

# HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN ANALYSIS

For a Proposed Playground  
Located in St. James Park  
San José, California

Prepared for:

The San José Redevelopment Agency  
50 West San Fernando Street, Suite 900  
San José, CA 95013

Prepared by:

DILL DESIGN GROUP  
110 NORTH SANTA CRUZ AVENUE  
LOS GATOS, CALIFORNIA 95030  
(408) 354-4015  
(408) 399-4715 FAX  
ldill@ricochet.net

Written by:

**Leslie A. G. Dill, Architect**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Historical and architectural design review of the proposed playground in St. James Park in the City of San José is being conducted by the firm of Dill Design Group. This review was begun in September 2000, and has continued through October and November 2000. The San José Redevelopment Agency, developer of this municipal property, requested this ongoing review as part of a proposed project to construct a new playground structure on the southeast quadrangle of the subject site. The conceptual design plans for the playground are by MPA Design, a landscape architecture and urban design firm from Walnut Creek, California. The initial proposal set was dated August 7, 2000; the current proposal pages are not dated. The County of Santa Clara Assessor's Parcel Number for St. James Park is 467-21-001 and 014. The subject site is at the southern end of Parcel Number 467-21-001.

### **Qualifications**

Leslie A. G. Dill, Principal of the firm of Dill Design Group, has a Master of Architecture with a certificate in Historic Preservation from the University of Virginia. She is licensed in California as an architect. Leslie Dill is listed with the Northwest Information Center as meeting the requirements to perform identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment activities within the professions of Historic Architect and Architectural Historian in compliance with state and federal environmental laws. The Northwest Information Center utilizes the criteria of the National Park Service outlined in 36 CFR Part 61.

### **Methodology**

Leslie Dill conducted a field survey of the subject property in September of 2000. The site and surrounding Historic District were examined. Characteristic features of the park and the neighborhood context were noted. Photographs were taken of the park. Research was conducted into the historical nature and significance of the park and the surrounding district. The proposed plan was evaluated according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the City of San José St. James Square Historic District Design Guidelines. Additional recommendations were provided based on the significant features of the park. Revised reports have been based on reviewing additional conceptual design proposal pages, the Conceptual Landscape Plan "C" dated August 7, 2000, testimony before the San José Historic Landmarks Commission by Redevelopment Agency Staff on September 6, 2000, and Design Development Phase documents presented at a meeting October 10, 2000.

### **Historic Status**

St. James Park is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the St. James Square National Register Historic District. As such, it is eligible for the California Register of Historic Resources. St. James Park is also listed as part of the City of San José St. James Square Historic District.



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### **Brief Historical Background of St. James Park**

