

Whose People's Park?

By Sarah Doggett

Abstract:

In 1969, citizen activists took control of a vacant lot owned by the University of California Berkeley and began developing it as a public park where activists could organize and protest, known as People's Park. Several weeks after its creation, Governor Reagan sent police to clear the park; students and local citizens protested this invasion. The conflict escalated into violence, including the use of shotguns with buckshot by the police, and led to the death of one student and many more injuries. Eventually, the bloodshed ended, and the park was rebuilt. While People's Park remains as a legacy of the 1960s Free Speech Movement, there is still conflict over its presence and purpose. The park currently serves as a sanctuary for Berkeley's homeless population. Because the park is still owned by the University, there have been several attempts to develop the land into student housing. Community outrage has stopped all attempts so far. This paper will seek to answer the following question: what is the source of the controversy over People's Park and what should be done with it?



Figure 1: Park activists do not believe the University legally owns People's Park (Source: Taylor, 2017)

Executive Summary

In 1969, citizen activists took control of a vacant lot owned by the University of California Berkeley and began developing it as a public park where activists could organize and protest, known as People's Park. Several weeks after its creation, Governor Reagan sent police to clear the park; students and local citizens protested this invasion. The conflict escalated into violence, including the use of shotguns with buckshot by the police, and led to the death of one student and many more injuries. While People's Park remains as a legacy of the 1960s Free Speech Movement, there is still conflict over its presence and purpose. The park currently serves as a sanctuary for Berkeley's homeless population. Because the park is still owned by the University, there have been several attempts to develop the land into student recreation and/or housing. Community outrage has stopped all attempts so far. This paper will seek to answer the following question: what is the source of the controversy over People's Park and what should be done with it?

This paper is addressed to the student body of University of California, Berkeley. Although People's Park still plays an important role in University policy, students are largely unaware of its rich history and the conflicts over the park that continue to this day. People's Park offers opportunities to address the housing crisis, but it also provides resources to the homeless and poor of Berkeley, including students. Additionally, the University has fruitlessly poured money and resources into People's Park in attempts to regain absolute control over the land. It is likely that the University will do this again, even though this money could be put to far more constructive uses, such as lowering tuition. It is important that students understand People's Park and the power they have to influence the University's actions toward it.

The university and the park activists have conflicting narratives of the history of People's Park. The University sees People's Park as their legally owned property, place where they generously allow the public to use. Park activists believe that the University abused eminent domain to obtain the land and therefore has no legal claim to the land.

The university and the park activists also have conflicting definitions of public space. To the park activists, public space is representational space – that is, space that is appropriated and lived in, politicized at its core, space where disorder is tolerated in the name of free and unmediated interaction. To the university, public space is a representation of space – planned, controlled, and ordered space. To them, users of public space should be made comfortable and safe; “they should not be driven away by unsightly homeless people or unsolicited political activity.”¹

People's Park began as space that was appropriated, that was taken, and the University has been trying to reimpose control over it ever since (at first by trying to eliminate it, later by attempting it to turn it into an orderly planned park, now by attempting to build student housing on it). This is the source of the constant, occasionally violent, conflict over People's Park.

Although activists and the university fundamentally disagree about the purpose of People's Park, both want to see the park improved. There are areas of common ground for this. For example, both groups want more people to use the park and believe this can be attained by programing activities that appeal to a wide range of the public. In 2007, the university hired the MKThink company to draft a

¹ Mitchell, “The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy.”

redevelopment plan for People's Park. While this plan never made it past the draft stage, possibly because of the recession, park activists had the opportunity to make detailed comments of the published draft. A copy of the draft plan can be found on the People's Park website, with the comments of an anonymous park activist on it. The activist responded to MKThink's proposal by writing:

*"There are many good ideas and an opportunity to actually improve the park in ways that most will agree upon. But it requires getting together different people and finding the actual points of consensus. To forcibly implement changes that "shoo away undesirables" in order to make the park a "park for all people" is not a recipe for peace. We must find ways to truly be together and create peace, health, and beauty."*²

To resolve the question of People's Park, the university needs to reach out to current park users and the surrounding community and listen to what they want from the park. Imposing its top down will on the park will only lead to further conflict.

