

# Ethnic passions at play in Denver park

Post 9-20-98 P.1A  
By Patricia Callahan  
Denver Post Urban Affairs Writer

Three tiny pieces of tape and a scrap of white paper — hard to believe they touch such a deep nerve in this northwest Denver neighborhood.

The tape and paper are remnants of a banner that covered up the word "Columbus" on the green metal Columbus Park sign at West 38th Avenue and Osage

## Hispanics object to Columbus name

Street. Over the Mexican Independence Day weekend, someone painted the words "La Raza" on the banner to make the sign read "La Raza Park."

In a neighborhood that has seen as many waves of immigrants as this one has, the name of a park matters to people. And this

park — an unassuming one-block stretch of West 38th Avenue — has been mired in ethnic politics since the 1970s.

The banner set off a new round of angry debate. "It's just something that hurts me from the inside because I know what the Italians went through," said Mickie Lava

Clayton, a north Denver widow who hands out calling cards with "Italian Activist" under her name. "There's a radical fringe that has decided they're going to get the park, and as long as I'm alive, I'm going to fight them."

"My friends say, 'Mickie, when you kick the bucket, who's going to fight for that

Please see **PARK** on 6A

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6A

# Activist vows to defend Columbus Park till death

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park?" And I say, 'I'm going to have myself cremated, and I'm going to have my ashes spread there so I can come up from the dead!'"

Nita Gonzales, a Chicano activist who runs a north Denver alternative school, feels equally passionate about her cause. She says she is in the "early planning stages" of a campaign to change the name to La Raza Park for good.



The Denver Post / Shaun Stanley

The sign at Columbus Park sports a bullet hole. The area is in the sights of activists who want to change the name to La Raza Park.



"Columbus contributed to the rape and pillage and death of millions of indigenous people, and subsequent to him came the next wave of conquest," she said. "It's not about attacking

Italians. Many of our people intermarried with Italians. It is about this one man. Do people want to embrace Hitler?"

In the 1990 census, the population of the two tracts that surround the park was 80 percent Hispanic. While those numbers will not be updated until the census in 2000, many in the neighborhood today say that even more Hispanics have moved there.

It wasn't always that way. Columbus Park was once the heart of Denver's "Little Italy." The Italians, who built Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church blocks from the park, raised thousands of dollars to improve what then was called Navajo Park.

When the name was changed to Columbus Park in the early 1930s, many Italians said it was the first time they felt truly accepted in Denver. Italians walked there every Sunday after mass.

But after World War II, many north Denver Italians began leaving for the suburbs and other parts of the city. While some of their restaurants and stores stayed, the demographics shifted.

Hispanics, who always had lived in the neighborhood, became the dominant ethnic group. The movement to name the park "La Raza" — which literally translates to "the race" but also connotes ethnic pride and political power — grew out of Denver's Chicano movement, said Gonzales, whose father,



The Denver Post / Shaun Stanley

Mickie Lava Clayton, left, in traditional Italian dress, vehemently opposes a push to rename Columbus Park in northwest Denver 'La Raza Park.' Nita Gonzales, right, a Chicano activist, is equally passionate that the name of the explorer be stripped from the park.

Corky, was one of the leaders of the political movement that fought for Chicano rights.

Hispanics blasted what they saw as history's Disneyesque view of Columbus shaking hands with the natives. The park was now theirs, and a park named after someone they saw as a conqueror wouldn't do, Gonzales said.

Gonzales argues that Columbus wasn't even Italian.

This makes Clayton fume. "Christoforo Columbo — with a name like that and born in Genoa, would he be Irish Catholic?" Clayton says, sarcastically. "They're against our Columbus Day parade and then our park. What's next? We have to change our Italian names?"

As years passed the park took on a greater political significance. In June 1981, police in riot gear tear

gassed a crowd of about 120 Hispanics, including children. City law at the time banned any gathering of more than 25 people in a park without a permit.

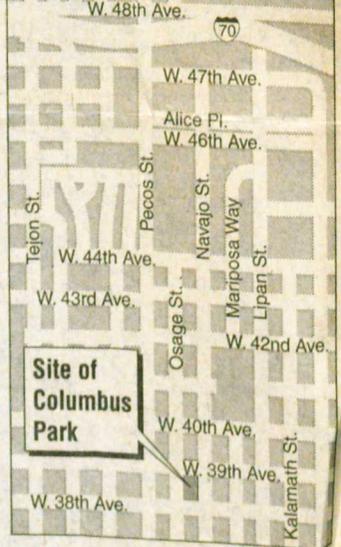
While accounts of what provoked that clash differ, Federico Peña, then a state representative, called the incident "perhaps the most outrageous case of police misconduct our community has experienced during the last 10 years."

