

*WEISS*

*URBAN LIVABILITY*

*FELLOWSHIP*

*RUSCH HOLLOW*

*PROJECT PROPOSAL*

**2004-2005**

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### **Introduction to This Document**

This proposal is designed to be read in one of two ways: either in whole to get a full understanding of the theoretical and practical issues involved in this year's project, or in sections to garner an understanding of whichever element of the project interests you most. We hope that however you choose to read this document, you find it informative and interesting.

## **The Program**

In 1992, Charles and Shirley Weiss, retired professors of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill began a program to improve communities through interdisciplinary exploration of the concept of “urban livability.” The Weisses were convinced through their active involvement with the arts, education, and civic organizations, coupled with extensive world travel, that a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary approach is crucial to improving the quality of life in contemporary communities. This program, founded on the Weiss’ belief that graduate students are an invaluable resource for the future, centers on the support and nurturing of graduate students.

The Weiss Urban Livability Program promotes talented graduate students pursuing scholarly and practical improvements in urban livability. The one-year fellowship provides additional financial support to selected students who have been accepted into one of the many graduate programs at UNC.

Students in the Weiss Urban Livability Program are offered numerous opportunities for professional support and growth. Traditionally, the program has sponsored the Floyd B. McKissick Visiting Scholar initiative, bringing a nationally recognized scholar for a week-long residency at Carolina, with whom the Fellows have the opportunity to interact. In addition, the fellowship lends students access to the Weiss Urban Livability Collection, which includes over 300 volumes on the topics ranging from the architecture of the city to the history of the environmental movement in the United States. This collection is composed of books, journals, and other volumes generously donated by the Weisses. Fellows also have the opportunity to meet regularly

with individuals from the campus and wider community who study and work on a daily basis with problems relating to urban livability through the ongoing Weiss seminar series. A unique aspect of the program is the Community Project, which is constructed by fellows over the course of the school year to positively impact an aspect of urban livability in the Chapel Hill community.

This year there are eight fellows taking part in the program. Their home department follows their name in parentheses. Adam Basch (Public Administration), Daniel Levine (Public Administration & City and Regional Planning), Monica Olivera (City and Regional Planning), Reed Palmer (Environmental Science and Engineering), Lauren Rosenthal (Art), Alexis Silver (Sociology), Haiou Zhu (Public Policy), Lindsay Hirschfeld (Sociology, Senior Weiss Fellow).

## **The Community Project**

One of the key components of the Weiss Urban Livability Program is the call for Fellows to design and carry out a project that will positively impact the surrounding community. The project component of the program differs considerably from many “service requirements” associated with other programs on campus. More than simply providing benefit to the community, this project is intended to foster academic growth and leadership in the participants, to take advantage of their skills as scholars from a wide range of fields, and to forge lasting relationships, both among Fellows, and within the broader community. Over the years, projects have represented the diversity that is the hallmark of the Weiss Urban Livability Program. This year’s project will be described in the remainder of this proposal, but first, past projects are summarized below.

### **2003-2004**

Fellows talked with community members and conducted research in the North Carolina Collection of Wilson Library to discover aspects of local history and unique places in the Chapel Hill/Carrboro/UNC community. They then created a web site that highlights these aspects of urban livability in our local community.

[http://gradschool.unc.edu/Weiss/interesting\\_place/](http://gradschool.unc.edu/Weiss/interesting_place/)

### **2002-2003**

Creation of the Pamphlet “A Guide to Bikeways of Chapel Hill and Carrboro” containing a map of bike-safe routes in the area and a list of bicycle safety tips. A bike helmet collection drive was conducted and the helmets donated to the local police department

for distribution to area children. To obtain a copy of the bike map in Adobe Acrobat .pdf format, you can get it online at <http://gradschool.unc.edu/pdf/bike.pdf>

### **2001-2002**

For the tenth anniversary of the Weiss Urban Livability Program, the fellows researched the history of the Weiss program. Interviews of past Weiss fellows and the Weisses themselves were conducted and the results compiled into a presentation in honor of the Weisses. All former fellows, and members of the community, were invited to attend the celebration, entitled, “A Decade and Counting: The Weiss Urban Livability Fellowship.”

### **2000-2001**

A Case study of the recently constructed Southern Village community, a planned, “new urban” environment, using focus groups, surveys, and interviews, and the organization of a community forum, “Southern Village, From Planning to Perceptions” to disseminate information.

### **1999-2000**

A project entitled, “Work and Home: An Urban Livability Study of the University as Community,” in which Fellows went out and spoke with members of the UNC-Chapel Hill campus community about issues of urban livability, public transportation, and community. The community members were also invited to document their experiences in photography that was later displayed in a public exhibition.

### **1998-1999**

A project entitled, “Visualizing Urban Livability at the Turn of the Century,” that distributed disposable cameras to individuals living in a variety of neighborhoods, asking them to photograph aspects that made their neighborhoods unique and interesting places to live. The photos montages for each neighborhood were displayed in a public exhibition.

### **1997-1998**

More than 60 Durham junior high school students were recruited to answer the question “What makes a Good Neighborhood?” using photographs to document the aspects of urban livability in the places they live. The students also discussed the difference that a college education can make. The photographs were displayed at the Durham County Library.



## **Urban Livability and Community Space Development**

Urban livability is an inter-disciplinary area that involves environment and ecology, art, history, architecture, American culture and social justice, and urban planning and design.

One aspect of urban livability concerns the economic and social aspects of urban life. There are two essential concerns in this perspective: livelihood and ecological sustainability. (Evans, 2002)

- Livelihood mean jobs are close enough to decent housing; wages are commensurate with rents; and there is access to the services that make for a healthy habitat.
- Ecological sustainability means livelihoods must also be sustainable. Only if the quest for jobs and housing is solved in ways that do not irreparably degrade the environment of the city is it possible for the livelihood problem to be truly solved.

The two aspects are closely related. Ecological degradation can buy livelihood at the expense of quality of life, with citizens forced to trade green space and breathable air for wages. Therefore, to truly improve urban livability, a city must put both aspects together, providing livelihoods for its citizens, ordinary as well as affluent, in ways that preserve the quality of the environment.

Another aspect of urban livability focuses mostly on the environmental part of urban life: urban design and public space usage. In our plan for the project (as described in future sections of this document), we focus on community development, particularly of public space. Public space is an important part of urban planning and design; it is also a

very comprehensive area that involves environmental and social issues, art, land use and architecture design.

