrupt about-face reflected a larger shift in planners' ideologies as they moved from one model of the ideal park to another. The shifting ideals entailed new strategies about how best to deploy women in the ongoing effort to curtail urban problems, as well as certain attitudes about how women should live in cities. Specifically, the redefinition of the gift from memorial arches to children's building represents the transition from the *pleasure garden* (1850-1900) to the *reform park* (1900-1930).

The pleasure garden was conceived as an antidote to the ills of the rapidly industrializing city. It was characterized by a curving picturesque landscape and an emphasis on mental refreshment. Standards of order for the physical environment and for social intercourse (assumed to be set mainly by women) would help to establish white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon Protestant values for the diverse urban population of ethnic and rural immigrants. Women's presence in the pleasure garden park together with their husbands and children would help stabilize the family unit, which was seen as threatened by alcoholism, prostitution, commercial entertainment, and boarding-house life.

In contrast, the reform park accepted industrial life and attempted to rationalize it by locating recreation near working-class neighborhoods. Physical exercise, supervision, and organization were stressed as the significance of fine art and nature appreciation diminished. For the first time sex and age segregation were institutionalized, dramatically reversing the prior emphasis on families using parks as a group. Segregation led easily to sex-role stereotyping and unequal treatment



First municipal playground in U.S. (Note the two slides ensuring separation of the sexes.)

of boys and girls. The attempt to solve the problem of juvenile delinquency also caused more attention to be focused on boys.

The pleasure garden and the reform park were followed by the *recreation facility* (1930-1965) and the *open space system* (1965-present). All four models had special implications for women's safety. In the pleasure garden, women were protected by being accompanied by men. In the reform park, safety was ensured by separating women from men. The recreation facility provided safety through police surveillance and elimination of shrubbery. In the open space system, women could only be guaranteed safety if they did not go to parks at all, went only on busy days, or went prepared to defend themselves with a martial art. In the Children's Quarter, we see the emerging reform park assumptions about women's safety via segregation in the context of a park based on the older ideal of the pleasure garden, with its concept of family use.

The idea for the Children's Quarter came from William Hammond Hall, Golden Gate Park's first designer, whose overall plan was published in the First Biennial Report in 1871 and slightly expanded in 1875. He classified the "probable frequenters of the park" into four types, each of which merited a major building. A manor house, large and elegant, would serve adults who demanded a first-class reception. The hostelry and race track were for "gentlemen who wish to

speed their horses." The cafe would cater to "large picnic parties, and very many persons who would approach the park on foot, or by public conveyance"—that is, the working class. The Children's Quarter, including a dairy and a house of refreshment and shelter, was intended for "ladies with their families, children in the charge of nurses and guardians, boys and girls, and ladies who may wish to enjoy themselves in a homelike manner." Hall physically separated this quarter from the rest of the park so that it "should not present any particular attention except to the children and those who wish to have a quiet time."

By the time of Sharon's bequest, Golden Gate Park already had a casino and speed track, fulfilling Hall's plans in part. The major lack was an informal refreshment place for women and children. The park commissioners reported that they themselves managed to convince the heirs to change Sharon's will. The heirs apparently recognized and appreciated the merit of the proposed change, which came from an existing prospectus and was consistent with the new regard for children's needs. In Hall's original master plan, the Children's Quarter had the lowest priority; it would not have been built without Sharon's donation.

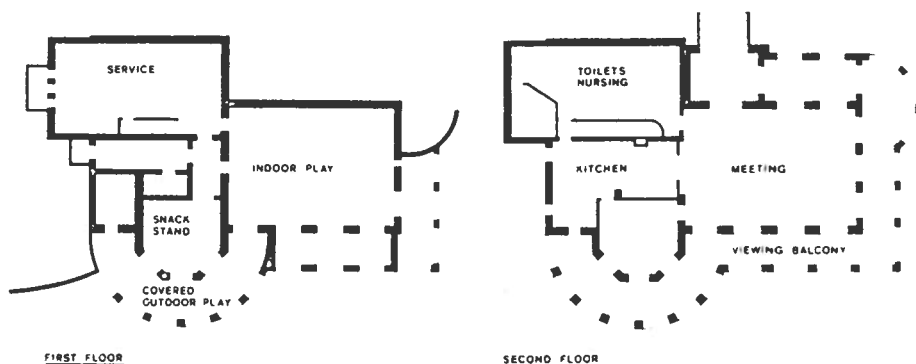
In 1885 the commissioners authorized the firm of Percy and Hamilton to design and construct the Sharon Children's Quarter, which officially opened in December 1888. The playground and building

were sited in the southeast corner of the park, which provided both easy access and visual privacy. The style of the building was Richardsonian Romanesque: three stories, with gables, turrets, asymmetrical plan, and rough-faced San Jose sandstone laid in broken courses. The siting, design, and styling expressed the ideals of informality, domesticity, simplicity, and naturalness.