Years later, when Peña was in the middle of a mayoral re-election campaign, he announced he would change the name of northeast Denver's Curtis Park to "Mestizo-Curtis Park," a move that was seen as a way to court minority voters. Mestizo is the Spanish word for mixed race.

Pressure mounted to change the name of Columbus Park, too. Denver City Councilwoman Deb-

## Park tug-of-war

Columbus Park, located on a one-block stretch of West 38th Avenue, has been mired in ethnic politics since the 1960s.



The Denver Post

bie Ortega, who is half Italian and half Hispanic, tried to strike a compromise back in 1988. She introduced a law that would have renamed the park Columbus-La Raza Park. She discussed the name change with her mother, the Italian side of the family.

"She thought the recommendation to do the joint name change was a good thing," Ortega says.

But other Italians and some city council members did not. After a heated debate, they shot down the proposal. The council hasn't taken up the issue since then.

The city did build a large band shell in the center of the park with

a small plaque that says "Plaza de la Raza, Place of the People."

It is this plaque that 13-year-old Estrella Garcia points to when asked what she calls the park.

"We call it La Raza Park," she says with pride. "It's our park."

Estrella, who was born and raised in the neighborhood, was playing hooky at the park last week.

There isn't much else to the park — some playground equipment, a bench, a portable toilet and some basketball courts. There is a bullet hole in the Columbus Park sign.

Estrella said she comes there ev-

ery day. At night, she and her friends sometimes play music under the band shell.

When asked about Columbus, Estrella shrugs. The debate over the political significance of the name is lost on her.

"He was just some guy who was born on a ship," she says.

Patricia Callahan profiles the people, places and spirit that make up some of metro Denver's distinct communities, especially the ones in the news. Her e-mail address is Pmcallahan@aol.com.



# Ethnic evolution

P.1

## Fight for new park name reflects a changing city

By JAMES G. WRIGHT  
Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

MAY 1 1988

Pierre Jimenez was fighting mad Monday night, and the Denver City Council knew it.

As the Hispanic leader and others shouted their anger, worried council members requested a police escort from the hall.

The flash point was a narrow council vote to let stand the name of north Denver's Columbus Park, despite the growing Hispanic community's request to call it La Raza Park.

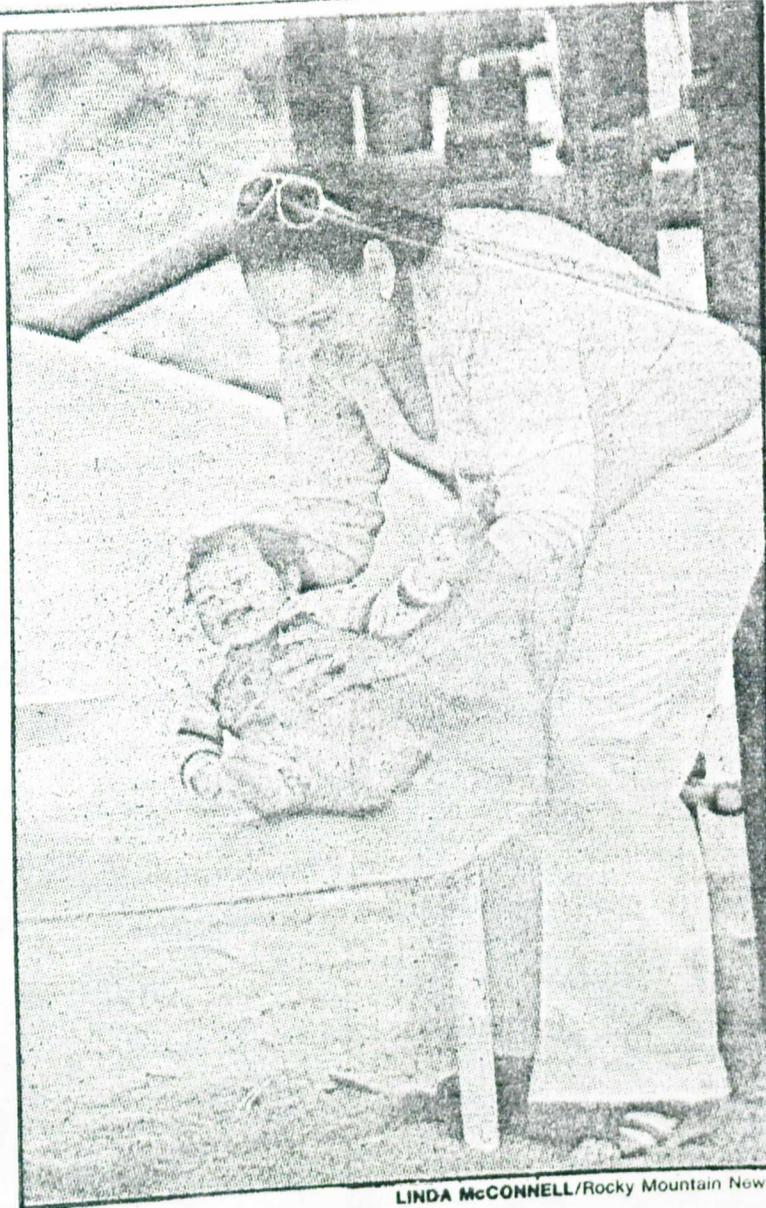
It was a surprisingly ugly confrontation for a simple renaming of a one-block square of parched grass at West 38th Avenue and Osage Street.

