OFFICE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
P.O. BOX 942896
SACRAMENTO, CA 94296-0001
(916) 445-7000 Fax: (916) 445-7053

November 16, 2011

County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors
Sachi A. Hamai
Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, California 90012

RE: California Register of Historical Resources Nomination of Legg Lake Play Sculptures

Dear Board of Supervisors:

The above-named resource is being nominated to the California Register of Historical Resources (California Register). The State Historical Resources Commission (Commission) is scheduled to take action on this nomination at its next regular quarterly meeting. (Details regarding the meeting are enclosed.) At the meeting any interested party, government entity, or member of the public may address the Commission regarding the nomination prior to the Commission taking action on the nomination. Any interested party, government entity, or member of the public may also submit to the Commission written comments regarding the nomination. Comments should be submitted to California State Parks, Attn: Office of Historic Preservation, Milford Wayne Donaldson, FAIA, State Historic Preservation Officer, Post Office Box 942896, Sacramento, California 92496-0001. So that the Commission may have adequate time to consider such comments, it is requested, but not required, that such comments be submitted to the State Historic Preservation Officer 15 days before the meeting.

The California Register is an authoritative guide to the state's significant historical and archeological resources. Generally, there are no restrictions placed upon a private property owner with regard to normal use, maintenance or sale of a resource listed in the California Register. Resources listed in of eligible for listing in the California Register must be given consideration in the California Environmental Equality Act ("CEQA") review process and protected from substantial adverse change, to the extent prudent and feasible. Further information is available in Technical Assistance Series #1 "California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Historical Resources," published by Office of Historic Preservation and available by mail or online at www.ohp.parks.ca.gov.

If you have questions, please contact the Registration Unit at (916) 445-7000.

Sincerely,

Milford Wayne Donaldson, FAIA
State Historic Preservation Officer

Enclosures: Nomination, Meeting Notice

FILED

2011 NOV 21 AM 10: 52

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

STATE OF CALIFORNIA – THE NATURAL RESOURCES AGENCY
EDMUND G. BROWN, *Governor*

OFFICE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
1725 23rd Street, Suite 100
SACRAMENTO, CA 95816
(916) 445-7000 Fax: (916) 445-7053
calshpo@parks.ca.gov
www.ohp.parks.ca.gov

MEETING NOTICE

FOR: State Historical Resources Commission Quarterly Meeting

DATE: January 20, 2012

TIME: 9:00 A.M.

PLACE: Chico Old Municipal Building
441 Main Street
Chico, California 95928

This room is accessible to people with disabilities. Questions regarding the meeting should be directed to the Registration Unit (916) 445-7008

State of California — The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
PRIMARY RECORD

Primary #
HRI #
Trinomial
NRHP Status Code 3CS

DRAFT

Other Listings
Review Code Reviewer Date

*Resource Name or #: Legg Lake Play Sculptures

P1. Other Identifier: Whittier Narrows Recreation Area

*P2. Location: ☐ Not for Publication X Unrestricted *a. County: Los Angeles

and (P2b and P2c or P2d. Attach a Location Map as necessary.)

*b. USGS 7.5' Quad: El Monte Date: 1966/1981 T 1S ; R 11W ; Sec 32 ; M.D. B.M.

c. Address: 823 Lexington Gallatin Road City: South El Monte Zip: 91733

d. UTM: Zone: 11 ; 402384 mE/ 3766147 mN Please see continuation sheet & sketch map for full list of UTMs.

e. Other Locational Data: (e.g., parcel #, directions to resource, elevation, etc., as appropriate) Elevation:

All pieces are located along a quarter mile walking path adjacent the eastern portions of Legg Lake and Center Lake within the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area.

*P3a. Description: (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

Constructed in 1960, the Legg Lake Play Sculptures are six aquatic themed playground pieces hand crafted in concrete by artist Benjamin Dominguez. As named by Dominguez, the pieces include the: "Mother Dragon," "Fish," "Octopus," "Two-Headed Dragon," "Starfish," and a semi-abstract piece called the "Tripod." Each is a whimsical creature designed to be played upon by small children. Many of the pieces feature expressionistic, happy faces and components such as spines and tentacles that extend into the surrounding space to encourage climbing and interaction. The pieces are scaled to children, and most of them are brightly painted. Three of the pieces are in very close proximity to the lakeshore, though elevated above the water itself. The majority of the pieces are set in context to a nearby backdrop of mature trees or other plant specimens. Each of the six pieces exists within a sandpit lined with river rock set in concrete. Though their general shapes were planned by Dominguez, all of the sand pits were built by the Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5) within two years after the pieces were finished.

Please see continuation sheet page 3.

*P3b. Resource Attributes: (HP29), (HP39) - Playground

*P4. Resources Present: ☐Building ☐Structure X Object ☐Site ☐District ☐Element of District ☐Other (Isolates, etc.)

P5a. Photo or Drawing (Photo required for buildings, structures, and objects.)

P5b. Description of Photo: (View, date, accession #)
Legg Lake Play Sculptures: Two-Headed Dragon.
View: NE. November, 2008.

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Sources:
X Historic: 1960; reference contract between Los Angeles County and Benjamin Dominguez
☐Prehistoric ☐Both

*P7. Owner and Address:
County of Los Angeles
Department of Parks and Recreation
823 Lexington Gallatin Road
South El Monte, CA
91733

*P8. Recorded by: (Name, affiliation, and address)
Dr. Efrosenya Lubisich, President
Friends of La Laguna
PO Box 2548
San Gabriel, CA, 91778-2548

*P9. Date Recorded: January 27, 2010

*P10. Survey Type: (Describe) California Register of Historical Resources

*P11. Report Citation: (Cite survey report and other sources, or enter "none.") None

*Attachments: ☐NONE Location Map XSketch Map XContinuation Sheet XBuilding, Structure, and Object Record ☐Archaeological Record ☐District Record ☐Linear Feature Record ☐Milling Station Record ☐Rock Art Record ☐Artifact Record ☐Photograph Record ☐ Other (List):

B1. Historic Name: Legg Lake Play Sculptures
B2. Common Name: Legg Lake Play Scupltures
B3. Original Use: Recreation
B4. Present Use: Recreation
***B5. Architectural Style:** Vernacular- Fantasy theme
***B6. Construction History:** (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations) Constructed from 1960; sandpits completed by 1962; painting and minor concrete repairs from c.1960-2009.

***B7. Moved?** XNo ☐Yes ☐Unknown **Date:** **Original Location:**
***B8. Related Features:** Each sculpture is in a sandpit with river rock borders constructed by the Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5), as pieces were completed between 1960 and 1962.

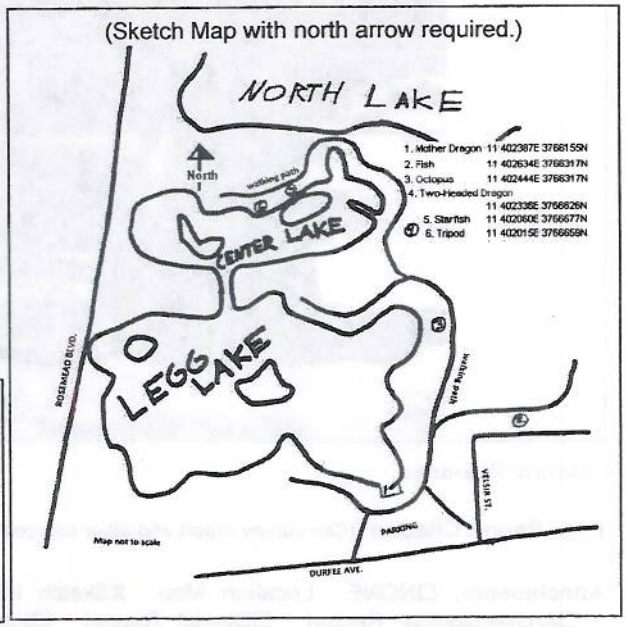
B9a. Architect: N/A
b. Builder: Benjamin Dominguez
***B10. Significance: Theme:** Post World War II Playground Design
Area: Southern California
Period of Significance: 1960-1962
Property Type: Playground
Applicable Criteria: 3
(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

The six play sculptures located around Legg Lake in the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area demonstrate a unique period in the construction of playgrounds but also represent the early work in the development of a master concrete artist, Benjamin Dominguez (1894 -1974). A Mexican immigrant, Dominguez brought with him to the United States age-old techniques of concrete working and sculpture garden design that originated in Europe and were learned by Dominguez in Mexico City. Dominguez used this knowledge to create unique and highly imaginative children's playgrounds. The distinctive folk vernacular that Dominguez expressed in his play sculptures and the mastery of concrete art that he displayed distinguished child's play during a time when city officials sought artistically inspired rather than perfunctory and proscribed play activities. His sculptures at Legg Lake are a testament to the broad and continuing pattern of immigrant and minority communities and the contributions they make to the broader community. Dominguez' contribution to the communities who have managed to retain his works is a testament to the often organic process and understanding of the population that is so important to the design and function of public spaces.

Please see continuation sheet 6.

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) (HP29), (HP39) – Playground

(Sketch Map with north arrow required.)



