



American Society of Landscape Architects
Olmsted Medal Nominations
c/o Honors and Awards
636 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001-3736

Dear ASLA Executive Committee and Board of Trustees,

It is with great pleasure and honor to nominate the Trust for Public Land's New York City Playgrounds Program for the Olmsted Medal.

Introduction

Since 1996, the Trust for Public Land's NYC Playgrounds Program, led by Director Mary Alice Lee, Honorary ASLA, has been a model for environmental leadership and community stewardship. Since its inception, the program has built over 214 green playgrounds across all five boroughs of New York City through a unique participatory design process involving the students and community. Through this program, previously impervious asphalt schoolyards have been transformed into vibrant community assets, placing over 4.2 million New Yorkers within a 10-minute walk of a quality playground.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) envisions a future where green schoolyards become a standard practice, serving as a hub for community empowerment, improved health and education, and climate resiliency. They are dedicated to bringing healthy, livable, and resilient environments equitably to all communities. The NYC Playgrounds Program has been the leader in this initiative both for the Trust for Public Land nationally as well as many other local and national organizations. Similar programs have been applied in Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, Newark, New Jersey and Tacoma, Washington. The program has inspired other organizations such as Green Schoolyards America, Learning Landscapes, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative and the Children and Nature Network, all with whom TPL has partnered with. This successful model is the gold standard for elevating the quality of life and developing sustainable urban environments and is more than deserving of this medal.

Background

New York City's public school system is the largest school district in the country, serving 1.1 million students who are disproportionately low-income with little access to close-to-home parks. In the mid-1990s, New York City had less green space per person than almost anywhere in America. At the same time, most schoolyards were featureless asphalt, uninviting to students and closed to everyone else. Altogether, schoolyards represented a big opportunity to make New York City greener, healthier, and more livable, without competing for pricey vacant lots. Schoolyards were also seen as an underutilized resource since they were used only a few hours a day and only by the school population. The rest of the time, most schoolyards were locked to the surrounding community all summer, every weekend, and every evening.

The one-off model started in New York City over 20 years ago with the goal of providing quality parks within a 10-minute walk of all NYC residents. With limited space in the dense urban environment, schoolyards, which are traditionally all pavement, became the ideal location. Schools are already located on public, city-owned land so no additional acquisition was required to build a new park. Schools are located in every neighborhood, so it was easy to extend parkland to the most underserved communities. Using GIS mapping and city databases, TPL was able to locate schools in areas that had gaps in the 10-minute walk radii from neighborhood parks. Maps were also layered with demographic and socio-economic data to identify the neighborhoods with the greatest need. These schools became the first priority in the program.

As community engagement has long been a hallmark of TPL's work, a participatory student and community led design process became the central focus of the NYC Playgrounds Program. Students at each school become the designers over the course of 3 months. With landscape architects as their guide, students

conduct site analysis and have group discussions about the current uses of the schoolyard. A survey of site amenities and features is conducted with students, school principals and community members to identify the top items to be included in the final design. Students work with scaled templates to layout elements on a base map to create a plan that addresses the survey results, site conditions and their own ideas. The users of the playground become the designers of the playground which not only ensures the playground will be well loved, but it also builds great pride and stewardship.

The completed playgrounds are open to the community after school hours and are designed by the school and surrounding neighborhood as nature-rich hubs for community health and climate resilience. If a community comes together to imagine a great schoolyard, they should be able to use it! But it's not as simple as leaving the gates unlocked: public access can mean more maintenance costs and raises questions around liability—and public school districts shouldn't be expected to take on the added burden alone. The NYC Playgrounds Program helps communities implement "shared-use agreements"—contracts between a school district and other local agencies that can resolve liability concerns and shift the burden for increased costs and maintenance away from school districts.

The new playgrounds created through the program become vibrant community hubs, open to the public after school hours and designed to meet the needs of neighbors as well as students. Playgrounds are designed to address the needs of the school, the neighborhood and environment. They include play equipment, running tracks, turf fields, active and passive areas, benches, gazebos with green roofs, outdoor classrooms and as many trees as possible. These playgrounds also play a vital role in mitigating climate change, capturing stormwater to reduce flooding, and combating the urban heat island effect.