But the fight over the park goes much deeper than a dispute over a name. The incident illustrates the growing role of ethnic politics in Denver.

"The cultural makeup of the city is changing," said Tom Morris, chairman of the Denver Parks and Recreation Advisory Board. "The ... incredible emotion is over who controls that neighborhood; it has nothing to do with the name of that park."

The patch of ground has become a symbol of things that far outweigh its importance as a park.

Columbus Park is a fundamental piece of history for the Italian-American community. Once the center of "Little Italy," it is one of the last reminders of a



LINDA McCONNELL/Rocky Mountain News

Olivia Silva plays with granddaughter Samantha Maxwell, 1, on the slide at north Denver's Columbus Park.

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# Renaming park a symbol to Hispanics

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time when all Denver Italians lived and worked in one neighborhood.

La Raza Park — The Race Park — is equally hallowed ground to the Hispanics who now dominate the neighborhood north of West Colfax Avenue and west of Interstate 25. They perceive the park as a symbol of their rise to political power in the neighborhood of rundown row-houses and brick bungalows.

Renaming city facilities is a recent development in Denver politics. In the past, only numbered streets and unnamed parks were rededicated. That changed in 1986, when Mayor Federico Peña, in the heat of a re-election campaign, offered to change the name of Curtis Park to Mestizo-Curtis Park. The offer reflects the growing power of minority voters.

Denver was 6% Hispanic in 1950. Today, Hispanics account for 19% of all city residents. The election of Peña and passage of laws that reserve 30% of all city construction jobs for minority-owned firms demonstrate Hispanics' growing political clout.

**BUT HISPANIC** activists say change has come too slowly. They prevent their symbolic effort to create La Raza Park, they say.

"We're dealing with political machinery that doesn't want to admit that it no longer has a power base here," said Nita Gonzales, director of Servicio de la Raza, a north Denver organization involved in the park renaming drive.

Councilwoman Ramona Martinez echoed those thoughts at Monday's hearings and said it's time Hispanics exercise their rights.

"To the young people out in the audience . . . when you're 18, register to vote, and when you're 25 and qualified for any political office, run for it and run for it to win," Martinez said. "That's how changes in this city are going to be made."

Councilman Robert Crider, who led opposition to the name change, said, "If they want to change the political system, they can do that."

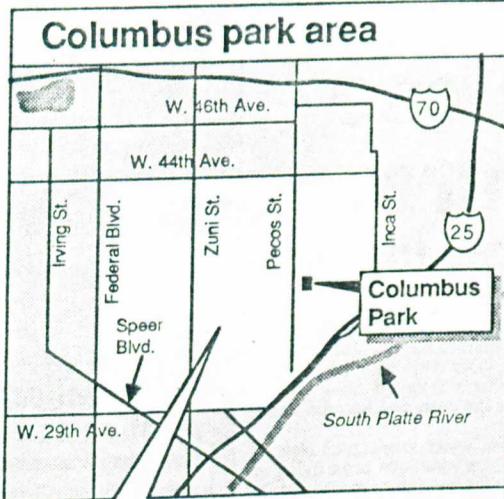
"Everything changes, and in another 20 years, it'll be another group of people," Crider said. "We named the park to honor someone. That shouldn't change simply because a different ethnic group moved into the neighborhood."