The importance of improving the livability of community is self-evident. As explained by Kelbaugh (1997),

*“Neighborhoods are the integers of cities. Without neighborhood, cities are much less coherent and livable however beautiful it might be. Neighborhoods integrate the daily functions of life, living, working, playing, schooling, worshipping, and shopping. With their centers and edges, they also provide a physical focus and common ground for local social life.”*

Kelbaugh (1997) summarized the principle in public space design as follows:

- community – the design should emphasize on community spirit;
- sustainability – the design for public space should be sustainable;
- order – the design should bring order and harmony to the surround environment.

To preserve the unique character of the region, the public space design should also have:

- sense of place,
- sense of nature,
- sense of history, and
- sense of craft.

These principles are closely related to our project. Because our project is intended to build a community-oriented recreational space that provides community atmosphere in the newly established neighborhood, our design is based on a concern for bringing order and harmony to the environment. We considered all the possibilities and did our best to

make our plan for the community-oriented recreational space self-sustainable under the care of the residents once the project is established.

New Urbanism is another movement in urban design, and it concerns the importance of integration of both city centers and suburbs. New Urbanism concerns both pieces and the whole. It applies principles of urban design to the region in two ways (Calthorpe, 1994):

*“First, urbanism – defined by its diversity, pedestrian scale, and structure of bounded neighborhoods – should be applied throughout a metropolitan region regardless of location: in suburbs and new growth areas as well as within the city. Second, the entire region should be designed according to similar urban principles. It should, like a neighborhood, be structured by public space; its circulation system should support the pedestrian; it should be both diverse and hierarchical and it should have discernible edges.”*

Hence, one important aspect of the new movement in urban design is to give enough attention to suburbs. The aesthetic, spatial and programmatic principle in urban design should be used both in the inner-city context and in suburbs. Spatial hierarchy and connectedness can be obtained regardless of land-use intensity; pedestrian life can exist in single family neighborhoods as well as on tenement streets.

Another aspect is that the inner city, suburbs, and their natural environment should be treated as a whole socially, economically, and ecologically. The design of a neighborhood should be treated with the same attitude as cities, and should follow principles, such as:

- there should be defined edges;
- the circulation system should function for the pedestrian;

- public space should be formative rather than residual;
- civic and private domain should form a complementary hierarchy; and
- the population should be diverse.

These principles relate to our project because our design of the community-oriented recreational space is intended to provide an open place that is close to nature and could attract residents of all kinds of races, from young to old, for both males and females, and provide a place that could satisfy various leisure needs, such as serving as a picnic area, a playground, or a place to enjoy the aesthetic pleasures of the community space.

## **Open, Green, and Public Space in the Urban-Suburban Framework**

It is no surprise that open and green space is highly valued by inhabitants of large urban and suburban areas. It is one of the most desirable aspects of living in a good community, and a critical component of urban livability.

Realization of the open and green space ideal has changed through social, political, and economic regimes and landscape styles. In addition, variations in land use and development modes have generated spaces of different geometry, distribution, and composition. The typical urban and suburban area incurs inherent physical and institutional obstacles that restrict the quantity and quality of community space.

Many urban theorists state the significant role of public spaces as one of the principal components of a healthy urban setting. This is in addition to their functional role, when they increase a sense of community when intensive social interaction takes place in these areas.

Calthorpe offers that the public world is shrunken and fractured. Parks, schools, libraries, post offices, town halls, and civic centers are dispersed, underutilized and under-funded. Yet, he adds that “these civic elements determine the quality of our shared world and express the value we assign to community” (Calthorpe, 1993). Open spaces help to build people’s confidence or increase cohesion. Additionally, public open spaces afford more than just places for recreation. Integrating green infrastructure into communities’ built infrastructure yields quantifiable environmental benefits (Braza, 2003). Also, Rogers argues that great cities are known for their great public spaces, and one measure of any city’s greatness is its ability to provide recreation, natural beauty, and signature open spaces for its citizens. Successful public spaces pay dividends for cities,

building civic pride, increasing tourism and economic investment, and contributing to health and quality of life (Rogers, 2003).

Geoghegan discusses the financial benefits of locating open space within residential areas. The results of her research of Howard County, Maryland, show that "permanent" open space increases nearby residential land values over three times as much as an equivalent amount of "developable" open space. Such results confirm the notion that the general public places a high value on nearby community space and that it should be a goal of local governments to protect and expand the amount of spaces that currently exist within their neighborhoods. Creating policy that makes open space a top priority instead of a planning afterthought would be an excellent investment on the part of local governments. It is cheaper for governments to buy land in rural areas to save for open space uses, than to buy land in already urban areas to create new open spaces. Planning for open space beforehand allows the city and the residents to enjoy both the financial and physical benefits of the space without having to investment a large amount of resources (Geoghegan, 2001).

Finally, according to Elsley, the importance of community space to children can never be overstated. Neighborhood parks and streets provide endless opportunities for children to be creative, imaginative, and entertained. When local officials open space policy and designs, it is imperative for children to have some type of input in the decision-making process. Elsley writes, "This should include taking into consideration young people's changing spatial needs as they grow older, responding to the diversity of their circumstances, and taking on board their ideas for improving their community" (Elsley, 2004)

## **Opportunities and Goals When Working with Small Community Parks**

A particularly useful reference for the Weiss Fellows in the planning and development of a small community space has been *Small Urban Spaces*, which contains a series of articles from different experts discussing the issues and opportunities that come with building a small community space. The work was edited and compiled by Whitney North Seymour, Jr. and provides a variety of perspectives. Some were especially pertinent to the project the Weiss Fellows are creating at the Rusch Hollow community and gave us many issues to consider.

Elinor C. Guggenheimer discusses the many goals a small park or playground can accomplish in a neighborhood. She points out that these goals are limited by the size of the lot, the presence or absence of other recreation facilities in the area, the desires of the people living on the block and general recreational goals. However, Guggenheimer's suggestions are quite useful in helping us determine what functions our recreational space should take. Some of the possibilities Guggenheimer discusses which can be incorporated into our space include:

- **Physical Fitness:** Guggenheimer points out that small spaces obviously preclude certain kinds of athletic facilities (such as baseball fields or tennis courts). However, a small space can still serve a large number of people by having activities of general interest that will accommodate as many people at one time as possible. If a community has a goal of physical activity for their small park, this can easily be met by installing gymnasium equipment (including parallel bars, rope ladders, jungle gyms, etc.). While a small neighborhood park cannot completely fulfill the physical fitness needs of a community, children can still be active for short periods of time.