Environmental Leadership

TPL is committed to conserving natural resources for future generations and implementing landscapes that increase resiliency, reduce flooding, improve the environment and address climate change. To help cities better manage stormwater, the NYC Playgrounds Program incorporates green infrastructure solutions into nearly all playgrounds. These "greening" practices can be anything that helps absorb, delay, and treat stormwater, like permeable pavement, green roofs, trees, bioswales, and rainwater catchment systems.

While using green infrastructure to manage runoff mitigates flooding and pollution downstream, it also improves air quality, cools the city, and provides green spaces that make our cities more livable, beautiful, and climate resilient. Urban trees and other natural areas have also been proven to improve mental health and well-being. Since 1996 the NYC Playgrounds Program has captured over 23,454,000 gallons of storm water annually and has installed over 4000 trees where there were none before.

In 2007 Mayor Michael Bloomberg released PlaNYC 2030, a strategic plan to prepare the city for one million more residents, strengthen the economy, combat climate change, and enhance the quality of life for all New Yorkers. As part of PLANYC 2030, the Schoolyards to Playgrounds Initiative brought together a public-private partnership with the NYC Department of Education (DOE), NYC School Construction Authority (SCA), NYC Department of Parks and Recreation and TPL to convert asphalt schoolyards into green playgrounds. The initiative developed 185 school playgrounds through a community participatory process that contributed to the goal of bringing all New Yorkers within a 10-minute walk of a park and provides proper play space for more than 360,000 children by 2030.

Since 2012, The NYC Playgrounds Program has partnered with the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) as part of a multibillion-dollar green infrastructure initiative to control the city's combined sewer overflows. TPL has taken the DEP's stormwater program a step further and is mandating green stormwater infrastructure in all of its new schoolyard parks. This public-private partnership with DEP, DOE and SCA will capture at least an inch of rain through green infrastructure. Collaborating with environmental engineers, landscape architects incorporate efficient green infrastructure details that include large stormwater infiltration systems under synthetic turf fields, continuous tree beds beneath permeable paving, rain gardens, bioswales and even green roofs on top of gazebos and storage containers. At a recent playground opening in lower Manhattan, **Council Member Margaret S. Chin** commented:

“The wave of climate strikes and protests we’re seeing across the country proves that our young people can—and must—drive the dialogue on climate action. This project shows exactly what you can achieve when our youth are at the leadership table,” said Chin. “Designed by students, P.S. 184M’s new playground will be an incredible amenity for community members across generations, and serves as an innovative model for green infrastructure and stormwater protections.”

The NYC Playgrounds Program also partnered with New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYS Parks) to expand the reach of their program. New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo saw the value of creating healthy, equitable urban parks by implementing *Vital Brooklyn*, a \$10.6 million plan to improve community recreation and health, create green infrastructure to reduce flood risk and improve water quality. *Vital Brooklyn* is a model for community development and wellness, breaking down barriers to health and wellbeing through eight (8) integrated areas of investment: Open Space and Recreation; Healthy Food; Education; Economic Empowerment; Community-Based Violence Prevention; Community-Based Health Care; Affordable Housing; and Resiliency. This targeted initiative leverages State programs and resources to empower New Yorkers in Central Brooklyn to improve their wellbeing.

Launched in 2017, Governor Cuomo’s *Vital Brooklyn* effort targets some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in New York State. Focusing on these Central Brooklyn communities, the initiative addresses a critical need for green space in a city where 73 percent of low-income neighborhoods fail to meet the city’s standard of 2.5 acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents. At the groundbreaking ceremony at Public School 115 the Governor commented:

“Playgrounds and open green spaces are a crucial part of our Vital Brooklyn initiative that has helped create vibrant, thriving communities in Central Brooklyn,” Governor Cuomo said. “This safe and modern new community playground will be a new resource for children and families to enjoy the countless benefits of outdoor recreation, while supporting the health and wellbeing of more than 16,500 people.”