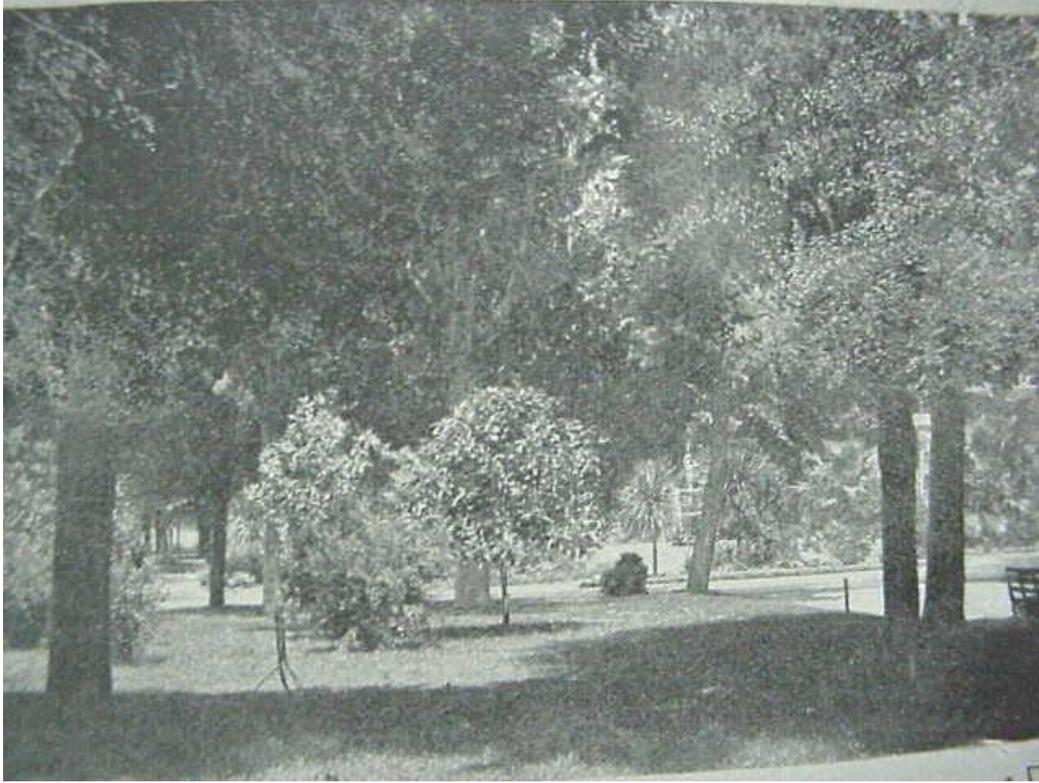
The park was established as part of Charles Lyman's 1847 survey of the City. It remained generally undeveloped as a park until 1868 and 1869 when paths, fences, and plantings were added, specifically lawns and American elm trees. The design of the paths has been attributed to Frederick Law Olmsted who designed Central Park in New York City, as well as other important landscape designs of that era. The park was so successful as an arboretum that in the 1880s plants had to be relocated from St. James Park to other City parks. Significant events that occurred in the park include a speech by President McKinley in 1901, long-term National Guard encampments after the 1906 earthquake, the infamous lynching of the Hart kidnapping suspects in 1933, and a speech by Robert Kennedy in 1968. Additional descriptions about the park's historic pattern of use include the reference to separation of a "women's and children's area" from the rest of the park in the 1930s. This segregation by age and gender apparently continued into at least the 1950s, and may have been instituted as early as the 1890s. (Loomis 1950; Farrell 1950; MPA 1985) In 1955, City residents voted to build North Second Street through the center of the park, and a community center was constructed on the site in 1973. Recent history includes the completion of a 1985 Master Plan, demolition of 1930s WPA restrooms, the installation of a transit stop, including new restrooms, the addition of a reproduction fountain on the western side of North Second Street, and other park improvements associated with the Master Plan. Interest in bringing more local residents to the park has sparked support for a playground; this proposed project is in response to that interest.

### **Brief Design Background of St. James Park**

In *Sunshine Fruit and Flowers* the San Jose Mercury staff described St. James Park in 1896: "There has been a charming negligence, or a careful simulation of such, in the arrangement of trees and shrubs, and as a result the park presents the appearance of a natural grove, the trees in which seem to have been most fortunately distributed. There is a greater variety than is usually found, the list including eucalyptus, pepper, sycamore, pine, cork elm, cypress, palm, willow, maple, umbrella, orange, birch, yew, locust, oak and a variety of flowering trees and shrubs." "There are everywhere wide stretches of greensward, and flowers bloom there every day in the year. Seats are provided in sunshine and shade, and a gardener is employed to care for the trees and flowers."

In addition to the plantings noted above, the park has become a home for a number of memorials. There is a statue in honor of President McKinley, a podium in honor of Robert Kennedy, a bench and monument in honor of General Naglee, a bell in honor of fallen firefighters, as well as a small monument to "Elizabeth Volkens and Inez E. Cottrell" at the subject site. A community center inhabits the northeast quadrangle of the park. Its design includes a high perimeter fence. North Second Street was constructed through the park in 1955. It currently is detailed as a transit mall, with special pavement and bollards that are meant to evoke the Victorian era related to this park. A large, tiered fountain is on the western side of Second Street.

Historical photographs, from the apparent period of significance, indicate a strong design aesthetic at that time. It was considerably more vegetated than it is currently. The images show a dense canopy of trees with curving paths around dense planting beds. A strong image is of the short palms used within the low



1893 View of St. James Park



1894 View of St. James Park

planting areas. The written descriptions also specify lawns, but the photographic documentation supports a more forested image.

The significant features of the park are described on an Historic Resources Survey Sheet (Undated) as follows: “The present condition of St. James Park consists of two equal square blocks bisected by a one-way, three-lane arterial (Second Street) running north to south. Most of the dense vegetation has been trimmed so that at present the informal arrangement of large trees and the open grassy lawns define the general design character. The one interesting aspect remaining from the more formal gardens of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is the unusual diagonal path system with its ornamental [curlicue] shapes and yet overall symmetrical pattern. To this day, St. James Park conspicuously represents the one significant piece of greenery, and the dominant urban open space in the central core district of the City.”

