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Vista Hermosa Park

In downtown Los Angeles on Saturday there were sights and smells and sounds of a milestone event the concrete urban core had not hosted in more than a century. Fresh bark. Tinkling water cascading down a rocky slope. California sycamores and coast live oaks, an expansive meadow of velvety green grass and squealing children everywhere -- in soccer fields and on slides, clambering atop playground snakes and turtles.

After a decade of political battles over what to do with land once slated for the Belmont Learning Center, a new park has bloomed on top of old oil fields, an earthquake fault and what had become a weed-infested, dusty lot. Vista Hermosa, whose name in Spanish for "beautiful view," reflects its backdrop of the downtown skyline -- was formally opened Saturday by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy as downtown's first new public park since 1895, giving residents of a city with far less green space than other major urban centers a chance to breathe, relax and play. The park also represents a triumph for the low-income, largely immigrant community that had pushed for a larger share of public resources, said Councilman Ed Reyes, who represents the area.

"This is very symbolic of how a community can persevere and actually be counted, not just be displaced and thrown away," Reyes said.

A slate of the city's political elite helped pushed the project through and showed up for speeches Saturday. They included Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, County Supervisor Gloria Molina, state Sen. Gil Cedillo, Assemblyman Kevin de Leon, Councilman Jose Huizar, Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent David L. Brewer III and Los Angeles Board of Education President Monica Garcia. In his remarks, De Leon said the park would help assuage what one environmentalist called the city's "nature deficit disorder."

Only 33% of Los Angeles residents live within a quarter-mile of a park, compared with 97% for Boston and 91% for New York, he said. Nationwide, the average park space per 1,000 residents is six to 10 acres; in Los Angeles it is 3.4 acres, he said. "This is a fundamental problem of access and equity," De Leon said. "This is a civil rights issue. When a child can't run freely and play safely in a park, it speaks to our fundamental values."

The park, he said, "sends a message that regardless of who you are, regardless of where your parents came from, regardless of the color of your skin, regardless of your legal status, you deserve access to nature." Brewer linked the lack of city parks to youth violence and drug use and urged families to embrace Vista Hermosa as their own by using it often and keeping it safe and clean. "This is an alternative to the streets," he said. "I want to see this park full of children."

Families that flocked to the park's opening said they would do just that. Rosie Escobar, a Guatemala native with twin daughters, said her family had already plotted out how they planned to use it. The girls would bring their homework there to study a bit, eat a picnic lunch and play, then kick back and maybe read, she said. Escobar said she had lived in a nearby apartment for 12 years without green space for her daughters to play. Several of her neighbors kept their children inside for safety and didn't have cars to

drive to parks farther away, she said.

"We think this park will transform everything here," Escobar said. "It's the best thing that's ever happened in the neighborhood."

The park, on school district land at 1st and Toluca streets, features 10.5 acres of trails, meadows, a waterfall and streams, picnic grounds, art elements, a children's play area, a soccer field and an outdoor amphitheater. It also features "green technologies" such as permeable parking lots to allow water to return to the natural aquifer below or an underground 20,000-gallon cistern that will recycle the water for irrigation. The \$15-million park, funded by public and private sources, will be operated by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, a local government agency that partners the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Conejo Recreation and Park District and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District.

Naturalists will offer environmental education programs, including hands-on lessons about animals and scientific phenomena, monthly visits to the Santa Monica mountains, a junior ranger program and a weekly family campfire and singalong complete with marshmallow roasts. The park will also serve as an outdoor learning laboratory for students at the adjacent Edward R. Roybal Learning Center, a high school scheduled to open this fall. On Saturday, naturalists transfixed several young children with lessons about bird beaks. The children vied to pick up dead worms and grasshoppers with chopsticks -- imitating bird beaks -- and played guessing games about what kind of bird ate what food.

Reyes and Huizar said the park site's troubled history began in the mid-1990s, when plans to build a high school there were put on hold after the discovery of underground toxic gases and an earthquake fault. Officials battled over whether to sell the land to private developers or keep their promise to develop it for public use. In 2003, Reyes and Huizar, who was then a school board member, began promoting a plan to scale back the high school to about 30% of its original size and use the rest for a park, after cleaning up the toxins. They enlisted the support of top political officials to break the decade-long stalemate.

"We made what was a terrible situation into one of the most beautiful things in downtown Los Angeles," Reyes said.

Armando Gonzalez and his 10-year-old daughter, Pamela, agreed. Gonzalez, a laundry room supervisor, said the park offered him a place to take his daughter away from TV and video games to smell fresh air and run through the grass. "This is healthy for everyone," he said. "It's going to change our lives." For Pamela, it already had. "I can play on the slide and play on the rocks and get on the snake and practice balancing," she said. "I can touch the water and wade through the waterfall.

"It's inspiring, because we didn't really have any place to play before," she said. "Now we do."

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