



**FRED ANDERSON
DOG PARK, CHICAGO**
With increased demand
for high-quality off-leash
areas, designer dog
parks are on the rise.

DOGS ARE THE NEW KIDS

**THE CANINE NATION
CLAMORS TO BE HEARD IN
THE CONVERSATION AROUND
PUBLIC SPACE DESIGN.**

BY BRIAN BARTH

Forget elevated linear parks and community gardens—the greatest demand for park space is not for such fashionable endeavors. According to the Trust for Public Land’s 2015 *City Park Facts* report, dog parks are the fastest-growing type of urban park in the United States, up 20 percent over the past five years, while park growth on the whole has been less than 5 percent. That was after a 34 percent rise from 2005 to 2010, a period when urban park space grew by 3 percent. In a way, canines are the new kids: 39 percent of American households now have a pet dog, which is just shy of the 43 percent who have children at home.

These numbers would suggest that dog park design must have earned its place in the constellation of basic landscape architecture services, yet few firms give even lip service to the topic. There is no shortage of dog parks with glaring design flaws, however. Eroding slopes, trampled native vegetation, and designs that encourage dog conflict are rampant, says Leslie Lowe, ASLA, the owner of Beargrass Landscape Architecture and author of a forthcoming book on dog park design.

“Dog parks are often a design afterthought,” she concedes. An expert trainer of hunting dogs, Lowe



ABOVE

Dog parks in rural areas allow pets to run off leash without worry of wildlife encounters or getting lost.

INSET

Boulders, gravel, and a layer of geotextile fabric keep the dog pond from getting muddy at the WAG Park in Whitefish, Montana.

designed the Hugh Rogers WAG Park in Whitefish, Montana, which opened in 2009, and has used it as a laboratory to test ideas ever since. “I think a lot of times we try to control what we think a dog needs instead of looking at it from the dog’s perspective, of understanding how dogs are going to relate,” she says.

In the WAG Park, which receives some 30,000 visitors a year in a town of 6,300, Lowe addressed the potential for conflict between dogs in a few simple ways. There are three entrances, so if there is a pack of large, rambunctious dogs cavorting near one, the owners of small, shy, or older dogs can enter on the opposite side of the park, which covers 5.6 acres. Each entrance consists of a pair of “airlock” gates, which help to prevent escapes as people are coming and going, but also give dogs a chance to sniff each other through a fence and decide if they

are friends or foes. Inside, a pavilion and benches are placed as far as possible from the gates to encourage activity away from the conflict-prone entry points. A separate fenced area for small or feeble canines is also available.

Hundreds of dogs scampering about each week in a confined area takes its toll on vegetation, limiting the palette of plants that will survive in small urban dog parks. In Chicago, concrete surfacing was the “park district standard” for off-leash areas, says Phillip Hutchinson, ASLA, an associate principal at the firm Altamanu, who led design work on the one-acre Fred Anderson Dog Park, which opened in the city’s South Loop neighborhood last year. “We wanted to find a surface that was a little more soft and friendly,” he says. Altamanu settled on a type of syn-

thetic turf developed specifically for the purpose. “They apply an antimicrobial agent to it that keeps it a little cleaner,” Hutchinson says. Although sparkly green turf is not a popular surfacing material among most landscape architects, it fits well with Altamanu’s playful Willy Wonka-ish design. Plus, it’s easy to clean—a pop-up sprinkler system sprays it down every day after midnight.

Dog parks are to dog owners what playgrounds are to parents—a place for the “kids” to play, socialize, and get exercise. Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects has experimented with asphalt paint in the few colors that dogs are able to see—shades of blue, yellow, and gray—creating a bubbly visual motif in several New



WATER FEATURES ARE AMONG THE MOST POPULAR PLAYGROUND FEATURES FOR THE CANINE SET.