## **ANALYSIS OF THE PROPOSED PLAYGROUND DESIGN**

### **Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation**

The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, originally published in 1977 and revised in 1990, “...encompass related landscape features and the building’s site and environment as well as attached, adjacent or related new construction. The Standards are to be applied to specific rehabilitation projects in a reasonable manner, taking into consideration economic and technical feasibility.” These standards are used throughout the United States to develop plans for historic resources, and are specifically mentioned in the St. James Square Historic District Design Guidelines by the City of San José.

The following is the complete list of Standards:

1. “A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.”
2. “The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.”
3. “Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken.”
4. “Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.”
5. “Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.”
6. “Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.”

7. “Chemical or physical treatments, such as sandblasting, that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.”
8. “Significant archeological resources affected by a project shall be protected and preserved. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures shall be undertaken.”
9. “New additions, exterior alterations or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.”
10. “New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.”

#### **Analysis using the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards:**

The important requirements of this project is that the new construction shall not change the use of the park or District (Standard 1), shall not remove character-defining features (Standard 2), shall not create a false sense of historical development (Standard 3), shall be compatible with the massing size, scale and architectural features of the District (Standard 9), and shall be reversible (Standard 10). In addition, the design of the playground adds features that may be interpreted as replacements of missing historical features, so the playground should be analyzed using Standard 6. Standard 8, regarding the preservation of potential archeological features, must be addressed separately by others (See Disclaimer). A few of the Standards do not apply to this proposed project. Standards 4, 5, and 7 generally do not apply in this analysis.

1. “A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.”

#### **Analysis:**

The historic purpose of St. James Park was as a civic plaza and park. It was the scene of many important twentieth century political speeches, and used as an arboretum in the late nineteenth century. Meanwhile, (posed) historical photographs indicate the use of the park by children, and written accounts mention segregating the children in the park. Clyde Arbuckle described sailing toy boats in the original fountain (MPA). The addition of a playground, while not original to the design, may be compatible with the historical use of the park.

This standard also states that the use should result in minimal change to the defining characteristics. At the present, the significance of the park is its openness that contrasts with its urban surroundings. The playground plan that retains the most open plan should be chosen. Berms and large, solid play structures that block views should be discouraged.

2. “The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.”

### Analysis:

The historical integrity of St. James Park has been lost over the years. The only historic materials extant include mature trees and one low monument within the construction site. The proposal indicates that most of the trees will be retained. This part of the proposal would seem appropriate, given the need to preserve the character-defining density of trees in the area. The play of shade and shadow would perhaps be welcome at the play structures as well.

3. "Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken."

### Analysis

There are two historical design issues that must be addressed prior to the introduction of a school play structure in St. James Park. The first issue is whether adding a schoolhouse play structure is appropriate on this site. The second issue is the appropriateness of the design of a potential school structure.