Italian-Americans living near Columbus Park are reluctant to discuss the issue for fear of increasing ethnic tension.

"To me, a name is a name. I can't see what the problem is," said the Rev. Joseph Carbone, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church at West 36th Avenue and Navajo Street. "It (the neighborhood) has come from Irish to Italian to Mexican, so what's the difference? It may change to something else."

At Patsy's Inn Italian Restaurant, where homemade spaghetti has been on the menu for three generations, a waitress born and raised in Little Italy simply shrugged when asked about the controversy over the nearby park.

"Things have changed," she said before turning to change a red-checkered table cloth.



	1960	1970	1980
Population of census tract	19,000	18,000	16,000
Italian ancestry	12.2%	8.1%	5.7%
Spanish surname	20.6%	44.6%	60.3%

Denver's changing racial makeup			
	1960	1970	1980
Hispanics	8.7%	16.8%	18.8%, or 92,348
Blacks	7.1%	9.1%	12%, or 59,252
Total Denver population			492,365

SAM WESTBROOK/Rocky Mountain News

They always have. Folklore holds that an Indian village was located on the bluff above the South Platte River Valley before Irish railroad workers settled in the area. In 1881, the immigrants put their stamp on the neighborhood by building St. Patrick Catholic Church at 3325 Pecos St.

Italian immigrants arrived at the turn of the century, drawn to the smaller, inexpensive homes in the area left behind when the newly affluent Irish moved to bigger homes.

**THE ITALIANS** built Mount Carmel only five blocks from St. Patrick and, in 1931, raised \$7,500 to improve Navajo Park at West 38th Avenue and Osage Street. They renamed it Columbus Park.

North Denver remained an Italian-American enclave until after World War II, when younger, second- and third-generation Italian-Americans moved to new developments in Arvada and Wheat Ridge.

"The immigration pattern has always been north and west," said a native of the area, Sen. Dennis Gallagher, D-Denver. "As you made it, you moved farther west. When you hit Tejon Street, you were almost in America."

Although Hispanics built Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in 1936, three blocks from Mount Carmel, they did not become a force in the area until after World War II, when the more affluent Italian-Americans moved to the suburbs.

By 1950, 8% of all neighborhood residents said they were Italian-born, but 13% had Spanish surnames.

In 1980, only 5.7% of the people in the area reported Italian ancestry, while 60.3% had Spanish surnames.

Today, worshippers at Mount Carmel commute to Sunday services. Few of the men who attend Potenza Hall lodge meetings live within walking distance of the Italian-American club near Columbus Park.

**BY SOME** estimates, the neighborhood is now 85% Hispanic.

Residents say the transition was gradual. Only in the last 20 years has Columbus Park become more a symbol than a place to swim or play ball.

"This is the heart of north Denver as far as Chicanos are concerned," said Jimenez, president of Hispanics of Colorado.

Hispanic activists like to tell of the day in 1970 when they "liberated" the park, staging a short-lived occupation after ejecting city workers they accused of inadequately maintaining the pool.

La Raza Park was born that day. Not all residents of the area thought the change was for the better.

"It wasn't a family park after that, it was more of a symbol," said Becky Picaso, a Hispanic who grew up near the park but has moved.

For the next 15 years, Columbus Park was a tear-gas polluted battle zone where Hispanic youths with rocks and bottles squared off with platoons of shotgun-toting police.

The pool at Columbus Park was demolished in 1983, when a new facility opened nearby. Residents of the area say the loss took the heart out of their community. They have since raised money on their own and secured community-development grants to revitalize the park.

They wanted to rename it La Raza Park when it was done. During a recent visit to the park, Jimenez gestured to a sign reading, "Columbus Park . . . provided for your enjoyment."

"That sign represents everything that's intolerable, that's unjust and that's unfair," Jimenez said. "As far as we're concerned, this is La Raza Park. Their sign won't be there."

Denver Parks Columbus

## ART &amp; ARCHITECTURE

# Smaller parks inspire pride



Mary Chandler

Architecture

Denver residents love their parks — witness crowded public living rooms like City Park and Washington Park.

But size isn't everything. The little neighborhood parks are more than welcome breathing spaces that clear out residential crowding or air out busy boulevards. These parks mean victory for a community: The city has spent money and paid attention, and sometimes that's a rare thing.