The environmental educational opportunities provided by the outdoor classroom, raised planting beds and the native garden walk resonates with the teachers, offering STEM education opportunities. Lessons in the importance of pollinators, using native plants, promoting urban habitats, healthy eating habits and using green infrastructure to manage stormwater on site will inform hundreds of students and promote environmental stewardship. Engaging the neighborhood in the process also fosters their on-going stewardship of the park.

Building Equitable Neighborhood Parks

The NYC Playgrounds Program helps communities transform their schoolyards using a participatory design process that invites the whole community—from students and teachers to neighbors and other local groups—to weigh in on what the space can be. The result is a place brimming with one-of-a-kind artwork, custom play areas, plenty of space to run around, and useful features for neighbors of every age. When neighborhoods unite to design their schoolyards, they create places that reflect what’s important to the whole community, where everyone feels welcome.

As many signature urban parks get located in areas that primarily serve tourists, more gentrified residents and wealthier business districts, the NYC Playgrounds Program provides high quality, engaging and inspiring parks to a wider diversity of New Yorkers and prioritizes adding new green spaces in traditionally marginalized communities. Many urban dwellers do not have the luxury of having a front or back yard so urban parks and playgrounds have to serve these needs. Since the playgrounds built through the Playgrounds Program are open to the public in the evening, on weekends and during the summer, they become the neighborhood “backyard”. They are a place where local residents can come together, play, relax and restore their health.

In the March 2015 issue of *Landscape Architecture Magazine* Alex Ulam writes:

“TPL’s schoolyard parks address the city’s new agenda by providing well-maintained, state-of-the-art green spaces for the many city residents who don’t have the good fortune to live near one of the new

destination parks. And considering the benefits of these repurposed schoolyards—to public health, the environment, education, and the community—it’s not an exaggeration to say that there may not be a contemporary open-space project in New York City today that so thoroughly addresses such a wide array of critical public policy goals.”

Inspiring Future Landscape Architects

TPL works directly with landscape architects to facilitate the design process and offer expertise in design specifics that will guide students to making appropriate decisions. But with the NYC Playgrounds Program, students are the designers - they have the experience, many for the first time in their lives to affect change in their communities. The creative energy of students, staff, and neighbors, are harnessed by enlisting them as co-designers to envision play areas that double as outdoor classrooms, brimming with art and greenery. To date, over 7,300 students have been involved in the participatory design process, the majority of which represent minority populations.

The specialized curriculum introduces the student design teams to the principals of landscape architecture and the important benefits of incorporating green initiatives into their new community park. Each member of the design team is given a custom design notebook which introduces them to the fundamental principles of landscape architecture and allows them to record important information about the existing site conditions, programming goals, timeline, budget, what it means to have a combined sewer system, as well as how they might introduce natural areas, art and age and gender equity for all into their proposed designs.

As participatory design begins, Students take a deep look at their schoolyard and surrounding neighborhood. They measure the site with measuring wheels, locate existing drains, look at areas of sun & shade and how the ground slopes. This analysis is all recorded collectively on 10 scale aerial maps. The concept of scale is introduced and base maps are provided at 1"=10'-0" for future work on schematic designs with templates to scale.

Students learn about stormwater management through an interactive three dimensional model of a typical NYC street lined with buildings. "Sewer in a Suitcase" illustrates how NYC's combined sewer overflows – the hardscape areas are sprinkled with glitter representing dirt and debris then water is poured over all surfaces, symbolizing rain. As the water collects the glitter, it flows through the drains and comes out a pipe into a trough that represents the waterways that surround NYC. Students see that the water comes out "dirty". Then a sponge is placed over the drain, representing a turf field. Glitter is sprinkled and water poured – the students are amazed to see that the water was cleaner as it came out the pipe. Students are also introduced to green infrastructure initiatives such as rain gardens, trees, pervious pavements and synthetic turf fields that can help improve NY's waterways.

Using to-scale templates and base maps, teams of students collaborate to decide on what elements to include in the design as well as where to place them. They keep in mind site analysis and placement of trees for shade, use zones and circulation and equity of activities for all park users. Equity of park uses is discussed among teams as they ensure there is something for everyone in their designs.