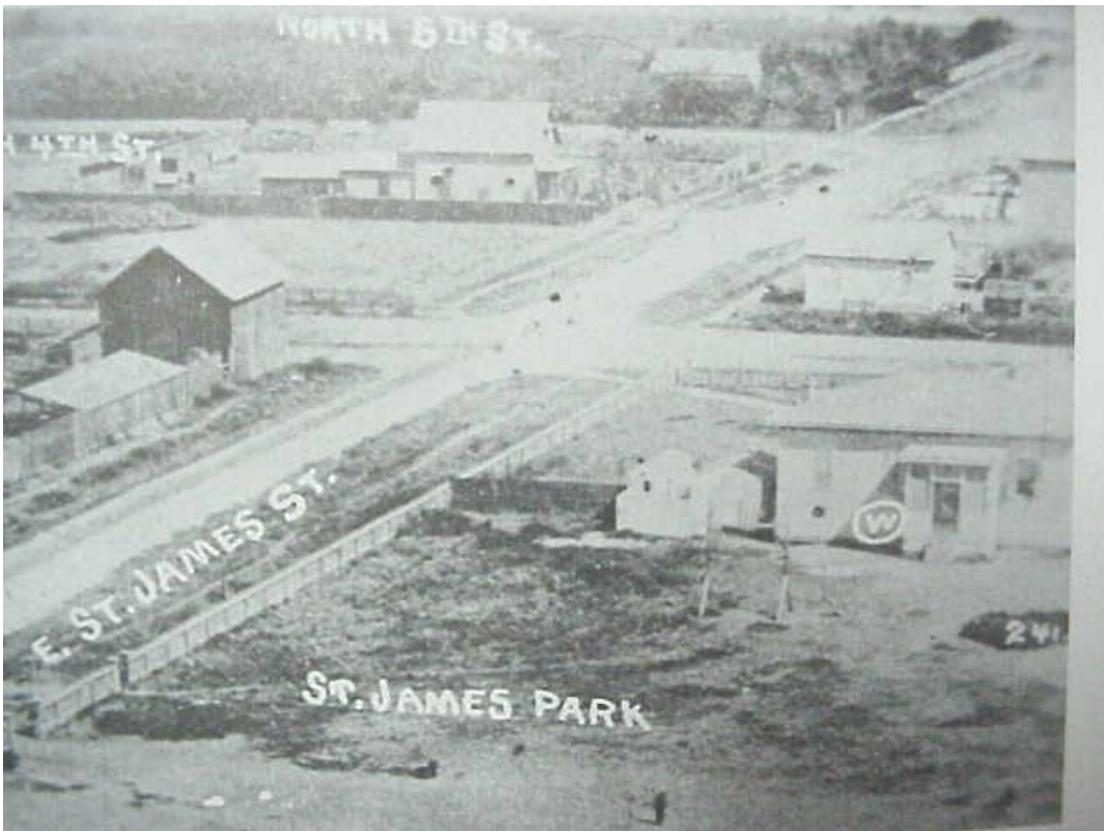
The original school structure--School Number Two--predates the park, and it was apparently not located on this quadrant of the square. According to park historians, it was a two-room schoolhouse on the northeast corner of the square, although one source from the 1920s reported that, "It stood in the center of the square" (Older 1920s). It was removed from the square by 1868. The period of significance of the Historic District begins when the undeveloped square was changed into a park, with walkways and elms, in the late 1860s. The school was removed prior to the construction of all but one of the buildings contributing to the St. James Square Historic District. Therefore, it does not represent a structure from the period of significance of the park, and it is debatable whether it is the best design approach for to the park. Put into perspective, however, a schoolhouse play structure should not perhaps be evaluated with the same rigorousness as a complete schoolhouse recreation. The inclusion of a play structure that would look similar to an historical school would likely not create a false sense of history if the play structure meets Standards 9 and 10 (See below).

If the school were included in the playground design, it would be best to document the original structure. Standard 3 indicates that "adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken." The sole use of the one-room schoolhouse at Kelley Park as a model is an inappropriate approach in such an important location in the City. Once documented, the Landscape Consultants can use the historical documentation for the basic form and configuration of the play structure. This documentation is ongoing, but two historical images have been located (See below).

The trolley play structures seem well suited to this location. Trolleys are an important historical element in the history of downtown San José (Laffey 1992). In addition, this form of transportation synchronizes with the period of significance of the park. It would be a successful juxtaposition for children to play on trolleys as the City's historic trolleys roll past. It will be imperative to document the appropriate colors and styles of the trolleys so that the play structures match and truly interpret the historic trolleys in form and color, so that the interpretation is complete.



1869 Bird's Eye View of the City of San José (Detail)



Schoolhouse in St. James Park from *San José: City With a Past*

The park's most important character-defining features are its trees and openness. Play equipment that takes its forms and colors from the trees and shrubs would be ideal. The denseness of Victorian underplanting can't be reproduced in today's era of policing, but such density of low features of interest could be interpreted by play structures in this new area of the park. The suggested fencing that is needed for a safe play area could encircle the play areas as the original fencing encircled the planting areas.

6. "Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence."

Analysis:

The playground plans do not propose to replace missing features; however, the plans, along with the 1985 Master Plan, do propose elements that are historically reminiscent. Care should be exercised that such elements as the fencing either are substantiated by documentary evidence, or are distinct from the original materials. (See also Standard 3.)

9. "New additions, exterior alterations or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment."

Analysis:

The new work needs to be further refined to reduce its impact on the Historic District. Once refined, the massing of the play structures needs to be reviewed for its height and massing relative to understanding the spatial quality of the original design of the park. The openness of the park in the center of the City is its remaining character-defining feature.

10. "New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired."

Analysis:

The new playground, as proposed, will be such that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the St. James Square Historic District would be unimpaired.