Small spaces also have the added advantage of being readily accessible. Since so many residents of the Rusch Hollow community voted for playground equipment, we can ensure that the equipment provides levels of physical activities for children of many ages.

- **Social Adjustment:** Guggenheimer argues that cities usually do not have much space for normal social communication. A small park or urban space can help alleviate the situation by providing tables, a few benches, chairs, and shaded areas. Guggenheimer states that these spaces provide “a place for the passerby to stop and rest, for the neighbors on the block to meet as friends, for teenagers to gather, for older citizens to find their peers, and for families to enjoy a shared period of leisure.” These areas give residents a feeling of neighborliness and of neighborhood pride, especially if the neighborhood takes some responsibility for determining the design. This goal is particularly important in dealing with the Rusch Hollow community. Most of the residents will be living in single-family detached homes, making it much easier to isolate oneself. Additionally, many residents are of Hispanic descent, where community ties are much stronger than traditional communities in the U.S. These residents also have the additional bond of building homes together, side-by-side. By creating an area that promotes social interaction among neighbors, we will be ensuring the community feel and close-knit structure of the neighborhood endures.
- **Neighborhood Betterment:** A small park or urban space can contribute to the improvement of the residential environment. Guggenheimer argues that the park’s existence, in and of itself, is a neighborhood improvement. She believes that even a park with only a few flower boxes, one or two trees, colored or textured pavement,



and pleasingly arranged equipment can enhance an entire area. This is one of the most important accomplishments we will be making in the Rusch Hollow community.

We will be improving the urban livability for the residents in the area.

- **The Desires of the People Living on the Block:** The Weiss fellows felt it was very important to involve the people of the Rusch Hollow community in the design of their community space. Guggenheimer stresses that community input is vital for a successful park. As much as possible, a consensus among stakeholders should also be reached. After some discussion, we were able to reach the best decision possible. Since most families have small children, playground equipment would be a priority, but we would still incorporate other features (such as benches and landscaping) that were important to residents who had no children. By considering everyone's interests, we were able to achieve a successful compromise.
- **The Program May Vary From Passive and Unorganized to Active and Structured:** Guggenheimer makes an interesting point to consider when creating a small community park. She argues that a simply designed area for inactive and self-direction activities is far better than any attractively designed area which must be kept locked up for long periods of time. She goes on to say that "it is frustrating for a neighborhood to see a lot that has been developed and then made useless, not by vandalism, but by the need to safeguard the area from vandalism." It is important to have equipment so inexpensive or sturdy that there is not need at any time to close the area to public use. This is especially important for the Weiss Fellows to consider because there will be no formal oversight of the Rusch Hollow community space.

The design and development of the Rusch Hollow community space is much easier to implement when we think in terms of particular goals we want to accomplish. By recognizing these goals and incorporating community input, we can ensure that any project we build will be sustainable—that is, the neighborhood community space will continue to be a source of community pride and a place where all residents feel welcome many years from now.

## **Community Participation**

The Weiss fellows felt that if the group was to undertake any activity, it would be imperative to garner community participation in the process. The word ‘community’ implies to us a collective union that cannot be imposed from outside, but must be nurtured from within. Therefore, as an outside entity desiring to promote wholesome communities, we wished to gather input and ideally inspire action from the community with which we work. As an institution, the World Bank must approach every community in which they work from the outside. The World Bank has had much reason to think about its impact upon these communities. They define community participation to be:

*An active process by which beneficiary groups influence the direction and execution of a development project with a view to enhancing their well-being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance, or other values they cherish.*(Paul 1987)

The objectives of including community participation in the project cycle are multifaceted and may include: empowerment of citizens, building beneficiary capacity, improving project effectiveness, efficiency, and sharing project costs (capital or maintenance) (Paul 1987). After studying a number of past projects the World Bank concluded that community participation may be warranted in projects in the following contexts:

- 1. When the objective of the project is empowerment and capacity building and projects are used as instruments towards these ends*
- 2. When the design of project services calls for the interaction among groups of beneficiaries as a basis for identifying their needs and preferences*

3. *When the nature of the project demands frequent dialogue and negotiation among beneficiaries and between project authorities and beneficiaries*
4. *When beneficiaries, rather than an [outside agency], are better able to manage a part of the project operations (Paul 1987)*

The proposed project at Rusch Hollow contains elements of all of the above characteristics, especially items 1, 2, and 4.

As Francis notes in a chapter dedicated to community participation:

*The process of community participation results in informed and engaged residents that feel more connect to their communities. (Francis 2003)*

## **Gardens**

One of the ideas this year's Weiss fellows considered was the creation of a community garden. The history of urban community gardening in United States dates back to the Great Depression when the New York City Housing Authority sought methods to stimulate creativity, ensure consistent maintenance, and inspire a sense of community (Landman, 1993). Community gardens were their answer. Community gardens have been instrumental in creating a sense of community in some of America's toughest urban settings. Liabilities like vacant lots are converted into neighborhood assets that foster a spirit of cooperation among residents, developing or enhancing local pride while providing healthful fresh food and lower family food bills. The activities inherent in managing a community garden also provide opportunities for the development of leadership skills among members of the community. South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces, better known by its acronym, SEEDS, is an organization that strives for such ideals by promoting community gardening here in North Carolina. One of the programs run by SEEDS, known as DIG or Durham Inner-City Gardeners, encourages the development of youth leadership, racial harmony, and the creation of urban green spaces through organic gardening activities.

In addition to the benefits of community gardens previously mentioned, the greening of an open space and the shade provided in an established garden may lower temperatures in the heat of an urban summer. Observers of community gardens also note that beautification of common spaces through gardening often leads to reduced littering. Some promoters believe this phenomenon is more than coincidental - that it is a direct consequence of growth in neighborhood pride that takes place along with the creation of

a community garden. Community gardens provide a place for positive interactions among residents. Residents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds have successfully established community gardens. In Boston it was noted that community gardens were one of the few spaces in which ethnic Chinese interacted positively with their predominantly Caucasian neighbors (Landman, 1993). Landman documents numerous instances of long-term friendships that formed as a result of participation in community gardens. Furthermore, there is evidence that community gardens can serve as spaces where residents of all ages interact. Five of the eleven gardens Landman studied in Washington D.C. had picnic areas, three had playgrounds, and two more were adjacent to public playgrounds. Indeed, the plan developed for the Rusch Hollow neighborhood includes space for playground and picnic equipment. Finally, in what may turn out to have relevance to our contemporary dependence upon fossil fuels, community gardens were encouraged by the federal government during World Wars I and II as a means to reduce the burden on the transportation system by producing food locally.