Take the revitalization of Columbus/La Raza Park and the creation of Northeast Denver Community Park.

Columbus/La Raza is an old park, a place that once served a predominantly Italian population. Demographics change: according to the city's planning department, more than 60% of the neighborhood's residents are now of Hispanic heritage. And although attempts to change the name of the park to La Raza — the people — have not made official headway, that's the name people in the community use when they talk about the square-block park at East 38th Avenue and Navajo Street.

Earlier this month, though, the term took on an official status when a pyramid and courtyard were dedicated at Columbus Park. The old swimming pool is gone, and now Plaza de la Raza offers a stage for performances, shelter, benches and other seating, all while hearkening back to the tradi-

tional pyramid form in Aztec architecture.

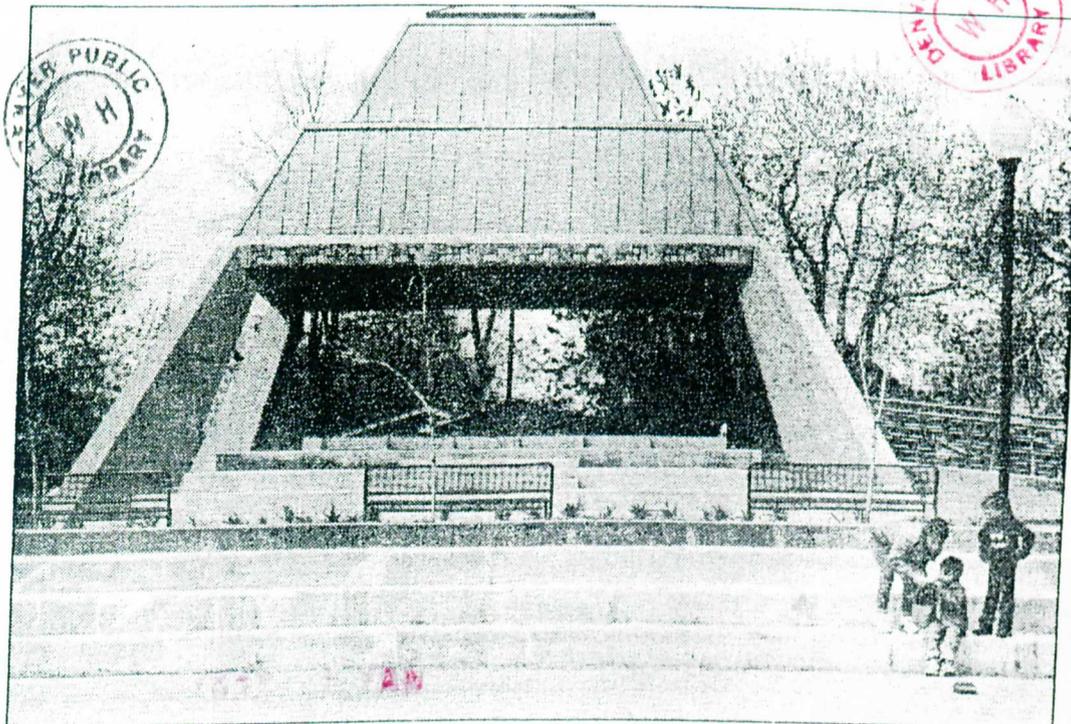
Designed by architect Steve Wagley, who has since moved from Denver, the central structure is drawn from the design of a *kiosko*, the ceremonial area at the top of a pyramid. Area merchants, community groups and residents, especially young people, had a say in the design, looking for a way to make heritage something that can be seen and touched.

People wanted to have something solid, as Denver senior planner B.J. Brooks explained it, and they do: The pyramid is a solid piece, and if it does not overwhelm the park, it gives it texture. That the park is surrounded by homes — the proverbial eyes on the street — lends an additional sensibility. When you walk through that park, you feel it: strength.

All the way across town, Northeast Denver Community Park offers a long, thin bandage of green west of Colorado Boulevard and south of Martin Luther King Boulevard.

For years, the land west of Colorado between 29th Avenue and 32nd Avenue (now MLK) was part of Sportland Recreation Center; parks planner/architect Paul Foster remembers picking up balls from a driving range on this site as a kid. In the '50s, the land was set aside for a possible widening of Colorado Boulevard, and commercial establishments (from skate-board park to fast food restaurants) have wanted to build there.