***B12. References:**
Please see continuation sheets 13 and 14.

B13. Remarks:

***B14. Evaluator:** Daniel D. Paul, Architectural Historian
ICF International

***Date of Evaluation:** January 27, 2010

(This space reserved for official comments.)

Description: Summary, ctd.

The sculptures Dominguez designed for Legg Lake are rare examples of this artist's early playground work and exhibit certain features and characteristics that cannot be found at his surviving parks. Compared to later pieces, the facial features of his serpents and dragons are sharply cylindrical and do not yet exhibit the softer animation of his later playgrounds in Garden Grove and San Gabriel. The eyes of the various creatures are geometric in shape and give the play sculptures an open-eyed appearance. Generally, the pieces are more angular in form with higher and sharper arches than later pieces. Finally, the fish play sculpture is the last remaining example of a piece where the slide is accessed by climbing through the mouth of the creature and sliding down along its back, a common motif used by Dominguez in his earlier designs. None of the pieces were painted upon completion by Dominguez; he seems to have arranged to allow the park maintenance staff to paint the pieces. This is an arrangement Dominguez established with the earlier playground in Las Vegas. Los Angeles County Supervisor Frank G. Bonelli commissioned the Legg Lake Play Sculptures after viewing the Dominguez' Las Vegas "Fantasyland Playground."

The larger space in which the pieces reside is called the Whittier Narrows Regional Park. This park is 1,500 acres situated at a nexus of the Rosemead, El Monte, Pico Rivera and Montebello communities. Within the park, the pieces are all located in the "Lakes Area," identified by Los Angeles County as Area D at the center of the larger park. This area consists of three man-made lakes: North Lake, Center Lake, and Legg Lake, built on project lands of the Army Corps of Engineers beginning in 1950. Though they are commonly referred to as the Legg Lake Play Sculptures, the pieces are located in the general vicinity of both Legg Lake and Center Lake. Five of the six sculptures are alongside the bike/walking paths that encircle the lake. A sixth piece, the Fish, is due east of Legg Lake at the southeast portion of the Lakes Area. The large, multi-acre area around the lakes is relatively flat with lawn cover and numerous mature tree specimens that include California Live Oak, Sycamore, various Pine specimens, Chinese Elm, Eucalyptus, and an occasional Palm tree.

The Lakes Area possesses multiple entrances. Santa Anita Avenue provides the most direct access from the 60 freeway, providing access to the area's western side. Parking is also available on the northern and southern sides of the Lakes Area. A paved, outer pathway and intertwining internal decomposed granite pathways provide access to the sculptures. These paths provide a five mile circuit around the three lakes. All six sculptures are located along a roughly 2 mile segment of the paths; roughly ¼ mile as the crow flies. For the purposes of this description, the pieces will be discussed in the order of their construction, moving counter-clockwise from south to north.

Individual Sculptures: Description

The first sculpture commissioned was named "Mother Dragon" by Dominguez. Contracts for the piece were drawn in June 1960 and the piece was completed within the month. The play sculpture sits at the southern end of Legg Lake, below the parking lot that can be accessed from Durfee Road. Mother Dragon faces to the east. Three identical mushroom "seats" of concrete are set in a triangular formation in front of the dragon. The snout of the dragon is a ¾ circle, and the mouth is open. The head is cap-shaped and has two spines in the back. The brow extends out toward the snout. The body of Mother Dragon is shaped like a bowling pin and the body follows straight out behind. The tail curves to the north and back on the body. Four legs with flat feet hug the body of the dragon, giving the appearance that the dragon is resting. Spines are evenly spaced along the body. Mother Dragon is located in a square shaped sandpit immediately adjacent to Legg Lake itself. Nearby are numerous tall Pine specimens that serve as a subtle backdrop for the piece.

Heading east along the path on the southern edge of the lake, visitors encounter Dominguez's Fish play sculpture. The fish sits at the southern end of the park and faces the lake along an east-west axis. It is situated in an oval sand pit constructed by Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5) in 1962. A row of seven

eucalyptus trees are present due south of the fish. They obscure a chain link fence and also serve as a backdrop to the fish. The height is approximately 11 feet. The mouth is open at slightly less than a 45 degree angle which allows entry to a ladder built into the concrete at the back of the mouth. There are 5 steps built into the concrete leading to the top of the fish's head and to a slide that returns to the ground, nearly following the spine of the fish. Markings around the face mimic the markings of a killer whale. The body is painted black and the face is blue. The eyes and mouth are ringed in red. The body of the fish hooks to the north, gently. The slide exits the opposite direction of the tail.

Moving north along the eastern side of the Lake, slightly more than two-tenths of a mile, sits the Octopus play sculpture. The octopus is centered in a circular sand pit that was constructed by Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5) in 1961. The octopus faces the lake in a southwesterly direction. The octopus features six supporting tentacles; five curl back on themselves and one curls out. Those that curl back make loops that small children can climb through and on to reach the body and upper tentacles of the octopus. Suction cups are drawn into the concrete on the underside of the tentacles. The face is distinguished by a slight smile and round eyes that have three lids drawn into the cement above them. The tentacle to the left of the face makes a reversed "S" while the tentacle on the right of the face makes a counter-clockwise circle. The tip of the right tentacle continues beyond the circle giving the appearance of the letter "Q". The height of the structure is approximately 10 feet at the top of the head and 12 feet with the tentacles that reach above the body. The piece is currently painted coral green. Directly behind it is a mature sycamore tree and a jacaranda specimen is due south of it.

Continuing north along the eastern side of the lake, approximately one tenth of a mile, and moving inland (east), the Two-Headed Dragon sits in a shady grove of trees. This dragon stands approximately 7 feet tall and is south-facing. The faces have rounded snouts and open mouths. The piece is currently painted blue with orange eyes. The body snakes out of the sand behind the heads and rises three times. Two of the spined arches are of equal size – about four feet out of the sand, while the third is slightly lower. The tail rises out the sand and turns back on the body to the west side of the structure. The play sculpture sits in a kidney shaped sandpit that was built by the Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5) in 1961. Three Aleppo Pines that serve as a backdrop are due east of the piece, a tall Canary Pine is present between the piece and the lake, and Chinese Elm and Carrotwood Trees are also located within close proximity.

The final two sculptures, the Starfish and "Tripod," are located at the causeway between North Lake and Center Lake and are approximately a quarter mile further north along the eastern side of the Lake. Both are in very close proximity to the shoreline, though elevated above the water itself. The starfish sits in a circular sandpit that is ringed with rocks set in concrete. This pit was constructed in 1961 by Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5), which was responsible for building the sand pits for each of the play sculptures located at Legg Lake. In the water directly behind the starfish is a small, densely vegetated, jungle-like island with typha grass, palm specimens, and other tall, mature tree specimens. This small island serves as a dramatic backdrop for the starfish. The starfish stands about 4.5 feet tall and has three steps cut into the west facing legs. The three remaining legs can be used as slides back to the ground. There are slight ridges that can function as handrails in each of the supporting legs and the body of the starfish is a slightly flattened dome.

A few feet further west along the Lake's shore sits a "Tripod" creature located in an oval sandpit. The edge of the sandpit was re-finished at an unknown date and the plaque indicating the year and the forestry camp responsible for its construction has been obscured under concrete. This figure is abstract in shape and form and visitors interpret its form as either a bird or dinosaur. The face of the play sculpture has no distinguishing marks and faces north. The neck and head curve gently up from the body of the "Tripod." On either side of the elongated neck and head are two legs that each have three built in steps. The legs have rounded pedestal footing and curved sides that again function as handrails. Climbing either leg takes the visitor to the back of the Tripod where they are hedged in by tall rising "hips." The rise of the structure directs action to the third leg, a slide back to the ground. The slide also ends in a footed

pedestal. The structure is currently painted a light green and rises to an approximate height of eight feet and spans six feet on the ground. Like the starfish, the Tripod is located in close proximity to Center Lake. Directly behind the Tripod, in the water is a small thicket of typha grass nearby the lakeshore that serves as a low backdrop for the Tripod.

The park area surrounding the pieces has numerous amenities – fishing piers, ADA and safety compliant playgrounds, covered and open picnic areas, and open areas for both passive and active uses, and restrooms. These, like the play sculptures, are scattered throughout the park so as to serve visitors from whichever point they enter. These features, however, are non-contributing.

Significance, ctd.

The Legg Lake Play Sculptures were the first pieces that Dominguez created in California and are the last remaining examples of the features and design of his early work. They represent style and design characteristics not found in his later, surviving playgrounds. Most important among these features are the reversed fish slide design and the more angular facial features that characterized the early play sculptures. The pieces most closely resemble those at the now demolished "Fantasy Park" built for the Junior League of Las Vegas in 1959, as evidenced by photographs from the Junior League's archive. Nevertheless, the expressive facial details and gentle arcs and curves persist through his remaining works.