## **Habitat for Humanity International**

Habitat for Humanity International is a Christian not-for-profit organization whose mission is “to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness in the world”(Fuller, 1993). Established in 1976 by Millard Fuller, this organization has built and renovated over 175,000 houses worldwide. Its formula is simple, practical, and sustainable: each house is built using mostly free labor, land, management, and materials. This keeps costs down to an average of \$46,600 in the United States (and much less abroad) so that the people who really need homes can afford them (Habitat for Humanity website) New owners’ mortgage payments are deposited in a “Fund for Humanity” (Fuller, 1993), which is invested back into the project, paving the way for more affordable home construction.

Habitat homes are only built in self-selected communities where people put forth interest, time and energy, first in applying for affiliation with Habitat for Humanity, then in doing all of the leg-work to bring affordable housing to their communities. This means building partnerships, finding land and materials, raising funds, and locating families in need. There are currently over 1500 affiliates in the United States alone (Habitat for Humanity website). Using local materials, construction techniques, labor, and expertise, each Habitat community looks and feels like it belongs.

Leaders in the organization attribute its success to this grassroots people-centered model, which prides itself on giving “a hand up, not a hand out” (Fuller, 1993). The umbrella of Habitat for Humanity International provides the seed from which each affiliate can grow its own village(s). In turn, each affiliate provides homeowners with the seeds from which to grow their homes. Each family is required to help build their house,

as well as pay for it. This gives new homeowners the opportunity to take responsibility for their future and builds a sense of pride that often leads to lasting home maintenance. Fuller says, “Habitat’s efforts are truly fulfilled when we can walk away from a project because it is being maintained, led, administered, and inspired by the people who live there” (Fuller, 1993).



## **The Project: Choosing the Location**

After several meetings and much deliberation, we collectively decided that we wanted to work with a community to create a public shared space in a neighborhood. While our initial thought was to build a community garden, we did not want to impose our idea for how to improve urban livability onto a community that we had not yet contacted. We therefore allowed ample time for identifying a site and establishing relations with the community members.

In an effort to identify the most appropriate location for our aims and capabilities, we consulted several organizations including: the Carrboro departments of Recreation and Parks; Planning, Zoning and Inspection; and Economic and Community Development, the Chapel Hill Town Manager, the Triangle Land Conservancy, Orange County Cooperative Extension, Orange County Housing and Land Trust, and Habitat for Humanity of Orange County. Of our options, Habitat for Humanity provided the best opportunity for collaborating with community members to create a useable and active public space within their community.

One of the Habitat neighborhoods, in particular, stood out as an ideal location to launch our project. The Rusch Hollow Habitat for Humanity neighborhood was breaking ground as we were preparing to enact our initial phases of project development. Entering into a community as it was being created provided a unique opportunity for the Weiss Fellows to help foster a strong sense of community among the house-owners before the neighborhood was established. Timing aside, the neighborhood was also advantageous in its proximity to campus. This proximity encourages a sustained relationship between the

fellows and the community. Finally, the location's demographic characteristics proved ideal for our purposes.

The neighborhood at Rusch Hollow is located in a historically low-income area off of Rogers Road in Chapel Hill. Comprised mainly of private residences, there is no community space within the area. As Habitat for Humanity specifically works with families to assist in building their own houses and foster a sense of community, we believed that the shared public space within this neighborhood would be ideal for enhancing this sense of community. Additionally, there is no other public space in the neighborhood, so it would serve to unite the community members by providing a common area for all of the households to utilize.

Furthermore, the majority of the families moving into the site have young children, so helping to create a communal neighborhood space and atmosphere from the initial phases of construction would help to create a safe and hospitable environment for children to grow up in. The space that we are utilizing is centrally located within the community and is in full view of several houses. Because of this central location, the area is both convenient as a meeting place and a safe place for children to play.

## **Filling the Space: Motivations and Community Collaboration**

### *Motivations:*

In discussing how we should create a public space within the Rusch Hollow community, we felt that it was of paramount importance to solicit the feedback of the community members, since they would be the people to utilize this space. Moreover, we knew that by including them in the processes of both conceptualizing and constructing the site, this exercise would help to further the sense of community within the neighborhood. We did not want to give the impression that we knew more about their needs and wants than they, nor did we want to approach them empty handed. We decided to show them several potential, but ambiguous plans for creating a usable public space within the Rusch Hollow neighborhood.

After several meetings with the Habitat for Humanity staff, we began to get a sense of the community. The house owners are mainly low income families. Most of the families have young children, several are Latino, and many speak Spanish as their primary language. The Habitat staff stressed that one man was particularly influential in the neighborhood. He will be residing in the parcel directly next to the Weiss project site, had self-identified as the leader of the neighborhood, and was well-known to the other families that were moving into the site. We were particularly interested in gaining his approval as the site is located directly next to his house and he had graciously volunteered to help maintain any structures or landscaping we put on the lot.

In preparation for our meeting with the community members, we prepared two poster boards to record the ideas of the community members as we solicited their opinions for the use of the site. In order to generate ideas, we also wrote some ideas that

we had for the use of the space. In addition to the poster boards, we made three designs of the potential finished space.

Our first design addressed the young demographic of the neighborhood. Because of the numerous children in the neighborhood, we anticipated that the community would request a child-friendly space. As stated earlier, the site is not located near any parks or play areas. Furthermore, the houses within the neighborhood do not have large yards or gardens. The community would therefore benefit immeasurably from a play space in the center of the neighborhood. One digital image that Lauren made for the potential space illustrated an active site filled with swings, playground equipment and a picnic area. This image was focused largely around the children of the community, but anticipated use by families and individuals both with and without children.

Another image focused more on aesthetic additions to the neighborhood. This image illustrated a space filled with flower beds, benches, and beautifying landscaping. While not catering specifically to children, this image left more green space available for free play. Additionally, we discussed the idea of creating a butterfly garden out of perennial plants that attract butterflies and require relatively little care. We felt that this would attract the children to play outside and utilize the shared space.

Finally the third image we created was based exclusively around landscape design to beautify the area rather than offer a play space for children. While it was still inviting and aesthetically beneficial to the neighborhood, it was less interactive.

#### *Collaboration:*

After examining the available space within the neighborhood and meeting the individual community members, our enthusiasm and vision for this project has only

grown. After presenting our potential plans for the site and soliciting feedback from the community members, we became excited by their eagerness to participate in the creation of this shared space. We were also surprised by the consensus among the house owners about the theme of the site. The community overwhelmingly supported the idea of a public space focused around children. This sentiment was expressed not only by the families with young children, but also by other home-owners, including the resident living next to the site.