The students take turns presenting different aspects of their playground design. This not only helps to develop their public speaking skills, but it also empowers them to talk about the designs that THEY created. The plans are then presented to the principals and community to get final input. Artwork that students design are incorporated into the colorseal in each playground to give them a unique identity. Students take great pride in seeing their artwork implemented in the built playground, showing family and friends that they created this playground.

When the playgrounds are built, which is usually within a year, students, teachers and community members are invited to participate in planting day for the smaller perennials, herbs and groundcover. Involving the students in planting day gives them an opportunity to be part of the implementation of THEIR playground and builds stewardship. This activity not only develops a deeper relationship with their environment, but they also gain a strong sense of ownership of their playground, and will likely help to keep it clean and thriving.

Opening day is always exciting for both the students and school staff but also for the community. Seeing the joy and amazement on the student designers faces as they get to use the playground for the first time is incredibly rewarding. In many cases this is the first time they realize that THEY designed it! The community pride developed through the implementation of student designs is truly amazing and this project is something students will remember for the rest of their lives.

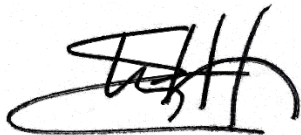
Community stewardship

Community needs and ideas are at the center of the NYC Playgrounds Program design process and are carried through with stewardship engagement and programming. After opening, each site receives stewardship support from TPL through grants and workshops to encourage community use. The NYC Playgrounds team works directly with the school custodians, staff and community leaders to review the specific needs of each site, answer questions and offer helpful advice based on what they have seen at other schools over the 20+ years. They also do ongoing post-occupancy visits to inspect for safety and health of trees and gardens.

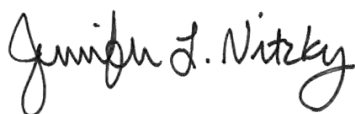
Once a playground opens to the community the NYC Playgrounds Program stewardship team helps teachers, students, custodians and community members take care of and activate their green spaces by leading teacher trainings, green infrastructure lessons, gardening and tree-care workshops, and providing plant and environmental education teaching materials and stewardship grants that support community-based programming after school hours. They have developed a very comprehensive Stewardship Manual that covers everything from the day-to-day maintenance, keeping the playground safe, and caring for trees and gardens to planning events, engaging the community, and creating environmental education activities for students. The manual also includes a detailed list of resources for local environmental organizations, educational programs and grant and funding sources.

Conclusion

The NYC Playgrounds Program has had immense impact in the underserved communities of New York City through their environmental leadership, community empowerment, and inspiring the next generation of designers and environmental stewards. And as the program continues, both in New York and cities around the country, their legacy is clear – it creates an equitable elevation of quality of life, health and wellness for communities and strengthened climate change resilience for the urban environments. Collectively, the 214+ playgrounds are transforming the most populous city in the nation into a model of climate-responsive urban design. This program is greatly increasing awareness of landscape architecture to a very diverse population of students and as the students in [this video](#) proclaim they “want to be a landscape architect!” What could be a more powerful reason to honor this program with the Olmsted Medal.



Elizabeth Hand-Fry, RLA, ASLA
Principal
Studio HIP



Jennifer Nitzky, RLA, ASLA, ISA
ASLA-NY Trustee

Supplemental Information

Awards

- 2019 ASLA-NY Design Honor Award
- 2016 ASLA-NY President's Award for Inspiring the Next Generation
- 2016 ASLA-NY Design Merit Award
- 2014 received the New York Municipal Society's Masterworks' Award for the "Best Green Design Initiative and serves as a model for sustainable playgrounds in urban environments.
- 2014 Mary Alice Lee receives ASLA Honorary Membership
- 2008 ASLA-NY Design Merit Award, Trust for Public Land's New York City Playground Program

Media

Videos:

"The Power of Playgrounds" <https://youtu.be/NDMSdWi9020>

"TPL NYC Playground Program – Inspiring the Next Generation" https://youtu.be/o4tBtJ_URBY

Articles:

[*"This Playground In The Bronx Just Got An Impressive Makeover"*](#)

Architectural Digest, November 14, 2017

[*"DIY Kiddo"*](#), Landscape Architecture Magazine, March 2015

"New York City and the Trust for Public Land Create "Green" Playground at PS 261 in Brooklyn That Will Manage Stormwater and Improve the Health of the Gowanus Canal", NYC DEP, September 19, 2013

http://www.nyc.gov/html/dep/html/press_releases/13-099

"Getting Lessons on Water by Designing a Playground", NYTimes, May 7, 2012

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/08/nyregion>

NYC Playgrounds Program Contact information

Mary Alice Lee, Director
New York City Playgrounds Program

The Trust for Public Land
666 Broadway # 9,
New York, NY 10012
Phone: (212) 677-7171
Email: maryalice.lee@tpl.org

Web: <https://www.tpl.org/>











100 ½ West 130th Street
New York, NY 10027

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Re: Nomination for the NYC Playgrounds Program of the Trust for Public Land

Dear ASLA Executive Committee, and members of the Board of Trustees,

Please accept my letter of recommendation for this exceptional candidate for the Olmsted Medal. There has never been an effort in this country that has intimately connected as many children of color with the design principles of landscape architecture. The NYC Playgrounds Program of the Trust for Public Land under the leadership of Mary Alice Lee has used classroom instructions by experienced professionals of our field to provide hands on site planning and design to transform their bleak, asphalt school yards to lovely, environmentally sensitive and functional playgrounds. The public-private partnership forged with the City of New York has become a national model of stewardship with a goal of providing public green spaces within a 10 minute walk of any family.

Ms. Lee and her team manage a program that demonstrates environmental leadership, vision, and stewardship. The impacts of the 215+ playgrounds on the conditions of the underserved communities where the schools are located have been enormous. However the most significant outcome has been the tens of thousands of predominately Black and brown children that have a hands on introduction to concepts about the environment, site planning, drainage, grading, planting and landscape design that opens their eyes to the world beyond their current circumstances. What an appropriate tribute to bestow the Medal that honors Frederick Law Olmsted on a program that is structured to promote the equitable growth of the profession he is credited with creating!

Thank you for your careful consideration of awarding this honor to the NYC Playgrounds Program of TPL.

Sincerely,



Karen A. Phillips, FASLA
Managing Partner

Phillips Davis Legacy Consultants



Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

ERIK KULLESEID
Commissioner

LESLIE WRIGHT
Regional Director

The American Society of Landscape Architects
Attn: Executive Committee/Board of Trustees
636 Eye Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001-3736

Re: Olmsted Medal Nomination for the NYC Playgrounds Program

Dear ASLA Executive Committee and members of the Board of Trustees,

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter of endorsement for The Trust for Public Lands' NYC Playgrounds Program. The Program is immensely deserving of this very special honor.

Over the course of the past 20 years, I've enjoyed the special privilege of both working with TPL's NYC Playgrounds Program from the inside as the former NYS Director for TPL and also more recently working with Mary Alice Lee and her fine team as a partner of NYS Parks in Governor Cuomo's extraordinary Vital Brooklyn Initiative to transform 8 community playgrounds in the heart of open space starved Brooklyn.

All in, since 1996, TPL's NYC Playgrounds Program has transformed over 214 asphalt lots into vibrant, kid designed community playgrounds that serve their local communities 365 days a year across the 5 boroughs of New York City. The vast majority of the Program's playgrounds are located in underserved communities with little park space and serve a tremendous need. Typically, each of the Program's playgrounds serve upwards of 20,000 very local community members.

TPL's NYC Playgrounds Program is not only extraordinary in the end products it creates but in how deep the Program's community engagement reaches throughout the creation of each playground. Specifically, starting with site selection, the physical attributes of size, location, accessibility are certainly important, but also the Program requires the true commitment of each project school's custodial staff to proceed. Without the enduring engagement of the custodians, the transformed playgrounds wouldn't be open to their communities after school hours, on weekends or throughout the summer months. Mary Alice Lee and her team engage with each school principal and custodial staff to lock in that commitment and seal it with additional funding for the custodial staff from the NYC Department of Education.