The Seven Aspects of Integrity

All six of the concrete sculptures remain in their original **location**, and each location was specifically selected by Dominguez. The location of most of the pieces near the lakeshore is not only picturesque, but gives the aquatic themed creatures the effect of emerging from the Lakes. Dominguez in conjunction with County Parks officials selected the location of the non lake-adjacent pieces to take advantage of the multiple entry points into the area. Aside from the continued growth of nearby trees and other landscape, the **setting** of the sculptures has not changed in the decades since their 1960 construction. The areas immediately surrounding each of the six pieces appear to have had no additions since the construction of the sand pits by the Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5), which were completed during the period of significance: 1960-1962. Only minimal alterations have taken place to the larger setting over time. These include modernization of the bathroom facilities and traditional playground equipment. However, most of the play sculptures sit near or at the water's edge, and the perimeter of the Lake has not changed since its construction.

All six sculptures retain excellent integrity of **design**. The expressive faces, suspended tentacles, and unique arches of the pieces, all character defining features of Dominguez' work, are unaltered and consistently represented. The expressive, friendly facial characteristics of the various creatures are a signature element of Mr. Dominguez's work that retains very good integrity. While early photographs show that the pieces were not immediately painted, an interview with Donna Andress, who commissioned Mr. Domginuez to build a playground in Las Vegas, indicated that Mr. Dominguez often left the pieces unpainted with the understanding that the contracting entity would paint the pieces at a later date.

As exhibited upon all six pieces, Dominguez' original **workmanship** is intact. In the absence of readily available tools capable of making the forms that Mr. Dominguez sought, he used tools that he made himself to bend the rebar within, for example, the shape of the starfish. Incised detail features upon various sculptures, in their faces in particular, are still readable and retain very good integrity. Aside from the presence of multi-layered paint on some pieces, the smoothness of all surfaces, which was intended by Dominguez, is also retained. The original concrete, Dominguez' **material** of choice for all his play sculptures, remains intact and no alterations or noticeable patching has been done to any of the six pieces.

The integrity of **association** of each piece to Benjamin Dominguez and to trends in Post World War II playground design is very good. The integrity of intended **feeling**, which was to illicit a sense of "fantasy," is retained. It is a feeling reiterated by the unique experience of spontaneously happening upon one of the creatures as it sits at the water's edge, within a grouping of trees, or as one comes around the V-bend of the nearby walking path. The effect is picturesque in the traditional sense of the word.

The Genesis of the Legg Lake Play Sculptures

The Whittier Narrows derives its name from the narrow gap where the Puente Hills and Montebello Hills come together about seven miles east of the city of Los Angeles. It is in this Narrows that the Rio Hondo, San Gabriel River and Alhambra Wash converge. The Federal Flood Control Act of 1936 provided the means to create a flood control area. However the flood of 1938 created the impetus to dam the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo Rivers. Despite an anti-dam movement based in the city of El Monte, then Representative Richard Nixon was able to broker a compromise. In 1950, the Army Corps began construction with the caveat that the region would remain a recreational area. The lakes were intended as public fishing lakes and were created as a joint project of the Department of Fish and Game, Wildlife Conservation Board, and the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation.

There is no "Main Entrance" to the Whittier Narrows. The space was created to be a regional facility and visitors enter from a variety of directions depending on their point of origin (El Monte, Rosemead, La Puente, etc.) and their intended activity (i.e., sports, fishing, equestrian trails, picnic, etc.). The Lakes area was intended to preserve local traditions of fishing in the Whittier Narrows but also provide traditional park amenities. As part of the construction, Supervisor Bonelli looked for examples of play equipment that implemented the new thinking in playground design.

In an effort to make the Whittier Narrows Recreational Area a destination, Supervisor Bonelli contracted Mexican concrete artist Benjamin Dominguez to create play sculptures after seeing photographs of a "fantasy-land" park that he created for the Junior League of Las Vegas. The fundraising for and construction of the playground generated considerable media coverage, and it is likely that a newspaper article first caught the attention of Supervisor Bonelli. The pieces built in Las Vegas included two fish, with slides along the back, and a mother dragon surrounded by mushrooms. The fish slide is a unique play sculpture because the slide is accessed through the open mouth of the fish and the slide follows the curve of the fish's body. This design seems to be indicative of Dominguez's feeling that play should follow the natural shape of the sea creature. A reversal of the once ubiquitous slide from the back of the fish or whale proceeding down the mouth, Legg Lake is the last remaining example of this sort of sculpture by Dominguez. The mother dragon exemplifies the more geometric and angular construction of Dominguez's early work and the pieces at Legg Lake share this characteristic style.

Dominguez had been to California once before when he received a commission in 1958 to build a rustic, *faux-bois* bridge at the Coldwater Park in Beverly Hills. However, he returned to California once the initial contract was drawn for the Mother Dragon play sculpture at Legg Lake. It seemed that prompt completion of the piece was important and only once Dominguez completed the Mother Dragon on schedule in 1960 were contracts for the next five sculptures drawn. Though Supervisor Bonelli directed Mr. Dominguez to place the sculptures around a continuous, quarter-mile distance of Legg Lake, the specific setting and acclimation in relation to the lake and the immediate landscape was left to Dominguez. Each piece was built in situ and photographs from the Dominguez family archives show a much less mature landscape surrounding the sculptures. Based on the various communities that used the park and the park's consciously intended lack of a pronounced, single entrance, it is not far-fetched to assert that Bonelli wanted the "uniquely designed play equipment"[1] spaced so that they would reach a larger audience. To this day, in anecdotal conversations, long time visitors on one side of the park are often unaware of the sculptures that are placed in other locations. For his first piece—the Mother Dragon and its accompanying mushroom pieces, Dominguez was paid $600 for his work, which was completed in mid-July, 1960. He then received a $2,240 commission for the remaining pieces, which he finished by the end of 1960.

[1] Contract between LA County and Benjamin Dominguez dated June 21, 1960. Dominguez Family Archives.

Dominguez created small models of the groupings that he intended to build at the park. The models allowed him to visualize the relationship of each structure to the space as well as to the other structures. He then drew each piece to scale, sometimes on sheets of paper, and other times onto plywood boards. Once construction began, each piece was enclosed in a wooden shed while Dominguez and his son, Benjamin Jr., worked. Rebar and steel mesh were used to create the frame for each piece. Then, Dominguez sculpted the pieces with layers of concrete. The final concrete layer of the sculptures was made of a pure silicate mixture, so that the pieces would feel smooth to the touch. After the pieces were completed, the Juvenile Forestry Camp (no. 5), a youth service and education organization, built stone and concrete pits to contain the sand and the play sculpture.

Bike and walking paths connected the sculptures to one another and the play pieces were advertised early on as "Fun in Concrete and Steel" in local publications and park visitor guides. Once completed, Dominguez left the painting to the group or entity that purchased the sculptures. The date at which the park maintenance crews began to paint the pieces is unknown.

The contract with Domginuez was indicative of a common goal in the 1950s and 1960s. Parks increasingly were seen as places where people of all ages could, "congregate, play, relax, or celebrate, experiencing a sense of community identity in the midst of a culture of ever-increasing mobility which tends to isolate individuals from one another."[2] However, at Legg Lake, the contract is also indicative of the balance between the traditional functions of the recreational area and the new thinking in playground design.

Mr. Dominguez hoped that the works he created for Legg Lake would lead to further commissions and he implored Mr. Bonelli to help him solicit further work. In a letter that he wrote to Supervisor Bonelli, Mr. Dominguez stated that his sculptures would be "works of decoration, to beautify the poetic-ambient [sic] of those places of rest and recreation to the thousands of families and children." He believed that his works would give the world famous region of Los Angeles the "distinction and excellence of their ancestry" in the public parks and provide for "decorative and functional...fantasy".[3]

Nearly 50 years later, the words of Mr. Dominguez ring true. Annually, 1.8 million visitors come to the Whittier Narrows Recreational Area, the concrete sculptures remain in excellent condition, and are a much-loved attraction in the Lakes Area of the facility. For visitors to the park, the Whittier Narrows are another-worldly retreat. Benjamin Dominguez' sculptures provide the creative play to truly make the landscape fantastic.

Benjamin Dominguez

Benjamin Dominguez was born in Guanajuato, Mexico in 1894. As a young man he came to the United States, seeking employment in Colorado, where he met and married his first wife. Together they had one son, Benjamin, Jr. Upon the untimely death of his wife, he returned to Mexico, remarried, and enrolled in the Academia de Artes Plasticas of the University of Mexico. He completed his studies in 1925 and began his career in the concrete arts. His particular specialty was that of the 250 year old European craft of "*faux-bois*" also known as *trabajo rustico,* or "concrete wood." In Mexico, there was a school dedicated to this technique and Dominguez rose in notoriety for his mastery of the art. His most recognized work in Mexico was at the Chapultepec Zoo in Mexico City where he designed the lion and tiger enclosures. Over the next 30 years Dominquez worked at his craft and raised his 13 children with his second wife, Anna. After World War II Dominguez moved his family to Juarez, close to the U.S.-Mexico border and

[2] Rainey, Reuben M. and JC Miller, *Modern Public Gardens*, (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2006), p. 73.
[3] Letter to Supervisor Bonelli from Benjamin Dominguez, 8-3-1962.

began establishing contacts for work within the United States. The 1950s proved to be a time when Mexican-Americans became more visible in American society and Dominguez benefited from friendships with men who had not only crossed the border, but who had also crossed into mainstream American society. He traveled often to El Paso and built a friendship with Ruben Salazar, a native of Juarez and a reporter for the *El Paso Tribune-Herald*. The youngest Dominguez son, Rene, recalls many meetings and conversations between his father and Mr. Salazar. For the Chicano community (American born Mexicans), Salazar has come to represent the early integration of Mexican-Americans into mainstream society. For Dominguez he was a valued contact who helped secure early commissions in El Paso.