The community members were also enthusiastic about a picnic area and landscaping around the standing structures. They expressed a willingness to help construct the site with us, and were eager to be involved in the process through its completion and, in the case of the neighboring resident, beyond. The positive feedback we received from the community boosted our eagerness to break ground on the site.

## **Expectations for the Future**

While equally excited about the project as we are, Habitat was forced to postpone the anticipated initiation of the construction of the public space in order to allow for the completion of nearby houses and structures that may have hindered our ability to construct a secure and beautiful space. We therefore retain our commitment to the community and put forth plans for the eventual completion of a vibrant and useable public area.

We anticipate collaborating with both the adults and children within the community to create a unique central space. Because of the enthusiasm for a play space for the children, we plan to work with the children to create an artistic play area. By adding unique elements to either the picnic tables or safe and sturdy play ground equipment, we will allow the children to help construct this area. Their own artistic contributions will foster a sense of pride in their creations and further the attractiveness of the site both for them and the community as a whole. Furthermore, the adults' participation in the construction of picnic tables or landscaping efforts will enhance their awareness of the site, thus promoting its usage.

We look forward to seeing our preparations and ideas come to fruition and are excited to continue our commitment to the community throughout the completion of the project.

## **Community Needs**

### *Overview*

The Habitat for Humanity of Orange County website emphasizes that the organization “builds not only homes, it builds communities.” As described in earlier sections of this report, community-oriented recreational spaces can play an important role in the establishment and continuation of vibrant, close-knit communities. In an effort to foster this sort of community in the Rusch Hollow neighborhood, the Weiss Fellows decided upon a project to develop such a space in cooperation with the neighborhood’s future residents.<sup>1</sup> The plot of land set aside for this project is vacant because its primary purpose is to help manage storm water runoff, in accordance with town policy, but it can also be utilized in other ways. Since there is no public park or other such gathering space near the Rusch Hollow neighborhood, we believe that the development of the vacant land can meet this need, which will in turn strengthen the community. Given the land’s location in the heart of the neighborhood (see **site plan** below), we believe that it is particularly well-suited for conversion into a community-oriented recreational space.<sup>2</sup>

### *A Straightforward Approach to Obtaining Community Input: Just Ask*

Because the purpose of the project is to help build community (not merely recreational facilities) our group agreed from the outset of the planning process that we wanted to involve the neighborhood in design discussions to the extent practicable. Thus, rather than planning the project based only on our collective ideas as a group, we decided

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<sup>1</sup> The neighborhood is under construction so nobody lives on-site. However, the future residents have been selected and most of their homes are currently being built. Rather than use the cumbersome phrase “future residents” each time these people are discussed, this document typically refers to the group as if they are current residents.

<sup>2</sup> Homestead Park is located two miles away, but there is no bicycle or pedestrian-friendly means of accessing the park from the Rusch Hollow neighborhood. Even if Homestead Park was accessible by foot or bike, the benefits of adding a community-oriented recreational space within the Rusch Hollow neighborhood itself would remain.

early on in the process that we wanted to meet with neighborhood residents to gather their input and to create a shared vision. The reasoning behind this approach was twofold: first, to identify the community's top priorities; and second, to increase neighborhood awareness and buy-in. We hope that residents' awareness and participation from the outset will result in increased usage and better stewardship of the end product for years to come. Since the Rusch Hollow neighborhood is composed predominantly of units sold to homeowners with long-term mortgages, and because of Habitat's successful track

### Location of Project Site in the Rusch Hollow Neighborhood





record, we believe it is likely that turnover will be relatively low and that residents of the neighborhood will live there for many years. This stability increases the value of gaining community buy-in during the design phase of the project.

Although we sincerely wanted to obtain neighborhood input into project plans, we also had certain criteria we needed to meet in order to satisfy the Graduate School's desires for the project and to ensure that the project matched our group's own expectations for what we hoped to accomplish. With these factors in mind, we first decided as a group (and with guidance from Habitat staff) upon an appropriate range of choices to share with community members. We chose to approach community members with a broad concept and then solicit their input as to how to turn this concept into a narrower, executable plan. Once we agreed upon the range of feasible options, we decided to organize a meeting with neighborhood residents in order to identify their top priorities for building a community-oriented recreational space. Since many of the Rusch Hollow residents are native Spanish speakers, we prepared to make our oral presentation in both English and Spanish. We expected that a bilingual approach would help to establish trust, as well as to ensure that everyone in attendance fully understood the range of options that existed for the site and could voice their opinions as to project design specifics.

#### *What the Neighborhood Wants*

On the morning of February 19, 2005, we convened the planned neighborhood meeting at the Rusch Hollow construction site. Participants included the majority of future neighborhood residents, many of whom were already on-site putting in "sweat

equity” towards the purchase of their homes.<sup>3</sup> Other attendees included Habitat’s Construction Manager and several Weiss Fellows. Among the attendees was the gentleman who will own the house planned for the lot directly adjacent to the vacant land on which the project will be sited. The meeting lasted for an hour and included a “walk-through” across the project site, as well as time to look at posters we had prepared that displayed information on the Weiss Program and on possible items for inclusion in the project.

Meeting participants were highly supportive of the project and actively engaged in the discussion of specific options for developing the site. After describing the general scope of the project, providing background information on the Weiss Program and on how our group got involved with the neighborhood, and answering some initial questions, we moved into the substantive part of our discussion. In this portion of the presentation, we listed more than a dozen possible improvement options for the site and explained how each option might fit within an overall plan to develop a community-oriented recreational space. Next we asked attendees to let us know which, if any, of the options we had presented most appealed to them, and whether they had other ideas in addition to those that we presented.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Habitat for Humanity of Orange County website, “Partner families invest at least 325 hours of ‘sweat equity’ into building their own and other homes.”



*Weiss Fellows set up materials for the February 19, 2005 community meeting.*

Consensus quickly built around designing a site plan that would feature playground equipment for the many children in the neighborhood, as well as a picnic area with barbecue grill to appeal to children and adults alike. All attendees agreed that these were the top two priorities for inclusion in the site plan, while basic improvements to the overall landscaping of the site also generated interest as a lesser priority. (Note that our group of Weiss Fellows initially envisioned a community garden, but since the idea did not capture the interest of residents we removed it from the plans.) Once all attendees voiced their opinion as to the key elements to include in the plan, we summarized their comments in order to confirm that everyone was satisfied. When the attendees reaffirmed their support for the plan, we closed the meeting by thanking the residents for

their time and assuring them that we would design a plan that would include as many of their top priorities as we could, given budgetary and logistical constraints.