² MKThink, "People's Park: Assessment and Planning Study."

Introduction - What is People's Park?

People's Park represents many things to many different people. To some, People's Park is merely a 2.8-acre public park, located three blocks south of the University of California, Berkeley (Fig. 2). To others, the park is a monument to the cultural and political struggles of the 1960s.³ To still others, "the park is a problem, visited by too many homeless people."⁴ Others simply see it as "a place to lie down and sleep when you're tired."⁵

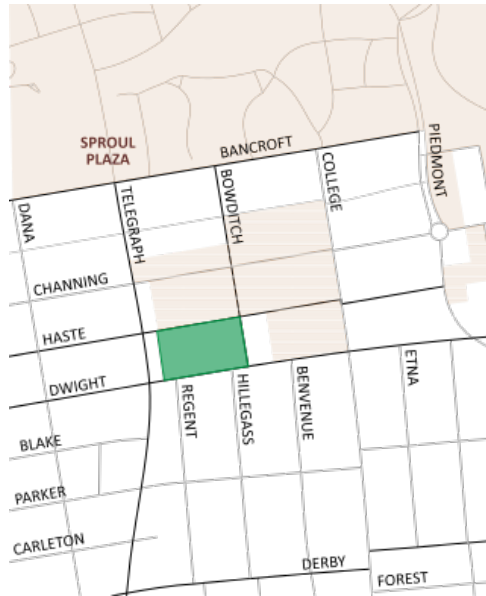


Figure 2: People's Park is shown in green, while the UCB is shown in light brown. (from Wikipedia, People's Park)

The park was created in 1969 by citizen activists who seized control of a vacant lot owned by the University of California, Berkeley (UCB). They developed the land as a public park where activists could organize, children could play, and people could be themselves. The park activists wanted "to create a user-controlled park in the midst of a highly urbanized area that would become a haven for those squeezed out by a fully regulated urban environment."⁶ The development of People's Park was met with strong, sometimes violent, resistance. Only weeks after its creation, UCB fenced in the lot and destroyed much of the park infrastructure. When armed police were sent in by the state government to suppress the subsequent protests, the activists fought back leading to the events of 'Bloody Thursday.' While the fences would stay up until 1972, the bloodshed of that day ensured that activists would never forget People's Park. Since the fences were removed, UCB has allowed park development to continue although it often removes park infrastructure without consulting activists and announces unsolicited plans for the park's "imminent 'improvement.'"⁷ Frequently, the "university's desire to exert top-down control" collides with the park activists' "desire to develop the park as they [see] fit"; these conflicts have led to violence on several occasions.⁸

This paper will first explore how the development of People's Park relates to concepts of public space. Then the paper will describe the history of People's Park and how it has led to the park that exists today. Finally, the paper will summarize key findings and make recommendations for the future development of People's Park.

³ Compost, *People's Park*.

⁴ Compost.

⁵ Mitchell, "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy."

⁶ Mitchell.

⁷ Mitchell.

⁸ Compost, *People's Park*.

What is public space?

According to Don Mitchell, an expert on public space, there are two contrasting ideals of public space. The first is the ideal of *representational space* – this is space that is appropriated by the public, lived in and defined by its use.⁹ This type of public space is a place “for oppositional political activity and unmediated interaction” where disorder is tolerated in the name of free and unmediated interaction.¹⁰ This is the ideal of public space that the park activists believe in.

However, the university believes in the other ideal of public space, *representation of space*, which is planned, controlled and ordered.¹¹ This type of public space is a place “for recreation and entertainment, subject to use by an appropriate public that was allowed in,” where users should be made comfortable and safe; “they should not be driven away by unsightly homeless people or unsolicited political activity.”¹²

Although public space typically begins as a *representation of space* and only becomes *representational space* after a group seizes control of it, People’s Park began as space that was appropriated and taken. The University has been trying to reimpose control over it ever since (at first by trying to eliminate it, later by attempting it to turn it into an orderly planned park, now by attempting to build student housing on it). This is the source of the constant, occasionally violent, conflict over People’s Park.