Dominguez' Early Works

Once Dominguez moved his family to El Paso in 1956, his first commission in the United States was from the Washington Park Zoo in that city. Based on the work Dominguez did for Chapultepec Zoo in Mexico City (1942), he was commissioned to create the Bear Pits, erecting a concrete tree for the bears to climb – a piece that no longer remains. This initial commission opened the door to future commissions that primarily featured the play sculptures that Dominguez had conceptualized while living in Juarez. For his first playground which was located in El Paso, Dominguez deliberately selected sea creatures as the best medium for children's play. Rene Dominguez recalls many drawings and discussions while the family lived in Juarez about the smooth surfaces and gentle curves that the sea creatures would provide for slides and safe tactile play.

At the El Paso playground which was created circa 1959, Dominguez created dozens of pieces - fish, harps, and double slides along with climbing structures that integrated various modes of play - turning his home into a virtual factory. A most popular piece was one that he titled "Sputnik" and that had the appearance of a moonscape in and out of which children could climb. To secure commissions, Dominguez painstakingly wrote letters, using a Spanish-English dictionary to translate his words. Eventually his play sculptures became quite popular. In the El Paso area today, a lone turtle remains. The pattern of commissions that emerged in El Paso repeated itself in both California and Nevada. In both states, Dominguez was first commissioned to practice the specialty of *faux-bois*, constructing rustic bridges in Beverly Hills' Coldwater Park (status undetermined) and the Las Vegas Desert Inn Golf Course. However, these initial commissions once again gave way to his signature play sculptures and Dominguez began to build a name for himself through his creation of "fantasy parks" – a name repeatedly used in the media coverage of his parks. Of various *faux-bois* artists who like Dominguez emigrated from Mexico to the U.S. in the early part of the twentieth century, Dominguez is the only one known to transfer the craft to the making of children's playgrounds.[4]

Dominguez' Fantasy Parks

The fact that Dominguez' fanciful creations were often described as "fantasy parks" seems to be part of the shift in the conceptualization of parks and play-spaces. A 1960 article in the journal *Parks and Recreation* noted that, "[t]he break in attitude towards the redesign of play areas has come from our European neighbors…[t]hey conceive that the play area should be an aesthetic and dramatic experience, as well as a physical one."[5] The article continued to state that the "new" park was a museum, an opportunity to see and experience the arts and crafts of the community, a native folklore center. It noted that the "rubber stamp" playgrounds of the past had given way to a new approach to recreation and park

[4] Perhaps the best know of such émigré artists is Dionicio Rodriguez (1891-1955), who, like Dominguez, emigrated from Mexico to Texas. It is not known if Rodriguez and Dominguez ever came in contact. Rodriguez' works include *faux-bois* bridges, gazebos, gates, and fountains, many of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

[5] Caplan, Frank , "The Playgrounds of Tomorrow," *Parks and Recreation*, 43:1 (January, 1960), 18-19, 74.

design in America. Now, rather than fitting the play equipment, "to create square spaces called playgrounds…[pieces] are selected and placed as required by the contour or position of the land." Greater attention was given to the design of outdoor spaces, creating attractions as much as playgrounds, and showcasing artistic expression. Dominguez' concrete play sculptures captured the fantastic quality cities sought for their new parks. A significant commission came in 1959, when the Las Vegas Women's Service League hired Dominguez to create a fantasy park that included whales, friendly dragons, mammoth mushrooms, and gargantuan turtles. It was often the case that many groups, such as city departments, women's leagues, Kiwanis Clubs, and Rotary Associations, would combine efforts to fund the creation of a park that would not only be a place of recreation but also an attraction. The play-space was intended to appeal to a broad range of age and to be a unique and distinguishing attraction for residents and neighboring communities.

Rene Dominguez recalls that his father was given creative license in designing the play-space in Las Vegas – something that would be a point of contention in later parks when he did not have full control over the site. However, Donna Andress, who chaired the committee charged with funding the "Fantasy Park," recalls that Domginuez brought pictures of each piece he planned to construct to get approval. She reiterated that Dominguez felt strongly that there was an appropriate space for each of the pieces he created. He felt that the careful placement of the pieces would create an environment that had artistic appeal to visitors and that would foster imaginative play on the part of the children. The enthusiasm for the Las Vegas Park led to three known commissions in Southern California: Whittier Narrows, Garden Grove, and San Gabriel. Following the commissions for his work, Dominguez again moved his family and settled in La Puente. He was now in his late 60s and so his younger sons worked as his apprentices, doing much of the hard manual labor of molding the rebar and wire to their father's specifications. On each of the parks, Dominguez himself executed the drawings, models, and all of the fine finishing details for each piece. Many of the details that gave the sculptures their character were made with tools that Dominguez either brought from Mexico or made himself.

Shortly before his death, Dominguez was approached to create an Aztec play sculpture for "Plaza de la Raza" in Lincoln Park. Although he began some cursory sketches, he died in 1974 before he could begin work on the project. In his place and memory, his son Rene completed the designs and built the Aztec slides. For a man who in many ways represented the immigrant experience, this was an important acknowledgement of his contributions to the communities in which he worked and lived. Plaza de la Raza was created to be a Chicano Cultural Center in Los Angeles, affirming and expressing the contributions of the Mexican-American community. When new safety guidelines were introduced in 2002, the Aztec pyramid was found to be non-compliant with the safety recommendations and was slated for demolition. This playground no longer remains and has instead been replaced by one of the "catalog" play structures that are now a common feature of many city parks.

Post-War Playground Typologies

The Post War Period in which Dominguez worked was a fertile and open time for creative playground design. The Legg Lake pieces reference a historic period now closed with the advent of strict new guidelines that have destroyed similar play sculptures from the mid-century era.

Theorists expounding the tenets of Modernism in the fields of architecture, landscape design, and art, found sympathetic partners in the child education, philanthropic, and applied arts fields that were willing to build playground equipment or whole playground environments showcasing the new design ideas (e.g., Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn's project for the Adele Rosenwald Levy Playground, Riverside Park, New York City; 1961-1966).[6] At the same time, new economic prosperity, the pronounced "baby boom" related

[6] Susan G. Solomon, American Playgrounds; Revitalizing Community Space (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005).

jump in the non-adult population, as well as the increased interest in family-oriented leisure activities that marked the period prompted the emergence of "Story Book Lands" across the United States. Two parallel typologies for playground design resulted. In one of the paradigms, the Story Book Land fantasy environments were established showcasing children's story book creatures, characters and/or structures that were recreated three-dimensionally in a fanciful form of realism. A second typology wedded contemporary pedagogy with the principles of modern art and landscape design in a search for innovative, sculptural expression that prized abstract design rather than realism.

The company most successful and best exemplifying the second typology during the Post War years was "Creative Playthings" and its later subsidiary, "Play Sculptures."[7] Creative Playthings was founded in 1944 by Frank and Teresa Caplan and flourished after exhibiting at the New York Toy Fair circa 1950, when a long partnership was formed with Frank and Bernard M. Barenholtz.[8] During the postwar period, the visionary perspective of advocates for playground design reform found broader audiences through mainstream architectural and art periodicals, and through exhibitions sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and other cultural institutions.[9] The high point in thinking about the design of playgrounds was the competition sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art in 1954. The competition showcased a range of modular elements that could form new contexts for play. The media recognition that followed gave playgrounds "a heightened legitimacy in art circles and in more general spheres," and also provided a further incentive to innovative playground equipment. Creative Playthings achieved great success in the MOMA competition, which resulted in the company subsidiary Play Sculptures. Creative Playthings and Play Sculptures created award-winning slides, climbers, and abstract outdoor equipment used by parks, playgrounds, and schools all over the world.[10] This includes many of the numerous and ubiquitous Rocket Ship slides and other similarly themed equipment from the postwar era up through the 1970s seen in school and municipal playgrounds across the United States. In July of 1966, CBS, which was interested in moving into the education industry, purchased Creative Playthings.[11]

Although far less widespread, a third important playground typology emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s that is often referred to as the "adventure playground" approach. Adventure playgrounds were constructed without traditional playground equipment, often using found objects or other salvaged materials to heighten the desire to explore the physical environment in undirected, free form ways that might appeal to a range of children of different age groups.[12]

By the early 1970s, a heightened concern about playground injury-related lawsuits, codification by organizations such as the National Recreation Association (NRA) and the Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) of playground equipment design safety guidelines that essentially advocated "no-risk" playground environments, and a sharp increase in liability insurance premiums, brought this exciting period of experimentation in playground design to a close.[13] The fate of many midcentury playgrounds was sealed in February 1981 when the CPSC released its "Handbook for Public Playground Safety," the

