

SFGate.com**OMI/Excelsior Living Library and Think Park, a new way to frame life**

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"Education and transformation, that's what I do," says Bonnie Ora Sherk. And if Sherk's plans come to pass, she will be doing so in a big way.

Sherk and her nonprofit company, Life Frame, Inc., have developed a master plan to transform nine contiguous acres of asphalt "factory model" schoolyards in southwest San Francisco into the OMI Excelsior Living Library and Think Park.

The nine acres of blacktop link Balboa High School, James Denman Middle School and the San Miguel Child Development Center.

The Living Library and Think Park will be a green schoolyard on a grand scale.

The plan entails transforming the schoolyard into a series of learning zones that link to the curriculum. The designated outdoor zones include: a sports and activities area complete with basketball courts and a ball field, multicultural gardens, a venue to explore agriculture/nutrition and health, a native riparian section and a native woodland area.

Digital technology will enhance the experience of each zone. For example, computer screens located near the multicultural gardens might provide live feeds from areas of the world represented in the gardens. Another screen in a Monarch butterfly meadow garden could provide a link to Michoacan, Mexico, where Monarchs spend the winter.

Several underlying philosophies have guided Sherk as she has worked with students, teachers and neighboring communities in developing a plan.

First, she wants to capitalize on the "built, ecological and multicultural resources past, present and future," of the site. For example, culverted Islais Creek passes underneath the yard and is a current source of flooding. Sherk hopes to use this water resource to develop a pond and waterways area.

Beyond the learning opportunities access to a pond can provide, she hopes the pond will mitigate the flooding problem.

The plan also calls for gardens to represent the rich cultural heritage of the site. Early on, the area was home to the Muwekma Ohlone Indians. Next, historic farms, of which Sherk has obtained maps, occupied the site and, today,

the surrounding neighborhood includes families of Filipino, Chinese, Latino, Somoan, African American and Vietnamese descent.

Sherk wants to represent and honor the district's cultural diversity, past and present, and believes that gardens are powerful vehicles for doing so. "Gardens are so rich in creating opportunities for understanding."

A second foundation of the master plan is Sherk's commitment to promoting an integrated understanding of biological, cultural and technological systems. She seeks to integrate learning and to demonstrate the interconnectedness of systems whose impact on each other are often poorly represented in schools. She says she hopes to help "deal with the problem of fragmented thinking and learning".

The process of designing the master plan has also incorporated Sherk's belief that "we learn by doing." She has formed various multicultural and intergenerational "community research teams" to develop aspects of the master plan.

Finally, Sherk wants the plan to encourage an awareness that the schoolyard doesn't have to stop at the door of the school and that the community can become the school.

She is in the process of exploring linkages to the city library and to the Balboa and Glen Park BART stations. At the BART stations, for example, she would like to install expressions that relate to the watershed that links the two places.

She also hopes that other communities will be interested in developing branch Living Libraries and envisions digitally linking a web of Living Libraries to each other.

Although the master plan is now complete, the process of transformation is yet in its infancy. Raising funds will be the foremost challenge. Total costs have yet to be projected but given the scale of the project will likely total \$1 to \$5 million.

What the process will be for integrating the Living Library and Think Park into the curriculum and who will develop applicable standards-based interdisciplinary learning units are issues that will be addressed over time.

"This is a very large site," says Sherk. "Obviously, this will be a phased transformation."

Despite the scope of the work to be done and the questions to be answered, Sherk is a committed visionary. She was the founding director and president (1974-1980) of the Crossroads Community, otherwise known as "The Farm," in San Francisco.

This project entailed transforming several disparate land parcels adjacent to a major freeway interchange into a culture-ecology park. The Crossroads Community incorporates a park, gardens, a theater, community art programs and environmental education.

Experiences such as these, together with her background in landscape architecture and education, have led her to think about public places as systems and to want to "integrate the rich resources available to create whole experiences."

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