Figure 3: Houses on Haste Street, 1968 (Source: Compost, 2009)



Figure 4: The Vacant Lot (Source: Compost, 2009)

History of People’s Park (1950-2017)

Before 1967, the block between Bowditch, Telegraph, Dwight, and Haste was filled with houses, old but well-constructed, which were mostly occupied by university students and professors (Fig. 3).¹³ Since the UCB regents had wanted to clear the block and replace it with dorms or athletic fields. Several park activists have questioned the university’s motives, believing that “it was hostility to the hippies rather than the urgent need for playing fields which motivated the University’s action.”¹⁴ Allegedly, the “minutes of the meetings between university officials in the 1950s are living proof that the poetry, the music, the ‘radical’ sexuality were terrifying to officials” and a state assemblyman urged,

⁹ Mitchell, “The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy.”

¹⁰ Mitchell.

¹¹ Mitchell.

¹² Mitchell.

¹³ Asimov, “UC Berkeley Ponders People’s Park for Housing in Controversial Move.”

¹⁴ Compost, *People’s Park*.

the lot instead.²¹ According to Van der Ryn, everyone believed that the “pressing recreational demands” that the University had cited to justify their decision to build a soccer field were merely “an invented rationale” to halt park development.²²

The UCB Chancellor directed Van der Ryn “to negotiate with the park people to accept the university’s conditions, which included a ‘plan’ for the area, the cessation of all work, and the appearance of a representative committee to speak for the park builders.”²³ Van der Ryn found that park activists were reluctant to negotiate with the university, especially through a committee; one activist told him that “we’re not going to play their power game... It blows the establishment’s minds when we don’t act the way they expect us to... Our real power is that we’re everywhere.”²⁴ Nevertheless, the liberal professors and other “respectable” park supporters, including Van der Ryn and Dean Wheaton of the College of Environmental Design, attempted to resolve the dispute in a traditional manner. They planned to create a “People’s Park Corporation” that would lease the park from UCB and supervise the spontaneous design process; this corporation would be managed by a balanced committee of establishment, professional, and community representatives, headed by professional landscape architect Jon Read who had been involved in the creation of People’s Park.²⁵ This plan did not receive support from the majority of park activists. One of the activist leaders, Mike Delacour told Jon Read, “this is bullshit. We risked our lives for that park and no one in this room has. If you walk down to the park and say you’re President, no one’s going to listen to you anymore.”²⁶ While Delacour welcomed the professors and liberal supporters to join the movement, “he was not willing to accept the old political technique of selecting an acceptable committee.”²⁷



Figure 7: No Trespassing (Source: <http://www.peoplespark.org/69gall3.html>)

²¹ Van der Ryn.

²² Van der Ryn.

²³ Van der Ryn.

²⁴ Van der Ryn.

²⁵ Van der Ryn.

²⁶ Van der Ryn.

²⁷ Van der Ryn.



Figure 8: Cops enjoy People's Park (Source: Copeland 1969)



Figure 9: Cop removing plant from People's park (Source: Copeland 1969)



Figure 10: The fence goes up (Source: <http://www.peoplespark.org/69gall3.html>)

Van der Ryn believes that “a key factor leading to the park crisis was the Chancellor’s demand for a committee which could not be produced instantly by the Park people.”²⁸ The university was unable to understand the culture of user development in People’s Park because of their “exclusive reliance on old forms of hierarchical organization... [including] the use of closed planning processes that do not involve consumers in significant decisions.”²⁹ The park activists valued individual participation over representative government and did not want to be

“drawn into the routines of campus planning” where they would become another cog in its bureaucratic machine.³⁰ The university expected the park builders to behave “like young executives...electing a committee and settling down to protracted negotiations with the administration.”³¹ When this failed to happen, the establishment did not know what to do next.

Governor Reagan stepped into this void and ordered the Chancellor to shut down the park. Property, including newly built playground structures, were removed from the park and the lot was fenced in (Fig 7, 8, 9, and 10). On May 15, 1969, hundreds of police dressed in riot gear occupied the park.³² Later that day, student body president Dan Siegel took control of a previously scheduled rally at Sproul Plaza and told the crowd to “Go and take back the Park.”³³ According to the UCPD’s account of events, “two thousand persons marched to the Park and... several hundred protesters assaulted the police with bricks, rocks and bottles from the ground and roof tops.”³⁴ The police used tear gas and shotguns loaded with birdshot to fend off the protestors (Fig. 11). Park activists claim that the police also fired

²⁸ Van der Ryn.