The meaning of this choice is best understood in the context of the competition among proponents of three different architectural styles for park buildings at the time. Designers of the pleasure garden, such as Golden Gate Park, originally advocated either rustic or Victorian Gothic architecture. Within a few years park administrators felt that these styles looked too insubstantial for public buildings, and they turned to the Richardsonian Romanesque for its handsome, massive solidity which at the same time was unpretentious and did not dominate the surrounding naturalistic landscape. By the 1880s donors had started to prefer the more imposing neoclassical style for their memorials. Senator Sharon was part of the latter group, which favored formal, symmetrical, white, exotic, ornate, highly visible public architecture.

The stylistic issues reflected alignments with new attitudes toward public spending (public outlays should look enduring), philanthropy (donors should get visible recognition), and the city itself (the City Beautiful movement acclaimed the order of neoclassical plans and buildings). Sharon's proposed memorial gate would not have been an utterly radical departure from the aesthetics of the late pleasure garden model, for its advocates increasingly accepted neoclassical buildings and had always preferred a perimeter wall with gates to control access to the park. Yet what is most significant about the Children's Quarter is not its stylistic modesty but the type of building per se; it represented a shift in park use and recreation philosophy. Moreover, because the Children's Quarter was created before the reform park was clearly defined as a model, the commissioners had no precedent to guide them. They evolved a new set of policies on their own and—not surprisingly—inconsistencies and contradictions appeared.

The chief tenets of the reform park were small size, location within working-class tenement districts, subservience of landscape to architecture, formal rather than informal ground plans, emphasis on organization rather than spontaneity, and sex and age segregation rather than the use of parks by "organic, natural" groups such as families and church congregations. The theoretical justification for sex and age segregation came from developmental theory: the biopsychosocial needs



The Sharon Building—floor plans.

of sixteen-year-old boys differed from those of seven-year-old boys, and those of fourteen-year-old girls differed from both. Accordingly, designers created separate gymnasiums, showers, and playgrounds, as well as apparatus of appropriate sizes, adapted to each group's "dominant interests." Whenever a facility had to be shared, supervisors divided the days or hours between males and females. This segregation implied a bilateral symmetry, which designers used to organize the ground plans formally around an axis—the antithesis of the informal curves and intentionally ambiguous layout of the pleasure garden.

The intellectual foundation of the Sharon Building included both pleasure garden premises and reform park ideals. It was located within Golden Gate Park, an existing pleasure garden, rather than in the working-class Mission District. Due to subtle siting, landscaping remained dominant and informality was retained. Children's play remained spontaneous because parental supervision preempted an organized program of activity. The building was not internally divided into male and female areas; instead, the entire site was off-limits to older boys or men. While planners adopted the reform park attitude toward serving children as a distinct user group, they did not fully realize the implications. Reaching the city children, especially children of working-class parents, would require some consideration that they would not all be able to come with their own guardians. Hiring play supervisors is the necessary consequence of attempting to serve children whose parents are at work. Thus the Children's Quarter was designed with mixed premises: parent-child supervision, on the one hand, and a perception of children and women as having needs distinct from those of the family, on the other.

On the ground floor of the building children could buy snacks and wholesome

refreshments in a "dairy" adjacent to their playground. The second floor was reached by a ramp from the ground, which wrapped around the southern and eastern facades of the building and turned into a viewing gallery, where adults could sit and drink coffee. Children were supervised by their own parent or nurse; no day-care ratios of ten to one here! Hence, the building, overlooking the playground, had to accommodate large numbers of adults. On the veranda they could be in the company of one another, take refreshment, and still have direct visual access to their charges. The building enclosed private rooms for nursing. A married couple lived under the peaked roof, on the third floor, available 24 hours a day for assistance.

The playground attached to the Children's Quarter was equipped with merry-go-round, live donkey and goat rides, swings, seesaws, slides, springboards, and maypoles. The city fathers intended these facilities for wholesome recreation to foster moral and physical development in the city's children. In 1888 the program for the opening ceremonies expressed both an instrumental attitude toward recreation and the new idea that children were a user group in their own right: "It is believed, and earnestly hoped by the Commissioners, that many hundreds of children will be taken from our streets, and with the facilities now afforded them for moral and healthful recreation, will grow up to be better men and women."

Class harmony, a goal of so much park planning, was also a goal of the playground. According to the souvenir programs, "when enjoying these grounds, under the friendly shelter of the house, there is no distinction between the offspring of the most lowly and the descendants of the most wealthy and influential." However, the dairy concession and the rides did cost money, which limited participation to those who could afford them.