## **The Plan**

### *Overview*

Based on the input we received from Rusch Hollow’s future residents, and the guidance provided by Habitat for Humanity of Orange County staff, we have worked to design a site plan for a community-oriented recreational space that will contribute to the short- and long-term vitality of the neighborhood. We believe that this plan will appeal to all members of the neighborhood and provide many years of use for residents of all ages. We created this plan with attention to the budgetary and logistical constraints faced by our group, and with particular attention to ensuring that next year’s Senior Weiss Fellow is able to turn the plan into reality.



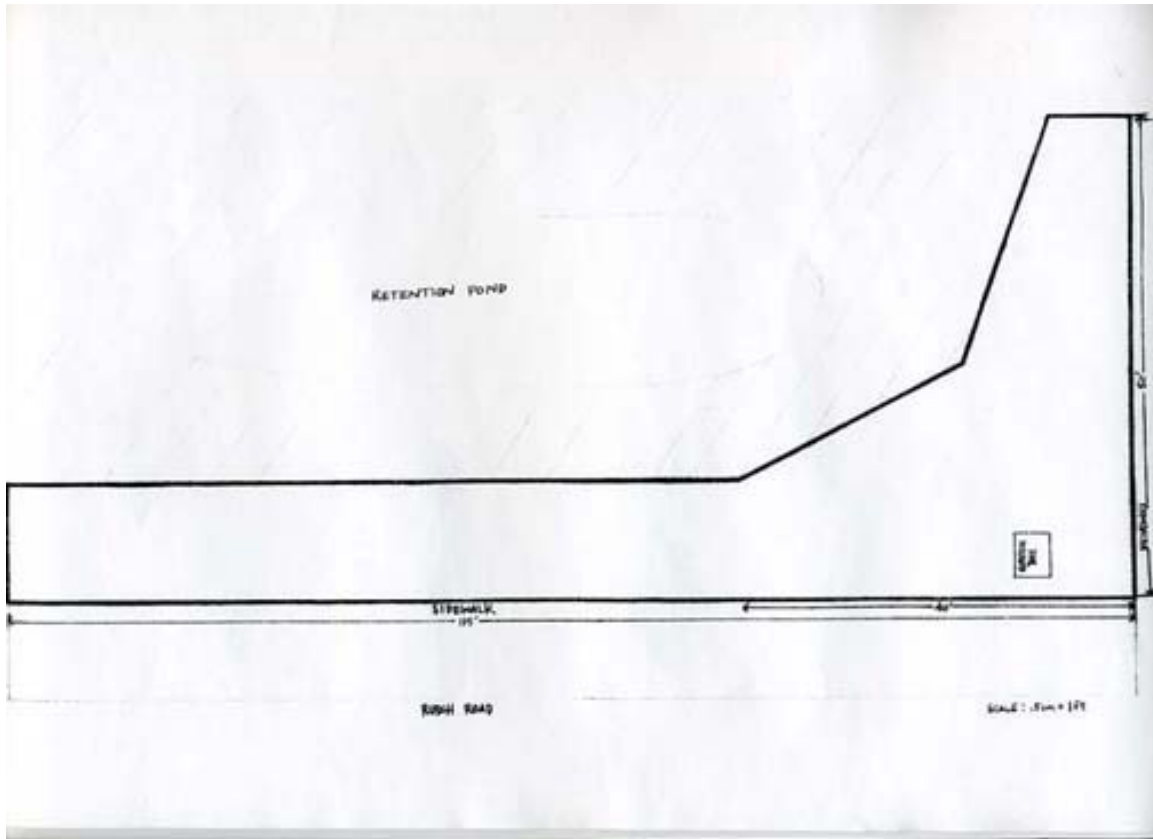
*The Rusch Hollow lot chosen for conversion into a community-oriented recreational space.*

As described in the previous section, the residents who attended the community meeting came to a consensus that constructing a playground and picnic area, in that order, were their top two priorities for the project. They also agreed that general landscaping improvements to the site were a third, less essential, priority.

### *Element 1: Playground*

Residents expressed a keen interest in including a play area in the site plans, and we believe that this is an essential component of the overall project. Playground equipment comes in a variety of shapes and sizes, from creative constructions using existing materials to stand-alone swing sets to more complex kits that include swings, slides, and other equipment. Thus, many options exist for how to design a playground that serves as an integral part of the community-oriented recreational space. Our goal is to make the play area appealing to children of a variety of ages, given the demographics of the neighborhood. Therefore, we have included multiple options for equipment that would appeal to a range of children, and that would fit within the limits on available space and budget.

As the space exists right now, it is broken into oddly shaped segments by the presence of a retention pond for rainwater run-off and an electrical box. (See diagram below)



Because safety specifications require six feet of empty space on all sides of playground equipment, even the smallest commercial composite swing-set will not fit in this space. However, with a bit of creativity, we could build a number of discrete play elements on the site. Paul Hogan's book, Playgrounds for Free, offers insight and drawings of playground equipment made from recycled materials like tires, utility poles, and cable reels. This ready-made philosophy and aesthetic seem to fit with Habitat's low-cost model. We've included some possibilities from Hogan's book below. His simple designs could easily be built by just about anyone. Even the children themselves could be included in the making of their own playground, just like their parents took part in building their own houses. This would instill a sense of pride and ownership that might deter potential vandalism.

Plans for the cable reel arena. I've made some arenas by using a flat top of the cone of the reel and wiring three or four slats so that I look two narrow slots. By starting the board and rolling down, you have a very seat-looking arena.

**CABLE REEL - BEST SAW**

MADE FROM 1/4" DIA. BOARD  
 1. 2" x 4" BOARD FOR SLATS  
 2. 1/2" x 1/2" BRASS OR STEEL  
 3. 1/2" x 1/2" BRASS OR STEEL  
 4. NUTS AND BOLTS

MADE TO HOLD 1/2" DIA. BOARD  
 1. 2" x 4" BOARD FOR SLATS  
 2. 1/2" x 1/2" BRASS OR STEEL  
 3. 1/2" x 1/2" BRASS OR STEEL  
 4. NUTS AND BOLTS



**MERRY-GO-ROUND**

3" ROUND STEEL PLATE (NEARLY FITTING) OVER TO TOP OF POLE  
 2 IN. 4 BOLTS FOR STEEL PLATE THROUGH ENTIRE WIDTH OF REEL  
 STEEL POLE, 4" OR 1/2" DIA. (MATCH DIAMETER OF REEL HOLE)  
 4-6 GRASPING POLES FOR THE CHILDREN MAY BE BOLTED 4-8" FROM EDGE OF REEL, AROUND ENTIRE CIRCUMFERENCE



To my knowledge, this was the first merry-go-round built from a cable reel. It was put together in McKim Park, Philadelphia, in the early 60's. Now there are ones like it all over Pennsylvania.  
 Plans for a cable reel merry-go-round. The size of the reel to be used depends upon the size of the children that the merry-go-round is installed for.