²⁹ Van der Ryn.

³⁰ Van der Ryn.

³¹ Van der Ryn.

³² “History – People’s Park.”

³³ “History of People’s Park | Police Department (UCPD).”

³⁴ “History of People’s Park | Police Department (UCPD).”



Figure 11: Fighting near People's Park (Source: History - Peoples Park)

lethal buckshot, which resulted in the death of James Rector.³⁵ Rector became a martyr to many park advocates, with some calling him an "innocent bystander" although the police account claims that prior to being shot, Rector had been "throwing metal rebar down on the police."³⁶

The day became known as Bloody Thursday. In addition to the death of Rector, one man was blinded, and 150 people were wounded with 40 needing hospitalization.³⁷ Governor Regan sent the National Guard in to reinforce the police. Soldiers occupied Berkeley for the seventeen days, armed with guns and bayonets.³⁸ Marital law was imposed on the city: a curfew was imposed, groups were forbidden to congregate, and city streets were blocked.³⁹ On May 20th, less than a week after Bloody Thursday, several thousand people ignored the restrictions on gathering and came to Sproul Plaza for James Rector's memorial (Fig. X). Despite the peaceful nature of the crowd, the National Guard "sealed off the campus" and "helicopters released tear gas, spaying the trapped crowd on Sproul Plaza."⁴⁰

People's Park remained fenced off until May 8, 1972, when "a violent demonstration against President Nixon's mining of Haiphong Harbor in North Vietnam turned into a storming of the park...protestors tore the fence down" (Fig. X).⁴¹ The fence was never replaced, and the University begrudgingly allowed the park to be rebuilt. According to park activist Carol Denney, the University refused to acknowledge the Park's existence for decades and referred to it as "the block of land between Bowditch, Dwight, Haste and Telegraph" in legal documents, even after the park was declared a historic landmark by the City of Berkeley.⁴²

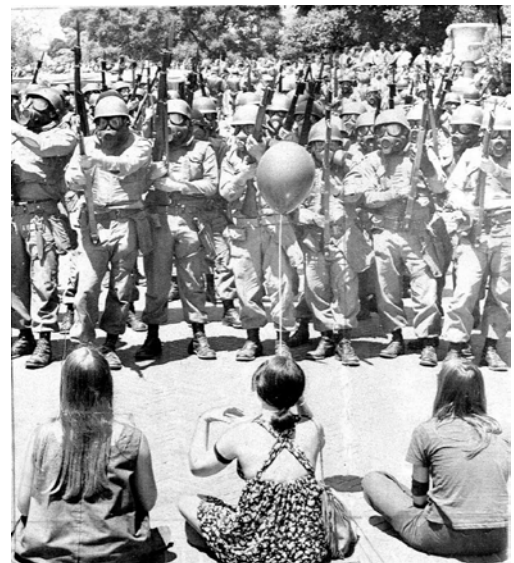


Figure 12: Activists face National Guard (Source: Asimov 2017)

³⁵ Asimov, "UC Berkeley Ponders People's Park for Housing in Controversial Move"; Delacour, "Opinion."

³⁶ Oakland Museum of California, "Unforgettable Change: 1960s: People's Park Fights UC Land Use Policy; One Dead, Thousands Tear Gassed | Picture This"; "History of People's Park | Police Department (UCPD)."

³⁷ Delacour, "Opinion."

³⁸ Oakland Museum of California, "Unforgettable Change: 1960s: People's Park Fights UC Land Use Policy; One Dead, Thousands Tear Gassed | Picture This"; Copeland and Arai, *People's Park*.

³⁹ Oakland Museum of California, "Unforgettable Change: 1960s: People's Park Fights UC Land Use Policy; One Dead, Thousands Tear Gassed | Picture This."

⁴⁰ Oakland Museum of California.

⁴¹ Compost, *People's Park*.