GOLDEN GATE PARK

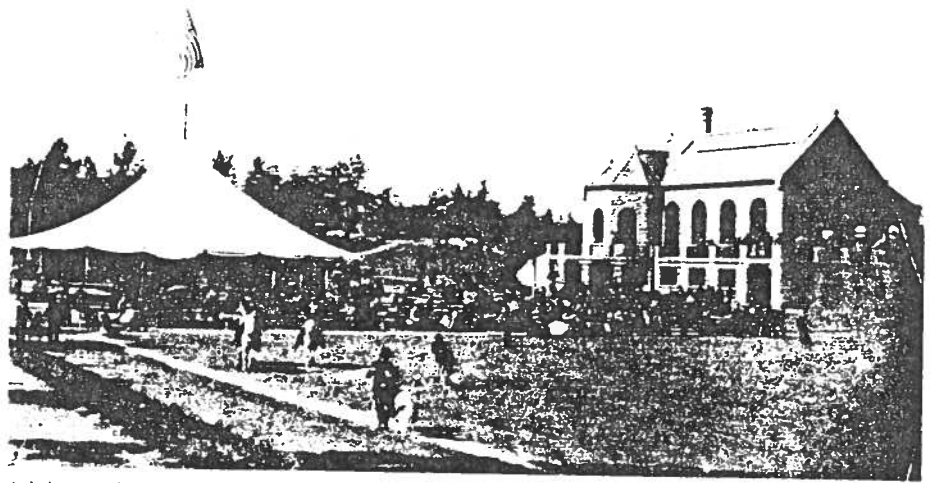
Partial solutions to this problem were to institutionalize one "free day" per year (subsidized by the park commission and the *San Francisco Examiner*) and to lower fares from a nickel per ride to two rides for a nickel.

The Sharon Building was to be only for mothers and their children, but this careful attempt to provide them with a safe and respectable environment had some consequences not foreseen by those who held pleasure garden attitudes toward family use of the parks: it kept fathers from taking a direct role in the care and supervision of their children. One indignant father wrote to the editor of the *Examiner* complaining that he was driven away from the lawn surrounding the merry-go-round and the children's swings by an officer who insisted that the ground was for ladies and children. The father pointed out:

That means that married men who have children at play in the ground must either get a lady to watch the little ones, or the man hides in the distance, or those men accompanying their wives may look at their family from the far road in order not to conflict with the Park Ordinance which reads, "This lawn reserved for ladies and children."

This man suggested that the sign be altered to read: "This lawn reserved for children and their guardians." However, since his views were exceptional, the park administration made no effort to include males in the supervision of children until well into the reform park era, when they were sometimes hired as play leaders.

The sex-role stereotyping of the reform park was anticipated in the provision of separate play equipment for boys and girls. Gymnastic equipment for the children's playground included a double slide, one for boys, the other for girls. Half the horses on the carousel had side-saddles. Even with these segregated arrangements,



Adults on the balcony overlooking the playground (photographed after 1900 when men were allowed in the building).

little girls were better off than before since they "never had had an opportunity of running races with each other or playing with a skipping rope, or giving their muscles exercise, or their lungs a chance to expand, just for want of such a place as this."

By 1893 newspapers took for granted that girls were the major users. In the use of swings, "Girls, as a matter of course, were in the largest majority." Nationwide, females of all ages used city parks more on their own and more actively than men had anticipated. Skating attracted women in winter climates, and on Golden Gate Park's Stowe Lake they went rowing more often than men did. In the 1880s young women everywhere began to play tennis, croquet, and basketball and to ride bicycles. Generally, women enjoyed active sports without the company of men; newspaper reporters covered this surprising turn of events with mockery and disbelief.

Men have defined women's needs for recreation and the use of other public places, and women themselves have usually accepted these definitions. However, perceived needs may not necessarily be the same as "real" needs. The assumption was, with the Sharon Building and other public places, that women needed a safe, protected, genteel setting, away from the raucous, dirty, loud, smelly, and chaotic environment of the 19th-century city and away from alcohol, swearing, and men. In reality, women were pursuing active sports on their own or with other women and girls. Accommodating these and other real needs of females might have meant a different kind of park programming.

The Sharon Building represents a historical experiment, an attempt to accommodate children and to create a safe place for women alone, in the context of a park conceived as an antidote to urban life. The Sharon Building was in most respects unique—an early and unresolved proto-

type at the cusp of the pleasure garden and reform park eras.

The reform park accepted and tried to rationalize industrial life and its division of labor by organizing users into discrete groups, using a rectilinear mode of spatial organization and institutionalizing age and sex segregation. The Sharon Building made gestures to the new ideal of sex segregation without abandoning the prior commitment to spontaneity, informality in plan, and "organic" social relations between mother and child. It stands today, albeit fire-gutted, as a material expression of a transition in thought regarding the best way for women and children to live in cities.

Bibliography

For a more expanded description of the four park models, see Galen Cranz, "The Changing Roles of Urban Parks," *Landscape*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer 1978), pp. 9-18. Also see her article on "Women in Urban Parks" in the special issue of *Signis* on women in cities (April 1980). Another overview of park history is Newton's *Design on the Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). Some writings by the leading pleasure garden designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, have been collected by Olmsted and Kimball in *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973). The development of the reform park in Chicago is fully chronicled by Clarence Rainwater in *The Play Movement in the United States* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1922). The early annual reports of the San Francisco park commissioners are rare books, available in university libraries and special California collections.

Galen Cranz has a PhD in sociology and is Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at UC Berkeley. Her book on the history of urban parks will be published by MIT Press in 1981.