#### **Analysis using the St. James Square Historic District Design Guidelines:**

The St. James Square Historic District Design Guidelines do not directly address development within the park. The Design Guidelines refer to the park in the introductory section "Existing Common Elements" and refer to the landscaping throughout the Guidelines.

Much of the Design Guidelines are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. These standards have been addressed above. In addition, the following items must be addressed from the

San José Historic District Design Guidelines. Similar sections appear in the Rehabilitation Guidelines for Existing Structures and in the New Building Guidelines.:

- “Building materials should be appropriate to the architecture and style for which they are used and compatible to those used in the historic building[s].”

Analysis:

This guideline allows a new playground structure to be constructed of materials that are appropriate to its use. Such modern materials as coated steel and some plastics are appropriate for the style of feature being added to the District (i.e., for play structures); however, to fulfill this guideline completely, the materials must also be compatible with those used in the surrounding historic district and park. The materials, form and color should be “respectful” of the surrounding area.

The park’s identified character-defining features are its trees and openness. It is understood, from verbal presentations, that brightly colored plastic forms will not be used in the park. These would be jarring in the park, and call attention to the new playground. Using harmonious materials should allow the playground to become a single, integrated element of the overall design of the park. Equipment that is constructed of wood and dark metal, as well as some “organic” plastic forms that complement the foliage, would be in keeping with the surroundings. The park already features the fountain and bollards in dark metal. Brick and stone are also featured in the park. These materials should be considered for use in the proposed playground.

There is also an opportunity to take some clues from the surrounding buildings for use in the playground. Although not encouraged (there were never buildings in the park during its period of significance), the illustrated structures include one or two items that are customized for their site. If carefully considered and detailed, such a structure could be an interpretive addition to a child’s play area in this special historical location.

The materials for the pathways and play surfaces are also important part of integrating the playground with the park. Of particular note is the color of the surfacing materials. (See the next item).

- “Building color(s) should compliment the building architecture, if not strengthen it, while being compatible to other buildings within the district, so as not to be contrary or a visual nuisance to the district.”

Analysis:

Although the color palette is not fully described in the landscape design proposals, it is understood that the colors of the play equipment will be in keeping with the natural setting of the park. The surrounding park features many shades of earth tones; however, additional colors would perhaps be appropriate if the park were planted with flowers. Otherwise, the color of the play structures should be green and brown “earth” tones without many accents of primary colors.

The color palette of the buildings surrounding the square is generally a neutral, light, “stone” color (such as sandstone and glazed terra cotta). This palette would not be appropriate for use in the park unless it is used to interpret the site in a special display.

The trolley structures should utilize the "correct" colors of historic trolleys in San José.

- “Landscape unity within the District should be sought by repetition of plant materials and in keeping with the character found in St. James Park or that of the sites with contributing structures.”

and

- “St. James Park is the focus of the District with the transition of the park to surrounding properties created by the exiting planting strips with street trees and existing lawn areas and plantings within the setbacks of all the historical structures. Where street trees are missing on surrounding properties fronting the park, additional street trees should be required with development permits.”

Analysis:

As already noted, the proposed plan retains most of the existing trees in this quadrant of the park.

### **Summary:**

A playground in St. James Park will not seem out of place if designed to complement the original park design. The materials and colors of the play structures and the surrounding surfacing will be of paramount importance to the design of the new playground, as will the form that the playground takes. The play structures must be detailed to visually recede from the urban surrounding; they should become a part of the green space of the historic park. The original layout of the park incorporated a formal diagonal path system with a free-form “organic” path. The proposed play area should use that approach as well. It should not be too formal in its design. Trees should be retained wherever possible and incorporated into the design of the playground. Materials should blend with existing materials in the park.

English Landscape traditions are embodied in the design of the original St. James Park design. The meandering paths that lead to memorials and other “features” are typical of that approach. As best possible, the playground should fit into the Victorian Landscape aesthetic, a refinement of the English Landscape traditions. One source summarizes this aesthetic into six “rules” (Pregill 1993):

- 1 The principal structure on the site was to be the dominant visual element, with other features designed to maximize its scale and ornateness.
- 2 All lines and forms were exaggerated both in layout and detailing.
- 3 Forms used were realistic, rather than abstract.
- 4 Details from foreign historical styles were incorporated into sites that were in other particulars solely Victorian in style.
- 5 The ground plane was the most significant surface.
- 6 Individual features were isolated visually and physically from others on the site.

The design review process is an ongoing, fluid process. As the design is refined, the historical analysis will be refined and revised as well.

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