⁴² Denney, "People's Park Still Matters as a Landmark"; Denney, "Opinion."



Figure 13: The fence comes down
(Source: Compost 2009)

However, this uneasy truce would not last. In 1989, UCB attempted to take control of the park again. Because the City and the park activists refused to allow the elimination of People's Park, the university began "negotiations with the City over plans to build recreation facilities for student use, while retaining portions of the Park for community use."⁴³ People's Park would still be a park, the university claimed, but "it would be a park in which inappropriate activities – 'the criminal element' – ...would be removed to make room for students and middle-class residents who...had been excluded as People's Park became a haven for 'small-time drug dealers, street people, and the homeless.'"⁴⁴ The University and the city "agreed to a seemingly innocuous development plan" where the University would lease the east and west edges of the park to the city while converting the center of the park – where many homeless people gathered and political organizing usually occurred – "into a recreational area replete with volleyball courts, pathways, public restrooms, and security lights."⁴⁵

Critics of People's Park believed that the haphazard community development of the park had resulted in disorder and a "scruffy appearance" which "invited criminality and excluded legitimate, 'representative' users."⁴⁶ The University was not alone in criticizing the park – the Telegraph Avenue Merchants Association argued that the unsafe image of People's Park was hurting their businesses.⁴⁷ The merchants agreed with the University that that the "legitimate public" of the neighborhood consisted of "the shoppers, the students, and the housed."⁴⁸

Park activists disagreed with the negative portrayal of People's Park. They were proud of the fact that the park was an area "in which homeless people could live relatively unmolested."⁴⁹ They believed this showed that the park was "truly a public space...where the power of the state could be held at bay."⁵⁰ Activists resisted any changes to the park that could lead to the removal of the homeless population, including the UC-City development plan, because such changes "were tantamount to an erosion of public space."⁵¹ While the development plan currently targeted the homeless community in People's Park, another park user argued, "It's only a matter of time before they start limiting the people able to come here to college kids with an ID."⁵² One of the park founders, David Nadle, "denounced the [UC-City] agreement as a final move toward the total commodification and control of space."⁵³

⁴³ Mitchell, "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy."

⁴⁴ Mitchell.

⁴⁵ Mitchell.

⁴⁶ Mitchell.

⁴⁷ Mitchell.

⁴⁸ Mitchell.

⁴⁹ Mitchell.

⁵⁰ Mitchell.

⁵¹ Mitchell.

⁵² Mitchell.

⁵³ Mitchell.

On August 1, 1991, the university started enacting its development plan by clearing land for two volleyball courts. The bulldozers were accompanied by a police escort, and several protestors were arrested for attempting to blockade the machines.⁵⁴ According to Mitchell, “the papers of [the week that followed] are filled with reports of street skirmishes, strategic advances by heavily armed police, and the rage felt by many protesters.”⁵⁵ Despite this, construction on the volleyball courts was completed on August 4th, albeit under armed guard. Four days later, the university attempted to cement their victory by releasing “student employees from their jobs provided that they would play volleyball in the Park,” effectively paying them to support the University’s actions.⁵⁶ Police continued to guard the courts and often arrested park activists who continued to protest (Fig. X and X).

According to the *People’s Park Emergency Bulletin* published on Aug 4, 1991, activists were opposed to the construction because “This is NOT just a Volleyball Court... Sports facilities are simply the most convenient way to disrupt and suppress the activities in People’s Park, and are not the result of a need for new facilities.”⁵⁷ By building the volleyball courts “at no-ones request,” the University had violated the Park’s founding principle of user development.”⁵⁸ Additionally, the construction of the volleyball courts eliminated the “open meadow character” that was essential for the festivals and concerts held at the park.⁵⁹ Activists also believed that “the operation of the sports courts [gave] the University police the excuse they [wanted] to expel or harass people in the park as ‘nuisances,’” especially the homeless.⁶⁰

Activists made the university pay dearly for its small victory; according to the SF Examiner that was published on March 26, 1992, “UC Berkeley spent almost a million dollars to build [the] volleyball court in embattled People’s Park and defend it against protesters.” It became so expensive to maintain the courts that the university eventually removed them in 1997.⁶¹



Figure 14: Protesters arrested at volleyball court (Source: History - Peoples Park)



Figure 15: Anti-Volleyball Sign (Source: History - Peoples Park)

⁵⁴ Compost, *People’s Park*.