Next, the Program engages and inspires the kid designers and school community to consider design and all the implications – spatial, environmental, budgetary – of each design element. Through the Program's participatory design process, I think it is safe to say that the Program has inspired a new generation of kids and community members thinking about landscape architecture and green infrastructure as never before in these underserved communities.

Finally, throughout the Program's engagement of each school community, that community's sense of ownership and tremendous pride of place is solidified. I know for a fact that playground program alumni

adopt the role of ambassador for their playgrounds and pass along the value of community stewardship to their peers.

With such a deep and enduring impact over so many neighborhoods throughout all of our glorious New York City, I cannot think of a better recipient of the extraordinary Olmsted Medal than TPL's NYC Playgrounds Program. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Leslie Wright
NYC Regional Director
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation



Regional Plan Association

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Kevin Willens
Kate Wittels

New York
One Whitehall St, 16th Floor
New York, NY 10004

New Jersey
60 Union Street, Suite 1-N
Newark, NJ 07105

179 Nassau St, 3rd floor
Princeton, NJ 08542

Connecticut
Two Landmark Sq, Suite 108
Stamford, CT 06901

212.253.2727 | rpa.org

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Re: Olmsted Medal Nomination for the NYC Playgrounds Program

Dear ASLA Executive Committee and members of the Board of Trustees,

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter of endorsement for the Trust for Public Land's New York City Playgrounds Program. TPL was one of the first national organizations to go into cities to provide accessible, safe, and high-quality parks and gardens in low-income communities. The New York City Playground program started in 1996 and was dedicated to transforming asphalt parking lots into vibrant community parks, with a unique participatory-design process to ensure a role for children and communities to reflect their needs and interests. For over 20 years, this program has been providing quality playgrounds or parks in underserved neighborhoods for over 4.2 million New Yorkers, placing them within a 10-minute walk.

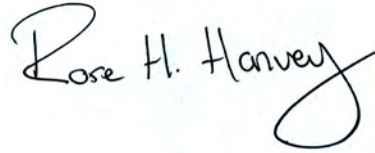
For those same 20 years, Mary Alice Lee from TPL and TPL's consulting landscape architect Melissa Ix (now of Studio Hip) created and sustained the participatory-design process that ensured the inclusion of all children and their families. This design process extracted the varying needs and interests of different age groups, genders, and cultures, and created designs with pockets and dividers that would permit many different uses but also blend them all together into beautiful spaces that welcomed and accommodated all, like an Olmsted Park. This participatory-design process was also educational, sparking students' interest in design, science, and physics, and has been a model for the green schoolyard program that has blossomed nationwide.

In America today, parks in low-income and communities of color are on average half the size with fivefold the visitation of parks in more affluent communities - not to mention the absolute inferior quality of these deteriorated parks. TPL has been providing true oases of nature, play, and solace in seas of asphalt and environmental ills. And they are designed to reflect their users' cultures, to be welcoming, and to be accessible and safe in their widespread use and the community's sense of ownership. In addition, The New York City Playgrounds Program designs weave in essential environmental features to improve air quality and mitigate heat island temperatures and excessive stormwater runoff. The many, many trees at each site, gardens, permeable pavement, and grass fields absorb hundreds of thousands of gallons of runoff water annually, bring shade and better air quality, and lower temperatures to these neighborhoods that bear a disproportionate share of environmental pollution. These new playgrounds play a vital role in helping to combat the effects of climate change in New York while also giving communities a beautiful place to play.

I have had the incredible privilege to work for TPL as Senior Vice President and Regional Director of Urban Parks, initiating the program to transform asphalt schoolyards into green community assets and meeting the need for safe, accessible places for our children to play. The goals over 20 years ago were quite lofty. But thanks to TPL and its hugely talented, constant, and persevering playground staff, including Ms Lee and consulting landscape architect Melissa Ix, the TPL program has in fact built, with, by, and for the community over 200 multi-purpose green play spaces that are vibrant, flourishing, and improving the environment and health of all the users.