York City dog runs, which also keeps the play surface cooler than if it were jet black. Designer dog parks often incorporate canine play equipment, such as sandboxes for digging and tennis ball launchers. The “agility course” at the WAG Park in Whitefish resembles an obstacle course you might find at a basic training facility for the army, with a series of ramps, jumps, tunnels, and boulders.

Of course, water features are among the most popular playground features for the canine set. Fred Anderson incorporates a splash pad no different from those found in children’s playgrounds—press a button and water spouts randomly from various nozzles at grade and overhead before

turning itself off after a set period of time. In Whitefish, an existing detention basin was refashioned as a quarter-acre dog pool. Taking advantage of an artesian well on site, Lowe devised a recirculating system where water is pumped out to irrigate the grassy fields and replenished on a regular basis, keeping the pool from becoming rank.

The WAG pool lacks a direct hydrologic connection with nearby waterways, but at many off-leash areas dogs have access to natural bodies of water, a questionable arrangement in terms of fecal contamination, erosion, and other environmental issues. Last fall, the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department held

a series of meetings between dog owners and non-dog owners to gather feedback for the city’s upcoming Off-Leash Area Strategic Plan, which brought some of these issues to light. “The non-dog owners were essentially environmentalists picked from local volunteer groups,” says Ellen Escarcega, chair of COLA (Citizens for Off Leash Areas), a dog park advocacy group in Seattle. City beaches, where dogs had been observed trampling unfenced restoration areas and threatening ground-nesting birds, seals, and other wildlife, were a particular concern. The dog owners’ response, says Escarcega, was to point out that the bigger problem is a lack of appropriate places for dogs to play—Seattle’s approximately 150,000 dogs have only 25 acres of designated off-leash area in the city—which leads many dog owners to let their dogs off leash illegally.

ABOVE
 Splash pads at Fred Anderson Dog Park, similar to those found in playgrounds, allow dogs to play in the water and cool off on hot days.



ABOVE
The gate at NOLA City Bark is controlled with a magnetic stripe card, and an annual permit is required for access.

BELOW
Though it is located within a public park, NOLA City Bark is maintained by a local nonprofit group that is funded by user fees.

The off-leash activists have been working for much of the past two decades to change that dynamic in Seattle, but Escarcega says citizen resistance to new dog parks makes the process painfully slow. In the past 14 years the organization, which has a contract with the city to manage all of Seattle's off-leash areas, has successfully lobbied for six new parks, but they're all tiny, comprising two acres in total. "They're basically doggie relief areas," she says. "We need

larger plots of land, and we need to be considered early in the process for planning new parks, not as an afterthought."

To improve poop-scooping compliance, Escarcega has suggested a grading system modeled after those used at some city beaches where contamination is an issue—a green sign means dog owners are picking up after their pets consistently; yellow means "needs improvement"; and red means it is closed until further notice—but says the approach has yet to catch on in Seattle.

Dave Marquardt, who was a landscape architect with the City of Denver in 2010 when the municipality developed one of the first dog park master plans in the country, has

heard all the complaints from both sides and studied many of the solutions. Denver initially considered New York City's approach, which is to allow dogs off leash in most parks between 9:00 p.m. and 9:00 a.m. in an effort to strike a balance between dog owners and other park users and avoid the need for new infrastructure. They also looked at fee-based dog parks to provide funding for maintenance, such as NOLA City Bark, a 4.6-acre off-leash area in New Orleans, where memberships run about \$50 per year and magnetic stripe cards are used to control access to the facility. Ultimately, Marquardt says, they kept it simple, recommending that traditional two- to three-acre fenced off-leash areas be built within a one- to two-mile radius of every residential district.



"That was one of the most trying and complicated planning processes I have ever been through," says Marquardt, who is currently the director of parks and recreation in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "What we heard loud and clear was that [dog parks] are opportunities for people to get out and experience Denver's parks and open spaces in ways that they felt were important to them. I believe that the more activity we have in our parks, the stronger the parks system. If it's dog activity or bringing a child to the park, or whatever it may be, that activity is a good thing. It's just a matter of how we best accommodate it." ●

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