But in 1977, a neighborhood plan for the Clayton-Skyland area suggested a park, something the residents wholeheartedly bought.



Debra Reingold, Rocky Mountain News

A pyramid and courtyard in Columbus Park provide a stage, shelter and benches.

Time doesn't fly in the city planning business, and it was just last month that the park was dedicated. The area has changed: the new Shorter AME Church is blooming to the west, and housing for the elderly exists just south of that. The park's trees are infants, and landscaping is not completed. This is not a shady glade, but it's a far cry from the old impression.

A curved walkway through the park and the openness of green space get a particularly telling boost from benches by artist Carolyn Braaksma. The \$6,700 commission, parks money filtered through the city's public art program, inspired Braaksma to use area residents for casts of hands on the benches — a community-based idea that goes beyond any

usual definition.

**Endpiece:** The Urban Design Forum's Art Party Saturday offers a day in which the art- and architectural-minded can do an ornamental rubbing of a building detail, create a chalk mural, watch sculpture demonstrations (by Carolyn Braaksma, Mark A. Lunning and Kevin Robb) and participate in a scavenger hunt of downtown art objects. Registration and activities begin at 9 a.m., at the Market Street Plaza on the 16th Street Mall. Fees are attached: \$5 for the architectural rubbing, \$7 for the scavenger hunt, \$50 to work on the mural (that includes materials). Call 534-6161, ext. 126, for information.

"The Academic Tradition in Colorado — The Architectural

Drawings of Thomas MacLaren" go on view June 4 in the special collections room of Norlin Library at the University of Colorado in Boulder. MacLaren, who was born in Scotland in 1863, moved to Colorado for health reasons. He practiced in Colorado Springs for 35 years, leaving behind the Springs' City Hall, Municipal Auditorium and Grace Episcopal Church, as well as the Carnegie Library and First Congregational Church in Boulder. The drawings on view at Norlin include works in pencil, pen and ink, and watercolor, and come from MacLaren's architectural portfolios in the CU special collections. Hours are 9 a.m.-noon and 2-5 p.m. Monday through Friday, through Sept. 7. Information: 492-6144.

# 'Pyramid' a focal point for Hispanics

Park's Plaza de la Raza and its centerpiece to be dedicated tomorrow

By Matthew Soergel

P. 81

Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

The park still bears the name of an Italian explorer, but its heart belongs to the Hispanic community it now serves.

That will be shown tomorrow, Cinco de Mayo, at the dedication of Plaza de la Raza in north Denver's Columbus Park.

The plaza's centerpiece is a 27-foot pyramidlike structure modeled after a *kiosko*, a ceremonial area found on the top of Mexico's ancient Aztec pyramids.

The pyramid now dominates the 1-square-block park on 38th Avenue between Osage and Navajo streets.

Official dedication will be at 2 p.m. tomorrow during a festival featuring food, traditional music, dance, carnival rides and a low-rider car competition. The events will run from noon to 5 p.m.

"It was an incredible amount of effort and took a long time to finish," said Dick Gannon, a landscape architect with the city parks department. "But it was fun. It was a real neighborhood, grass-roots effort."

The *kiosko*, a cooperative effort between the city's planning and parks departments, neighborhood and business groups, cost about \$350,000 to build. It's part of \$7 million invested in the neighborhood by the city, non-profit and private investors, according to B.J. Brooks, a senior planner with the city. It took five years from planning to dedication.

The pyramid is made of rose-colored



MAY 4 1990

Debra Reingold/Rocky Mountain News

Neighborhood children play around Plaza de la Raza, or "the pyramid," in North Denver's Columbus Park.



## The pyramid is made of rose-colored concrete with a metal roof and skylights.

concrete with a metal roof and skylights. It's built to accommodate concerts and dances.

Donna Picaso of Servicios de la Raza, a private, non-profit social services agency in the neighborhood, said the park has become a focal point for Denver's Hispanic community.

The structure is called Plaza de la Raza, but most people in the neighborhood call it "the pyramid," Picaso said.

It's come to symbolize the revitalization of the area, she said: "The whole communi-

ty has been involved in it. It's really five years of community development."

Picaso said there is still resentment over a Denver City Council decision to turn down a proposal to change the name of the park, which was once the center of "Little Italy," to La Raza-Columbus Park. *La raza* means "the people" in Spanish.

"In the area right now we're basically Mexican and Hispanic," she said. "We've claimed the park and we've done the redevelopment. We should be able to name it."