---

[7] Ibid.
[8] Oakland Public Library, "Creative Playthings Puppet Family," http://www.oaklandlibrary.org/AAMLO/collection/puppets.htm, viewed 7-14-2008.
[9] Solomon, Children's Playgrounds.
[10] Oakland Public Library, http://www.oaklandlibrary.org/AAMLO/collection/puppets.htm.
[11] Oakland Public Library, http://www.oaklandlibrary.org/AAMLO/collection/puppets.htm. A second company called Creative Playthings was founded in 1951 and early on was focused upon wooden swing sets. Today this company provides playground equipment for numerous schools and municipalities across the country. The two "Creative Playthings" companies do not appear to be affiliated, though more research is necessary to verify this assertion. See: http://www.creativeplaythings.com/company/history, viewed 7-14-2007.
[12] Solomon, Children's Playgrounds.
[13] Ibid., and "Early history of Playgrounds in the United States." Found at: http://www.outdoorfunstore.com/playground-history.asp. Accessed on 7-8-2008.

first ever federal guidelines designed to reduce the number and severity of injuries on the public playground.[14] The handbook was published in two volumes, one with technical information and the other in lay language, so that parents, teachers, and recreation leaders could be watchdogs in relation to goings-on in their community and school playgrounds.[15] Installations in publically owned environments such as parks and schools were remodeled, and fantasy and Modernist playground elements destroyed. Standard equipment meeting the criteria of the NRA and CPSC were often installed in place of the removed features. This process of destruction and replacement has made the unaltered pieces at Legg Lake incredibly rare and unique.

Conclusion

The Legg Lake Play Sculptures were Dominguez' first such works in Southern California and are the only remaining examples of his earlier, more geometric, design work. While the traditional playground equipment in the Lakes Area has been replaced over the years, Dominguez's sculptures have remained. Generations of visitors have come to visit their favorite creature. Dominguez's keen understanding of children and fanciful style has accomplished precisely what he promised Supervisor Bonelli: They have beautified the poetic landscape that is a haven from the surrounding urban areas, provided recreation to millions of visitors, and created an atmosphere of decorative and functional fantasy.[16] The pieces, which have maintained a perfect safety record over five decades, are valued by Los Angeles County, and beloved by the communities that enjoy them. Constructed by Benjamin Dominguez, the Legg Lake Play Sculptures are eligible for the California Register of Historical Resources under Criterion 3 for significance in design and workmanship.

[14] Frances Wallach, "Playground safety: the long trail - from the 1940s to the 1990s," National Park and Recreation Group, 1995. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1145/is_n4_v30/ai_16889608/print?tag=artBody;col1 viewed 14 Jul 2008.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Letter to Supervisor Bonelli from Benjamin Dominguez, 8-3-1962.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:
Oral History
Réne Dominguez, 1-15- 2007, Chico, California.
Donna Andress, 7-21-2009, Nelson, Nevada.

El Paso
El Paso Herald Post, "El Paso Youngsters test new park Playground Equipment; Unusual Shapes provide adventure in climbing fun", 4-7-1958
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 9718, Washington Park Bear Pit, 10-2-1956
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 7757, Washington Park Playground, 12-5-1958
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 9489, Washington Park Playground, 12-19-1957
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 8134, Mission Hills Park, 12-29-1957
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 247, Washington Park Playground, 1-22-1958
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 5913, Eight Parks, 7-16-1957:
Clardy Fox, Mary Webb, Mt. View, Mesa Terrace, Memorial, Madeline, Sunset Heights, Alamo
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 1339, Washington Park Playground, 3-6-1958
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 3950, Washington Park Playground, 3-5-1957 El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 8613, Washington Park Playground, 11-12-1957
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 7249, Washington Park Playground, 11-19-1958
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 6370, Washington Park Playground, 10-8-1958
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 7954, Washington Park Playground, 10-15-195
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 6723, Washington Park Playground, 10-24-1958
El Paso, Purchase Order, no. 6063, Washington Park Playground, 9-25-1958

Las Vegas
Las Vegas Sun, "Fantasy Park: Pride of Service League", 10-30-1970
Las Vegas Review, "Mexican Artist Designs a Land of Make Believe Here", 4-10-1959

Beverly Hills
Coldwater Canyon Bridge Letter, Benjamin Dominguez, 8-16-1957
Coldwater Canyon Bridge Letter, Charles W. Reither, 8-19-1957
Coldwater Canyon Bridge Purchase Order, no. 6961, 9-12-1957.

Legg Lake
Contract for Legg Lake (Mother Dragon and Mushrooms), 6-8-1960
Contract for Legg Lake (Octopus, Fish, Starfish, Tripod, Abstract), 8-16-1960

Letters:
Bonelli to Harry Petrie, Civil Service Commission 7-19-1962
Petrie to Dominguez, Concrete Examinations, 7-24-1962
Dominguez to Petrie, Play Sculptures, 8-3-1962
Dominguez to Bonelli, 8-3-1962

Translations:
Independent Star News, Dirk Werkman, "Los Monstruous del Parque Whittier Narrows," 9-30-1962

Bibliography, ctd.

Secondary Sources:

American Public Health Association Committee on Hygiene of Housing. Planning the Neighborhood. Chicago: R.R. Donnelly and Sons, 1948.

Brockman, C. Frank. "Concepts of Recreation." *Recreation*, 52:8 (October 1959), 309.

Burnap, George. "Parks, Their Design Equipment and Use." Prepared for National Recreation Association. Philadelphia: J.B Lippincott Company, 1916.

Butler, George. "Our Space Standards". *Recreation*, 51:1 (January, 1958), 24-26.

California Committee on Planning for Recreation. Park Areas, and Facilities, R.L. Rathfon, Chairman. Guide for Planning Recreation Parks in California.

Caplan, Frank "The Playgrounds of Tomorrow", *Parks and Recreation*, 43:1 (January, 1960), 18-19, 74.

Cranz, Galen. The Politics of Park Design, A History of Urban Parks in America. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982.

Creative Playthings. http://www.creativeplaythings.com/company/history, viewed 07-14- 2007.

"Designs for Play" (anonymous), *Recreation*, 52:4 (April 1959, 130-131).

"Early history of Playgrounds in the United States." Found at: http://www.outdoorfunstore.com/playground-history.asp. Accessed on July 8, 2008. Oakland Public Library.

"Creative Playthings Puppet Family." http://www.oaklandlibrary.org/AAMLO/collection/puppets.htm, viewed 14 Jul 2008.

Light, Patsy Pittman. *Capturing Nature: the Cement Sculpture of Dionicio Rodriguez*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press. 2008.

Mozingo, Joe. "Column One: Exhibit A for River Activists." *LA Times*: 05-26-2001.

Pasadena Star News. "Special Report: The San Gabriel – a river on the edge." 9-27-2000.

Rainey, Ruben M and J.C. Miller. *Modern Public Gardens*. San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2006.

Smith, Stanley. "America's First Play Sculpture at Oakland" *Parks and Recreation*, 35:7 (July 1952), 18-19.

Solomon, Susan G. *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*. Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005.

Wallach, Frances. "Playground safety: the long trail - from the 1940s to the 1990s." National Park and Recreation Group, 1995. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1145/is_n4_v30/ai_16889608/print?tag=artBody;col1 viewed 7-14-2008.

Weir, L.H. "Historical Background of Recreation in America," *Parks and Recreation*, 29:3 (July-August, 1946), 238-243.

Whittier Narrows Visitor Guide, 1999.

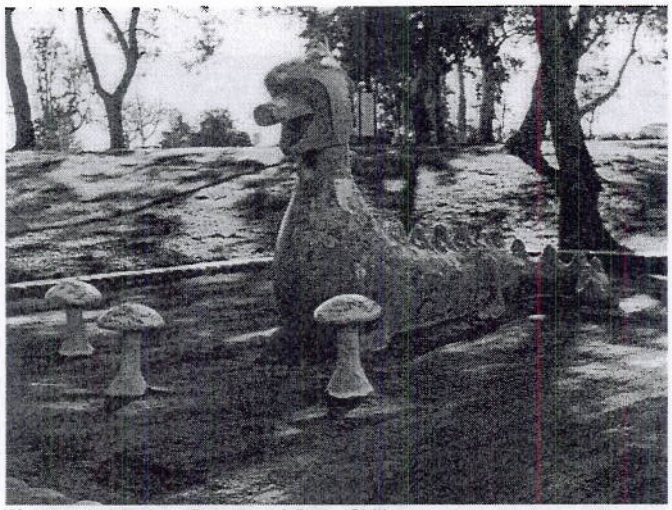


Figure 1: Mother Dragon. View: SW.