⁵⁵ Mitchell, “The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy.”

⁵⁶ Mitchell.

⁵⁷ Compost, *People’s Park*.

⁵⁸ Compost.

⁵⁹ Compost.

⁶⁰ Compost.

⁶¹ Zamora, “No More Volleyball in People’s Park.”

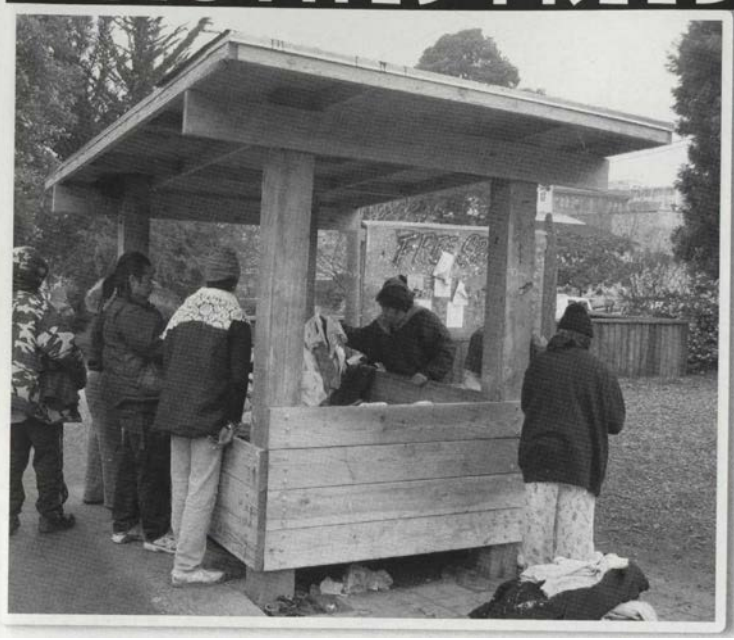


Figure 16: Wooden Free Box (Source: Compost 2009)

Since the removal of the courts, the University has not attempted to add any new facilities to People's Park. However, it has not stopped interfering with the user-development of the park. For example, the University has removed the Park's Free Box on several occasions.

The Free Box was a clothes and material exchange which allowed "people [to] meet their needs in a manner not entirely predicated on capitalist relations of property, exploitation, and exchange value" (Fig. X).⁶² Although the Free Box had been established in the 1970s, campus police began to regularly dismantle the Box in 2005. When this happened, park

activists would "just build another one."⁶³ After a wooden Free Box was burnt down by persons unknown, park activists replaced it with a sturdy, metal structure.⁶⁴ Because this new Free Box was not a fire hazard, "supporters were hopeful that the new box would last...but those hopes were dashed as the police entered the park under cover of darkness" and destroyed the Box.⁶⁵

The University defended their actions by saying that "people have taken the clothes and sold them to buy drugs or alcohol...It just has not been a productive way to get clothes to homeless people"; park activist Terri Compost argued against this justification, saying "[the Free Box] is a more 'productive' way of getting clothes to the homeless than removing the box and throwing away the clothes as UC has been doing."⁶⁶ She also noted that the removal of the Free Box would not stop activists from sharing clothes in the Park "but instead of the dignity of a box, they lie in bags, boxes, or piles on the ground."⁶⁷

The removal of the Free Box is just one of the reasons activists are suspicious of any University attention to the park. Denney claims that "'Improvements' are the euphemisms for upcoming city and UC efforts to separate the park from its history and traditions...[and] 'Advisory groups' and 'ad-hoc committees' are the terms used to describe [the people] appointed to 'implement' these non-user-developed changes usually designed to alter traditional users and uses to 'welcome' a less radical, less committed, more sports-oriented crowd" to the Park.⁶⁸ Other activists believe that the University is

⁶² Compost, *People's Park*.

⁶³ Compost.

⁶⁴ Compost.

⁶⁵ Compost.

⁶⁶ Compost, "UC STEALS FREEBOX."

⁶⁷ Compost.