The breadth, depth, and innovative participatory-design of TPL's NYC playgrounds is remarkable and grew better and better with age and experience. The cumulative impact is unprecedented, and it is indeed a model and example for the many green schoolyard programs that have been started across the country. For these reasons, I am highly supportive of honoring the NYC Playgrounds Program with the Olmsted Medal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rose H. Harvey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Rose Harvey
Senior Fellow, Parks & Open Space
Regional Plan Association



Mitchell J. Silver, FAICP, Hon. ASLA
Commissioner

T (212) 360-1305
F (212) 360-1345

E mitchell.silver@parks.nyc.gov

City of New York
Parks & Recreation
The Arsenal
Central Park
New York, NY 10065
nyc.gov/parks

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It is with great pleasure that I write this letter of endorsement for The Trust for Public Lands' NYC Playgrounds Program.

The NYC Playgrounds Program is dedicated to environmental leadership, community empowerment and responsible stewardship, goals we share at NYC Parks. The program has transformed over 214 asphalt lots into bright green kid designed playgrounds and serving local communities across New York City's five boroughs. The innovative vision for quality playgrounds within a ten-minute walk from all New Yorkers in a variety of neighborhoods speaks to the program's commitment to equitability, as most of those playgrounds are in underserved communities with tremendous need and limited space.

The NYC Playgrounds Program helps communities transform their schoolyards using a groundbreaking participatory design process that invites the whole community, from students and teachers to neighbors and other local groups, to envision what their site can be. The result is a place brimming with one-of-a-kind artwork, custom play areas, plenty of space to run around, and useful features for neighbors of every age. When neighborhoods unite to design their schoolyards, they create spaces that reflect what is important to the whole community, where everyone feels welcome. TPL works directly with landscape architects to facilitate the design process and offer expertise in design specifics that will guide students toward making appropriate decisions. But with the NYC Playgrounds Program, students are the designers, having the profound experience of affecting change in their communities.

The new playgrounds created through the program become vibrant community hubs, open to the public after school hours and designed to meet the needs of neighbors as well as students. Playgrounds are designed to address the needs of the school, the neighborhood and environment. They include play equipment, running tracks, turf fields, active and passive areas, benches, gazebos with green roofs, outdoor classrooms and as many trees as possible. These playgrounds also play a vital role in mitigating climate change, capturing stormwater to reduce flooding, and combatting the urban heat island effect by utilizing more tree canopy for shade and replacing impervious pavement with permeable materials.

Community needs and ideas are at the center of the NYC Playgrounds Program design process and are carried through with stewardship engagement and programming. Once a playground opens to the community, the NYC Playgrounds Program stewardship team helps teachers, students, custodians and community members take care of and activate their green spaces by leading teacher trainings, green infrastructure lessons, gardening and tree-care workshops, and providing plant and environmental education teaching materials and stewardship grants that support community-based programming after school hours.

The NYC Playgrounds Program has had immense impact in the underserved communities of New York City. As the program continues, both in New York and cities around the country, their legacy is clear – to create an equitable elevation for quality of life, health and wellness in communities and to strengthen climate change resilience for the urban environments. Collectively, the 214+ playgrounds are transforming the most populous city in the nation into a model of climate-responsive urban design. The NYC Playgrounds Program has significantly increased awareness to a very diverse population of students – the next generation's environmental designers and stewards inspired to think about landscape architecture and green infrastructure as never before.

As NYC Parks Commissioner, my focus has been park equity – that is, fair and equal access to world-class public spaces. TPL's NYC Playgrounds Program has demonstrated how an external partner can make its own impact in realizing equity goals. Throughout the Program's engagement of each school community, a tremendous sense of purpose, appreciation and pride of place is solidified. Program alumni adopt the role of ambassador for their playgrounds and pass along the value of community stewardship to their peers. I cannot think of a more powerful reason to honor TPL's NYC Playgrounds Program with the extraordinary Olmsted Medal.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mitchell J. Silver'.

Mitchell J. Silver, FAICP, Hon. ASLA
Commissioner
City of New York Department of Parks & Recreation