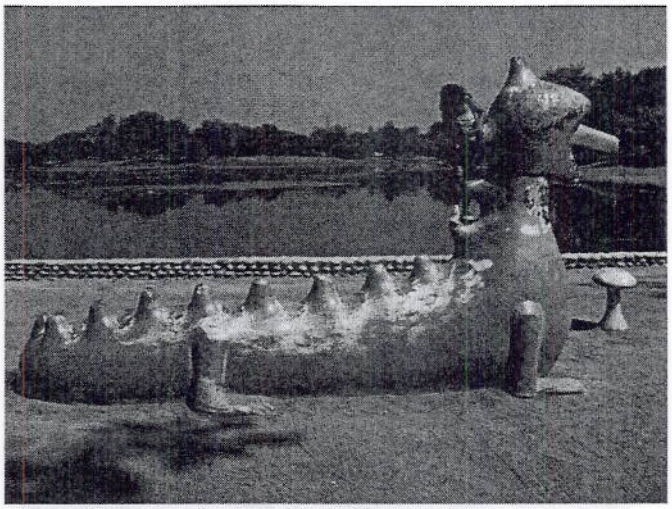


Figure 2: Mother Dragon. View: N

Figure 3: Mother Dragon, face detail. View: W

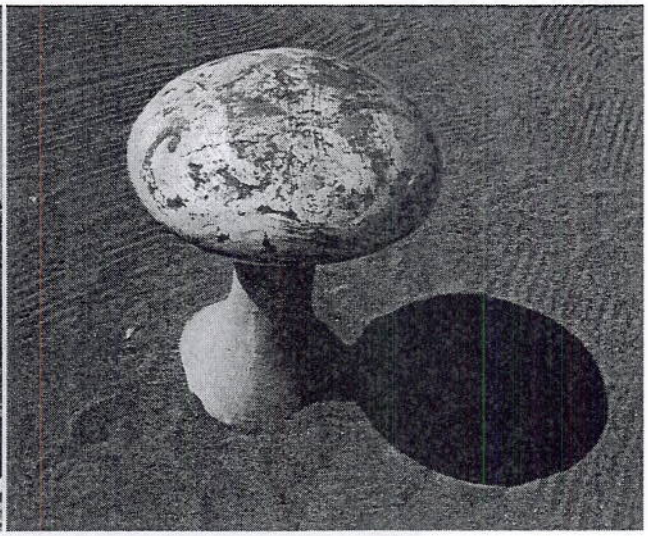


Figure 4: Mother Dragon, Mushroom Detail. View: SW/ downward

All photos on this sheet courtesy ICF International. August, 2008.

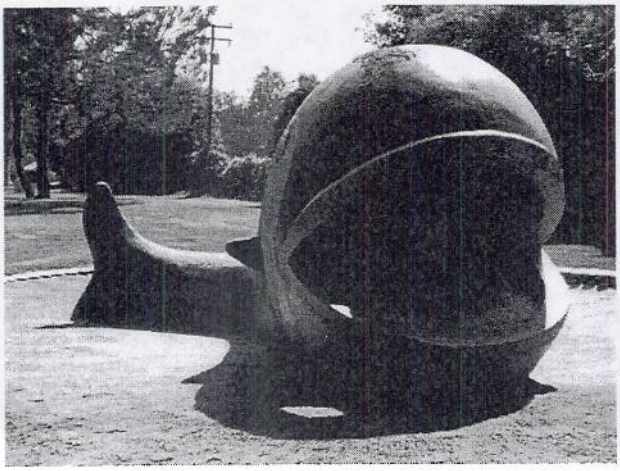


Figure 5: Fish. View: E.

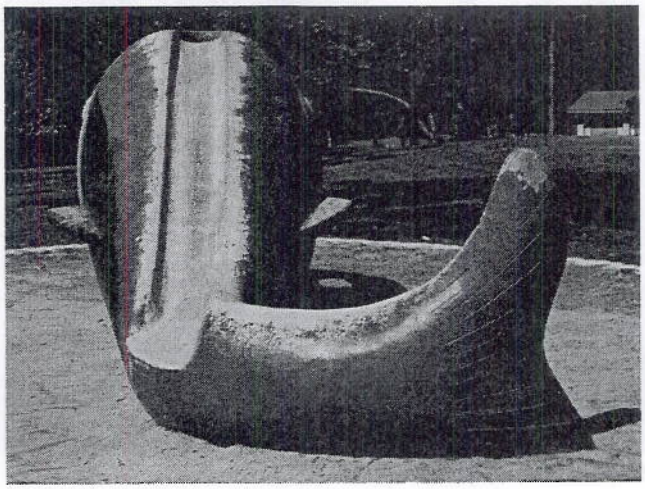


Figure 6: Fish. View: W, NW.

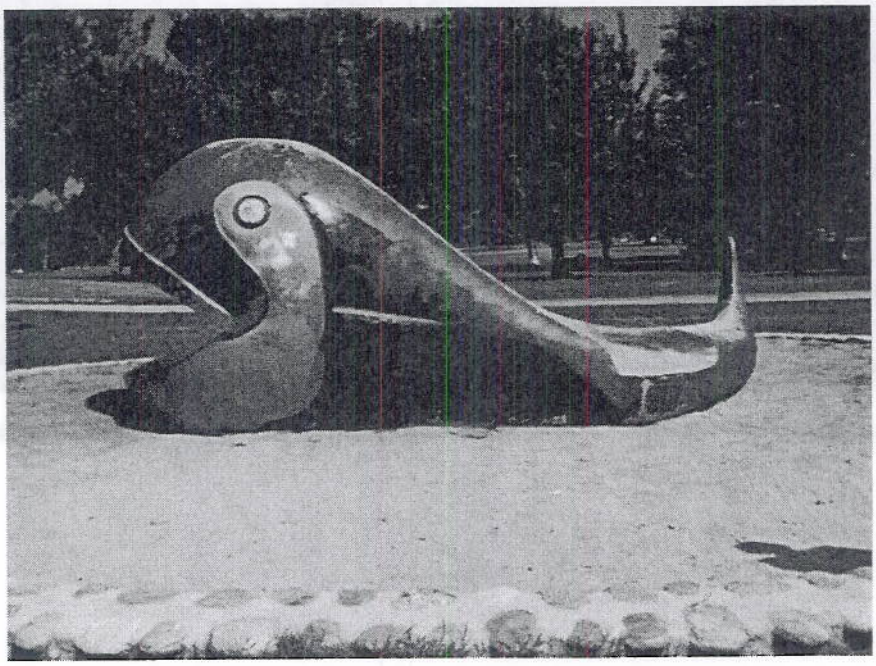


Figure 7: Fish. View: N, NE.

All photos on this sheet Courtesy ICF Jones & Stokes. August, 2008.

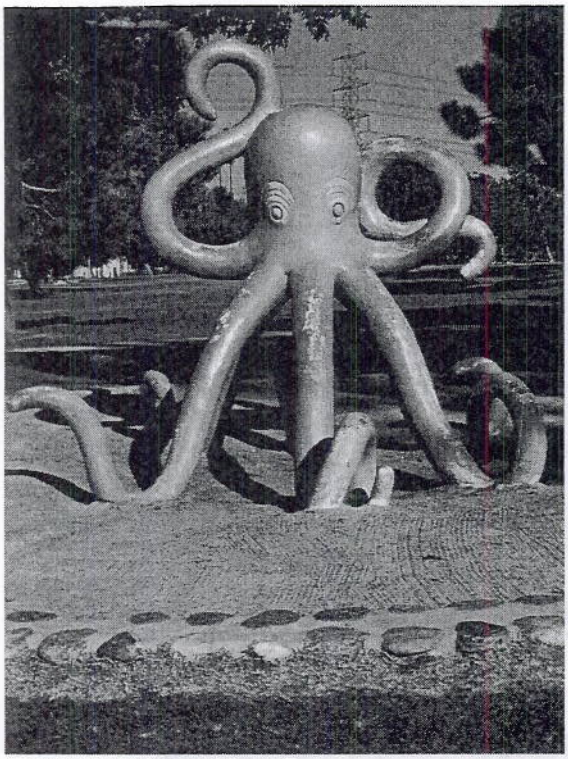


Figure 8: Octopus. View: E.

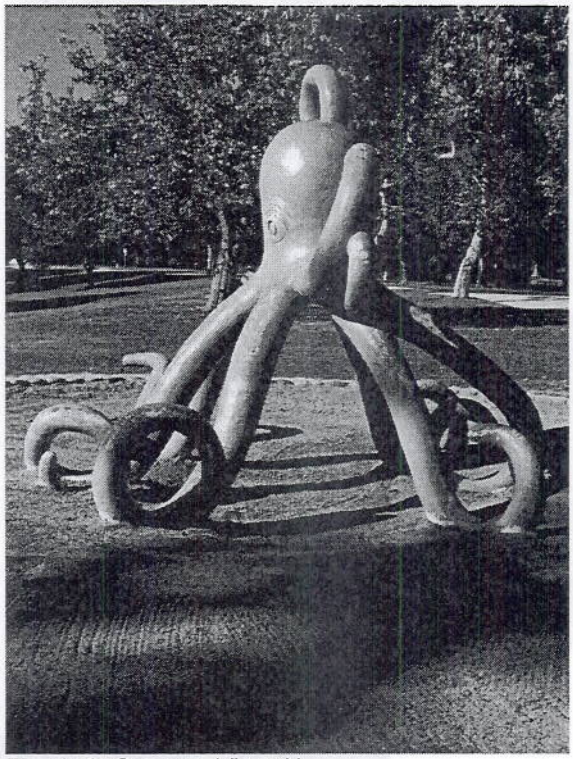


Figure 9: Octopus. View: N.