⁶⁸ Compost, *People's Park*.

deliberately sabotaging People's Park and is biasing students against the park by telling them "the park is a sketchy place they need to stay away from."⁶⁹

In 2007, the University heightened community distrust when it hired the MKThink company to develop a new plan for People's Park. At a community meeting in May, a MKThink planner "assured community members that the firm was acting in the best interest of the park... [and that] our desire is to make it a welcoming place and to respect its rich history."⁷⁰ Activists responded to this by stressing that "they wanted a community process and not a corporate design for People's Park" and that they were worried that the company's process was too "secretive, biased and divisive."⁷¹

On October 1, 2007 the company released a draft version of their "Assessment and Planning Study" of the park for public comment.⁷² However, no final version of the report was ever released. It is unclear why the University did not further develop the plan, but the 2008 recession may have been a factor.

Although the final plan was never published, a copy of the draft plan annotated by an anonymous park activist is available on the People's Park website. The draft report and the comments from the anonymous activist provide valuable insight into the conflict over People's Park.

Notably, the MKThink plan stated that "People's Park requires greater intervention and oversight than currently exists" and that some community members "believe that the park is not inclusive [and use] the phrase 'Some People's Park' ...to express their sense of being unwelcomed."⁷³ MKThink clearly held the view that public space was a "representation of space" and should be orderly and controlled, whereas park activists believed in "representational space" characterized by free, unmediated interaction.

Throughout the report, the anonymous activist expressed their frustration over aspects of MKThink's plan that went against the founding principles of People's Park. For example, the plan argued that "the delivery in the park of food and social services for at risk populations is incompatible with the broad objective of making this space enjoyable and welcoming for all community members."⁷⁴ If social services were to be provided in People's Park in the future, MKThink advised that they be "structured, comprehensive, meet all applicable codes, and administered by trained professional personnel."⁷⁵ None of the other uses that MKThink proposed for the park, including education and community workshops, were required to comply with this high standard. The anonymous activist commented that these standards were "a backdoor attempt to regulate out the community groups and individuals who share resources in the park."⁷⁶

There were other areas of disagreement. MKThink noted disapprovingly that the "park is often littered with clothing," to which the anonymous activist responded, "UC continues to destroy a free

⁶⁹ Bhattacharjee, "People's Park Planners Meet With Community."

⁷⁰ Bhattacharjee.

⁷¹ Bhattacharjee.

⁷² MKThink, "People's Park: Assessment and Planning Study."

⁷³ MKThink.

⁷⁴ MKThink.

⁷⁵ MKThink.

⁷⁶ MKThink.

clothes distribution box.”⁷⁷ The activist disliked MKThink’s plans for “improving visual and pedestrian access and accentuating and activating park entrances,” calling it “doublespeak for removing oxygen producing plants and replacing with ‘hardscape.’”⁷⁸ The activist was vehemently opposed to the addition of any buildings to the Park.⁷⁹ Finally, the activist summed up what was wrong with MKThink’s study:

“This whole report misses the special uniqueness of [People’s Park] as a place that has been created and evolved from the community. Sweeping architectural reworkings are completely antithetical to the concept of People’s Park. Nor do any of these designs honor how the paths, uses, structures of the park have come from use and volunteers.”⁸⁰

The activist believed that MKThink had missed this crucial point because they “focused mainly on outreach to groups of people who might use People’s Park if it were different...[and] only gave cursory input to the people who currently use the park for their input for betterment.”⁸¹ However, the activist conceded that the report also contained “many good ideas and an opportunity to actually improve the park in ways that most will agree upon” although any joint improvement effort would require a sincere attempt to meet with the park activists and community members to find “the actual points of consensus.”⁸²

The main point that MKThink and the activist agreed on was that they both wanted more people to use the park. MKThink recommend that the University implement “programs that encourage community members to use the space for formal events...[and] informal activities” because “more use by more people will, over time, cause the park to be perceived as a safe place that welcomes all people.”⁸³ The activist commented “yes, win-win” on this suggestion. This suggests the possibility for other areas of common ground in the conflict over People’s Park.