**EARTH MOVER TIRE**

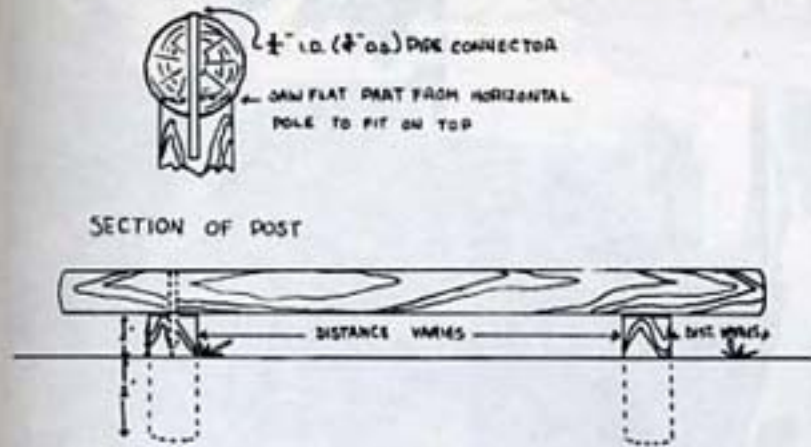
SHOULD BE 1/2" FROM GROUND

THIS SHOWS HOW TO INSTALL A TIRE IN THE GROUND. MAKE SURE THAT AT LEAST 1/3 OF THE TIRE IS BURIED AND THAT THE BURIED PORTION IS FILLED WITH ROCKS OR LOOSE EARTH. BE SURE TO DRILL SEVERAL DRAINAGE HOLES AT THE BOTTOM.



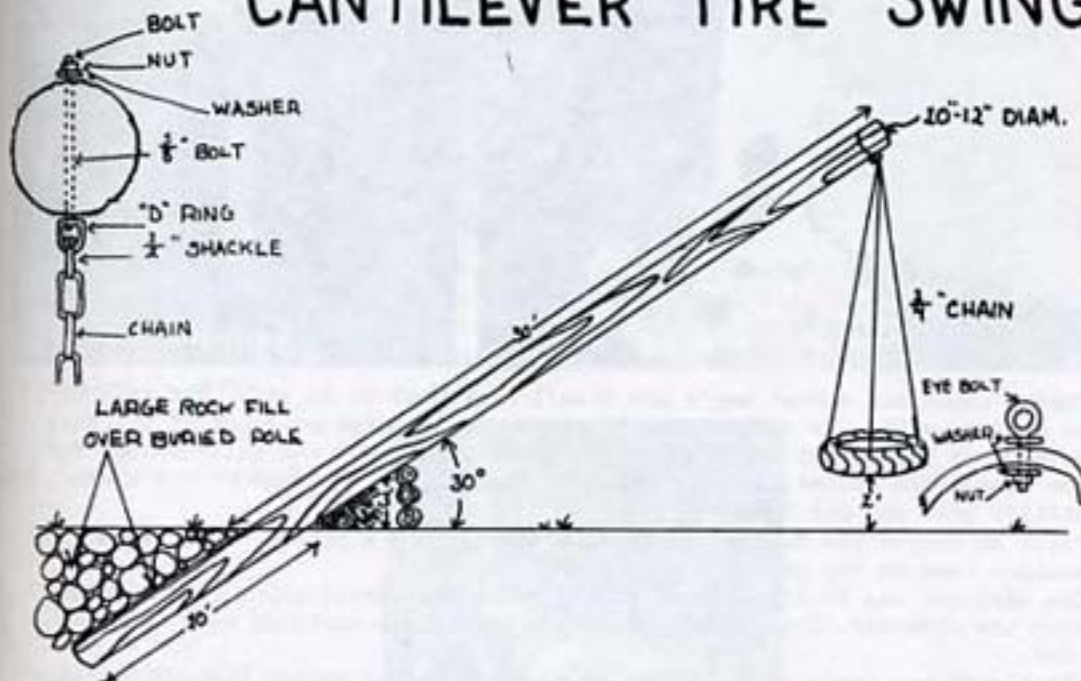


## UTILITY POLE BENCH/WALK/DIVIDER



This utility pole bench/walk/divider is just that. The elevation determines its use. It can be a soft bench, a place for children to balance-walk, or a divider to keep cars where they belong. You notch either the top pole or the post. A section of water pipe does a good job of holding the poles together.

## CANTILEVER TIRE SWING



This cantilever tire swing is after a design by John Cook, a landscape architect in Rockford, Il. Playground Clearing House, Inc. has made dozens around the state of Pennsylvania, and these swings are far superior to conventional ones. A child is soon bored by swinging alone in a private swing seat and there is always a minor crisis when others want their turn. With a horizontal tire swing four or five children can all ride at once. These swings go forward and backward and sideways, and spin around on the swivel.

There was some talk of filling in much of the area around the retention pond, which would open up more space, and therefore, more options. The kinds of construction methods outlined above could still be used. However, there might also be the potential to utilize commercial equipment. Creative Play Things has three lines of equipment that are functionally very similar, but made of three different types of lumber and the prices vary considerably between the top of the line and basic pine lumber. The attached picture of the Durango set is the top of the line lumber and 4 person swing set. This version is regularly priced at \$4600, but is on sale now for \$3000. The area needed for this set is 27ft x 22ft. The second grade lumber is about \$1000 less. The Alpine Gym (picture attached - highest quality lumber) with three swings (picture may have 4 swings) is \$3000, on sale for \$2149. It requires 24ft by 20ft. The Hampton, made of basic pine, has a smaller covered play area with a slide is priced at \$1300, sale price \$999. The material warranties are lifetime, 15 year, 10 year, for the three grades of lumber.

Home Depot has designs for playground equipment by Timber-Bilt. They are build-it-yourself playgrounds with similar components to those sold by Creative Play Things and the estimated budget is in the \$700-\$1500 range.