Figure 10. Octopus. View: NW.

All photos on this sheet courtesy ICF Jones & Stokes. August, 2008.

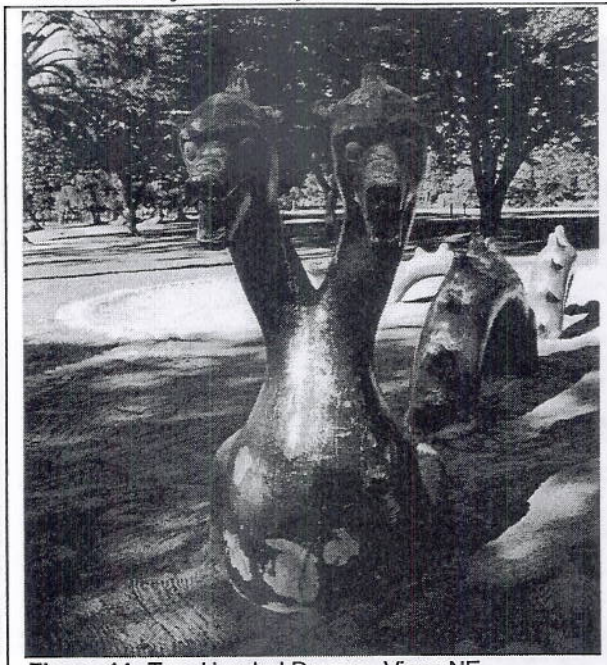


Figure 11: Two-Headed Dragon. View: NE

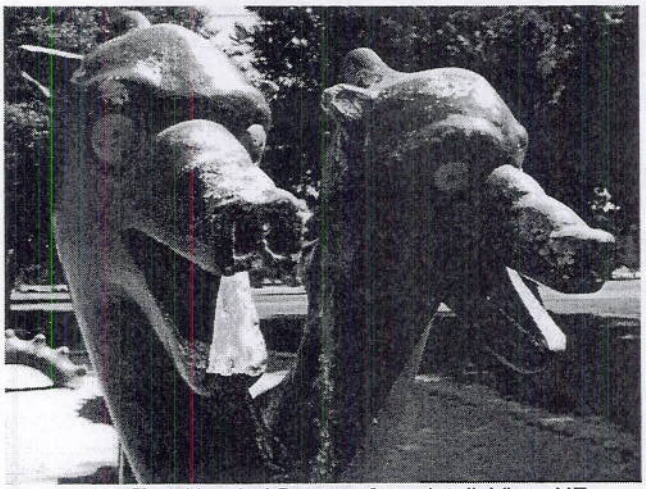


Figure 12: Two-Headed Dragon, face detail. View: NE

Figure 13: Two-Headed Dragon. View: NE

All photos on this sheet courtesy ICF International. November, 2008

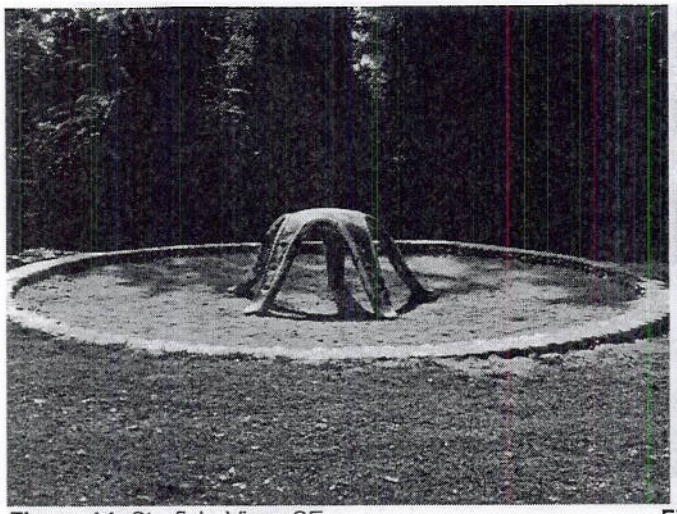


Figure 14: Starfish. View: SE.

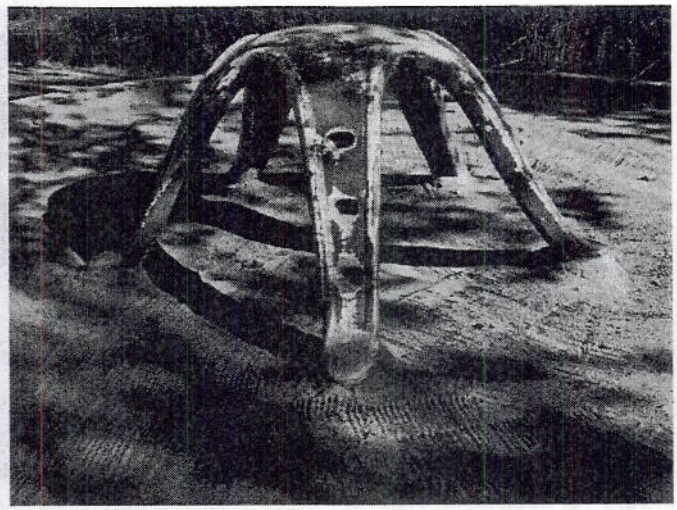


Figure 15: Starfish. View: SE.

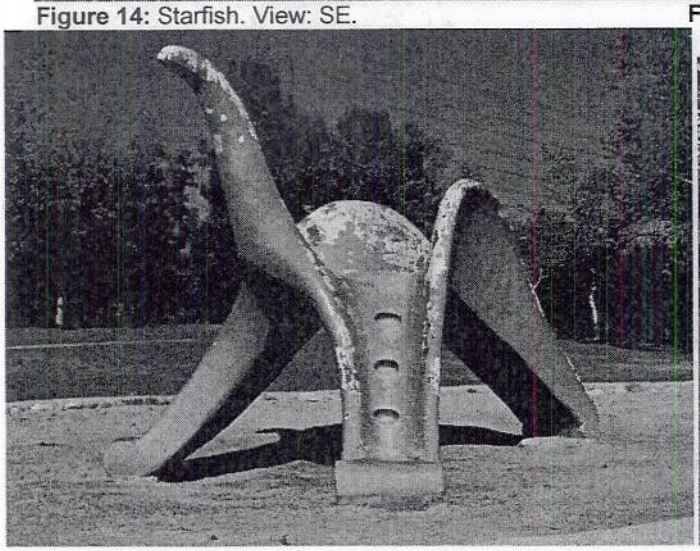


Figure 16: Tripod. View: NE.

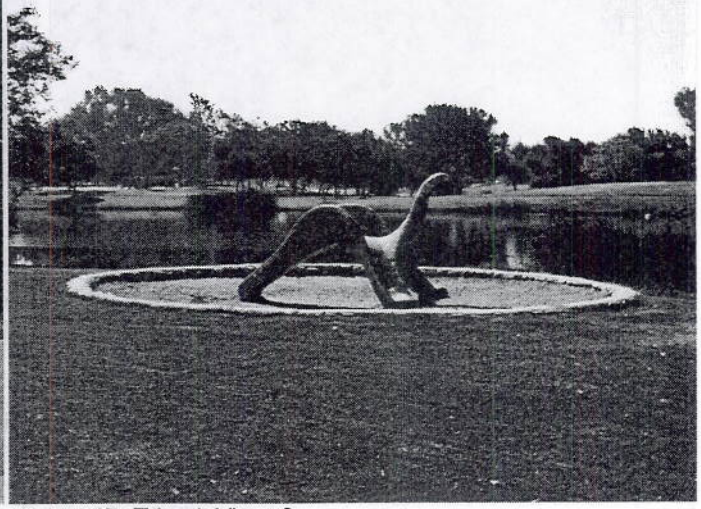


Figure 17: Tripod. View: S.

Figure 18: Sandpit Ring detail at the Starfish. View: SE

Figure 19: Juvenile Forestry Camp plaque in sandpit ring at the Mother Dragon

All photos on this sheet courtesy ICF International. November, 2008.

Figure 18: Legg Lake. View: E, NE.

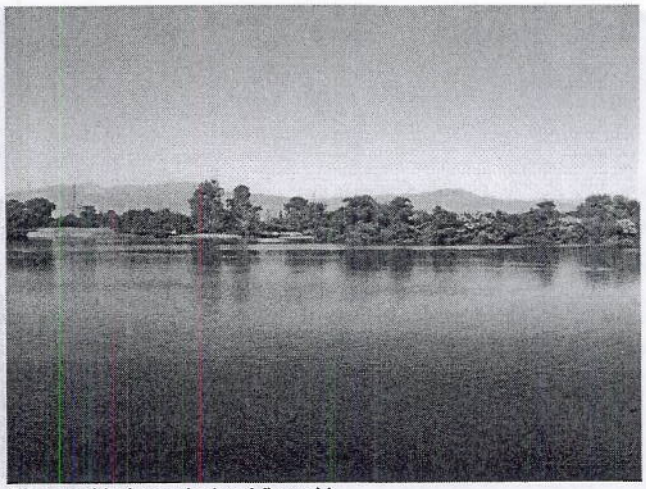


Figure 19: Legg Lake. View: N.

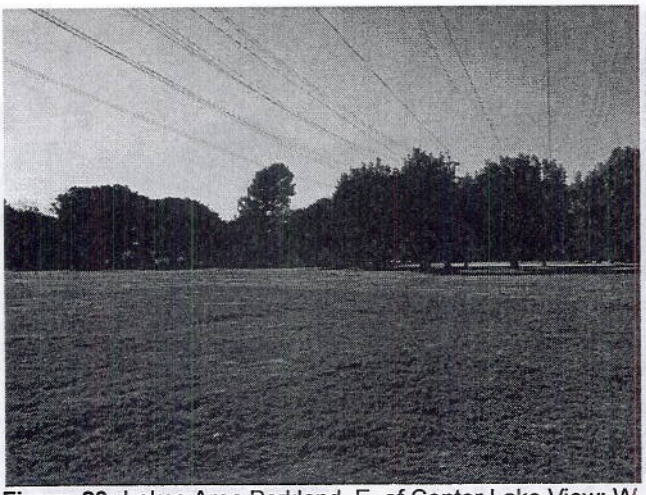


Figure 20: Lakes Area Parkland, E. of Center Lake.View: W

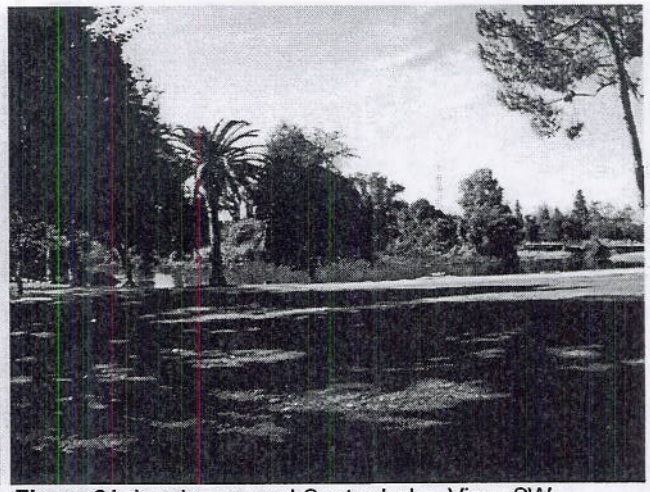


Figure 21: Landscape and Center Lake. View: SW.

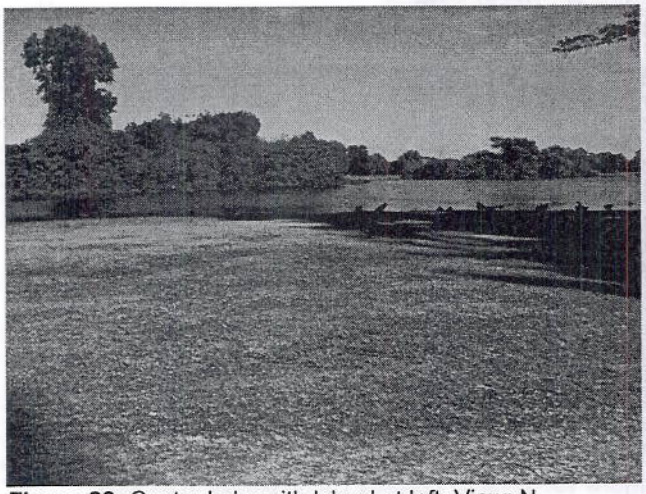


Figure 22: Center Lake with Island at left. View: N.

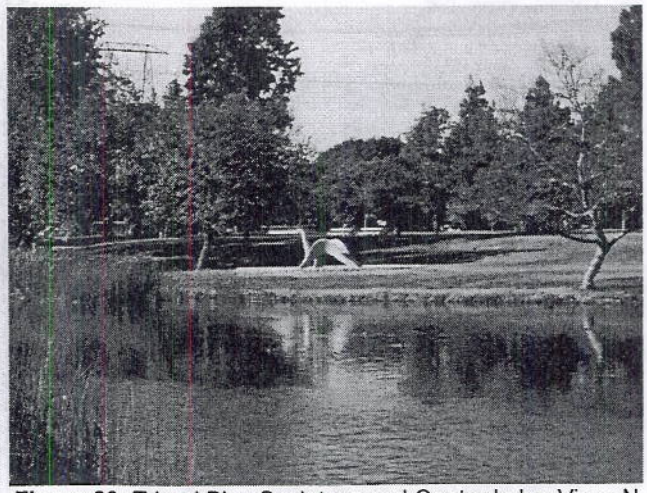


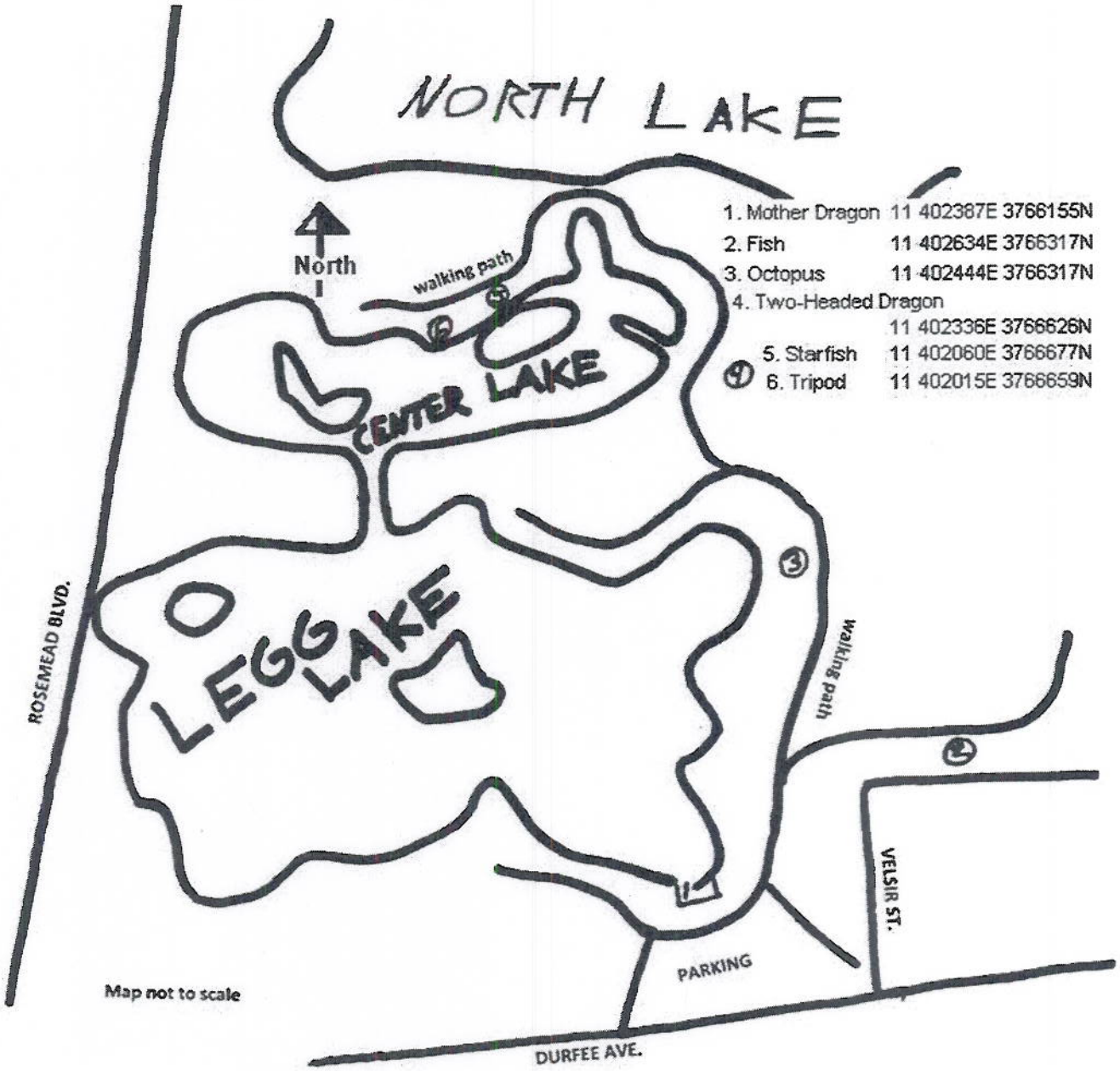
Figure 23: Tripod Play Sculpture and Center Lake. View: N, NW.

All photos on this page courtesy ICF International. November, 2008.

State of California — The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

SKETCH MAP

Primary #
HRI#
Trinomial

Page 21 of 21 *Resource Name or # Legg Lake Play Sculptures

*Drawn By: ICF International Date: January 27, 2010