Playmart.com makes playground equipment from 100% recycled plastic (milk bottles). The sets are quite expensive, however, and the more reasonably priced sets were designed for small children as opposed to a wider age range.

*Products*

*Durango*



*Alpine*



*Hampton*



*Home Depot: Timber-Bilt*



If any of these commercial play structures are used, we hope to engage the community in a beautification project that would allow the children to personalize the space. This might entail adding hand-painted ceramic tiles, or simply painting the wooden structures with bright colors, inspiring quotes, or playful imagery. Again, including the children in the creation of their own space would inspire a sense of ownership and pride that might help deter vandalism. We have included a few images that show how this has been successfully done at other playgrounds. The pictures are from two community playgrounds in the Philadelphia area.







### *Element 2: Picnic Area*

Community members expressed their strong desire for a picnic area that would complement the playground by providing a space that could be enjoyed by adults with or without children. A picnic table(s) and a barbecue grill(s) were at the top of the list of facilities residents wanted to be included in our plan. We believe that it is possible to provide at least one picnic table and a barbecue grill, in order to provide space for family and/or community cookouts and other social gatherings.

We researched the prices of three products—picnic tables, park benches, and barbecue grills—in order to identify the estimated cost of providing a high quality, attractive picnic area for the Rusch Hollow residents. We focused primarily on recycled plastic products given their environmental benefits and durability, but wooden, metal, and concrete products exist too at similar prices. Picnic tables have a wide price range, from

about \$250 to \$1,000 or more, but good quality tables exist for approximately \$500. Park benches range from ~ \$100 at the lowest end to over \$500, with many high quality benches available for around \$350. Outdoor charcoal grills run between ~\$150 and \$400 each depending on size and features.

**Online resources:**

See <http://www.theparkcatalog.com/index.asp> for a huge selection of outdoor products that are aimed at the public park market (i.e., high quality products intended for heavy use). This website is the source of all of the examples listed below. Other companies to consider include <http://www.furnitureleisure.com/home.asp> and <http://www.jakebrothers.com/>. Also, there are various local retailers to consider, which would save S&H costs.

The community could also alter the picnic tables in keeping with the play structures to make them more unique and beautiful. Aside from adding color, life, and greater meaning, additions could include painted or embedded ceramic checker/chess boards to provide a quiet play area when the tables aren't being used for meals.

*Element 3: Landscaping*

Community members also told us that landscape work could help turn the vacant lot into a more attractive space. For example, they expressed hope that plantings or another aesthetically appealing barrier could be erected around the storm water retention pond to help keep children from wading into the water. Since landscaping improvements would benefit all residents of the neighborhood—even those who choose not to utilize the playground or picnic area—by beautifying the land, we believe it is important to use any remaining funds to add shrubs, flowers, a park bench near the roadway, and similar improvements to the site.



## **Resources Needed**

In order to bring any of the plans outlined above to fruition, three key categories of resources are required. These resources are: financial support, a labor pool and construction tools, and supervisory coordination. The sections below outline our plan identifying and coordinating each of these three categories of resources.

### *Financial Resources*

The most significant resource need for carrying out the site plan is money. We expect to receive some funding from a yard sale conducted by the Chapel of the Cross to benefit Habitat for Humanity of Orange County. This money will go toward the purchase of the top priority equipment needs. However, regardless of the exact amount of yard sale proceeds we receive, other financial needs will remain to enable the completion of the project. In our meeting with Habitat, other funds coming directly from Habitat were also discussed. By accessing other available money in Weiss Program funds, we will be able to complete the project for the Rusch Hollow community.

### **Playgrounds**

- Range: \$700-\$4600.
- Approximate Desired Equipment Price:
  - For the Alpine Play Set: \$3000, presently on sale for \$2149
  - For the Hampton Play Set: \$1300, sale price \$999
- Bottom Line: This was the top priority for the residents, and we would like to make every effort to give them a play structure.

### **Picnic Area**

- Range:
  - Picnic Tables: \$250-\$1000+
  - Benches: \$100-\$500
  - Outdoor Grills: \$150-\$400
- Approximate Desired Equipment Price:
  - Picnic Tables: \$500
  - Benches: \$350
  - Grill: \$300

- Bottom line: If we were to purchase an 8 foot-long, mid-priced picnic table along with two BBQ grills, it would cost somewhere between roughly \$900 and \$1300, excluding S&H. A park bench—a lower priority according to residents—would add another \$400 or so.

### *Labor and Tools*

Although we will no longer be Weiss Fellows by the time the construction of the project takes place, many members of our group are eager to participate in a hands-on way in the completion of the project. Of course, this will not be a requirement, so it is wise to plan for additional labor sources if needed. Next year's Senior Fellow will help keep in touch with current Fellows and will help tap into other available sources of labor.<sup>4</sup> Habitat for Humanity of Orange County has assured us that plenty of labor will be available to assist in construction, so the several sources are available. First, since homeowners moving into the neighborhood have a vested interest in seeing the project through to completion, we will make every effort to involve them in the construction phase. Habitat also employs a variety of paid construction staff, including AmeriCorps volunteers, who could contribute labor if needed. In addition, Habitat staff assured us that an ample number of volunteers can always be counted on to offer their time for special projects such as the one we are undertaking. Finally, UNC Habitat for Humanity group has agreed to work with the Weiss Program to make sure that the project is completed as planned, which will both increase the available labor pool and add to UNC's role in the project.

Besides requiring labor, assembling playground and picnic equipment, and installing landscaping and related improvements, will require basic construction tools.

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to keeping in touch with 2004-05 Fellows, the Senior Fellow will form a connection with 2005-06 Fellows and hopefully will be able to obtain some voluntary help from them toward the completion of the project.

Since home construction will be ongoing in the neighborhood in Spring 2006, Habitat has assured us that the necessary tools (shovels, drills, saws, etc.) will be available for our use as needed.

### *Supervisory Coordination*

In order to identify the necessary financial resources and a group of volunteer laborers, as well as to ensure that the project is executed according to plan, capable and dedicated supervisory coordination is needed. Next year's Senior Fellow will play the lead role in coordinating resources and overseeing project construction. He or she will: know the history of the project; have a working relationship with the Graduate School; serve as a liaison with UNC Habitat for Humanity and with Habit for Humanity of Orange County; communicate with other 2004-05 Weiss Fellows who want to remain involved in the project. These connections will enable the Senior Fellow to address any additional needs that arise, in order to make sure that the project is completed as proposed in this document and with input from Rusch Hollow residents.

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