The University has not officially responded to either the MKThink draft report or the activist’s critique of it. In December 2011, however, the university engaged in what it termed “intensive maintenance” and what activists called “desecration.”⁸⁴ Without consulting or even informing the People’s Park Community Advisory Board or Berkeley’s Landmark Preservation Commission, the university removed the park’s pergola (which had been built out of lumber left over from the “ill-fated volleyball courts”), leveled the longstanding community gardens, and cut down several trees.⁸⁵

According to Mitchell, “the lack of mobilization against this move by UC suggests... that...after more than four decades of struggle and stasis, People’s Park is ripe for change.”⁸⁶ However, park activist Becky O’Malley believes that the lack of community response was due to the timing of the demolition

⁷⁷ MKThink.

⁷⁸ MKThink.

⁷⁹ MKThink.

⁸⁰ MKThink.

⁸¹ MKThink.

⁸² MKThink.

⁸³ MKThink.

⁸⁴ Gilmore, “People’s Park Maintenance Work Underway”; Fonseca, “UC Berkeley Officials Desecrate People’s Park.”

⁸⁵ Fonseca, “UC Berkeley Officials Desecrate People’s Park”; O’Malley, “Can UC Berkeley Be Saved from Another People’s Park Debacle?”

⁸⁶ Mitchell, “People’s Park Again.”

which “was carried out in bad weather between Christmas and New Year with no warning” and she expects there will be “major opposition” if the University does something like that again.⁸⁷

At the time, many believed that the 2011 demolition was “a first, highly attenuated, effort to begin to act on recommendations” of the 2007 MKThink report.⁸⁸ When a park activist discovered, by piecing together open records requests, that the University had “spent \$12,000 on this first round of ‘heavy maintenance’ and had plans to spend more than \$200 000 more on another two phases of park improvement,” this belief appeared to be confirmed.⁸⁹ However, the University has not taken any further action to develop the park in the years since.

Today, the park remains a sanctuary for Berkeley’s homeless population, which has grown dramatically in the years since the recession (Fig. X). According to a count taken in January 2016, at least 1,200 homeless people lived in Berkeley.⁹⁰

In October 2016, park activist Michael Diehl wrote that there were rumors of “secret meetings being held to discuss putting student housing on the northeast corner of People’s Park.”⁹¹ Diehl was opposed to the idea, claiming that the University could house students elsewhere.⁹² Although park activists “want to reach out to students in [their] common cause of housing issues,” Diehl emphasizes that “it must be done in such a way that... the dispossessed... are not further pushed out of Berkeley and criminalized and labeled as having some kind of mental problem, or stigmatized for being the victims of capitalist developers and new tech industries.”⁹³

The rumors that Diehl heard proved to be true. And so did the predictions of John Delmos, who in 1993, stated “I think [the university] is going to continue and by hook or by crook they’re going to try to build dorms on [People’s Park], and eliminate it except for maybe a little patch for a memorial.”⁹⁴ In 2017, the University revealed a conceptual plan for “the construction of both student housing and separate supportive housing in



Figure 17: Homeless person sleeping in People’s Park (Source: Taylor 2017)

⁸⁷ O’Malley, “Can UC Berkeley Be Saved from Another People’s Park Debacle?”

⁸⁸ Mitchell, “People’s Park Again.”

⁸⁹ Mitchell.

⁹⁰ Diehl, “The Housing Crisis in Berkeley.”

⁹¹ Diehl.

⁹² Diehl.

⁹³ Diehl.

⁹⁴ Compost, *People’s Park*.

the storied park” along with “a memorial to the People’s Park history.”⁹⁵ Although the University plans to house at least 200 students in the planned student housing, the supportive housing for the homeless would only have room for 60 people, less than 5 percent of Berkeley’s homeless population.⁹⁶ Some park activists have spoken out against this plan. One believes that the “homeless buildings” will “soon become dorms” regardless of University promises.⁹⁷ Denney claims that the cultural significance of People’s Park outweighs the need for student housing, especially as “the university’s own proposal admits they have seven other sites on which to build housing.”⁹⁸ It is still unclear whether the larger community will support or oppose the University’s plan, if it ever comes to fruition. If the University does move forward with this plan, hopefully it will learn from the lessons of the past and work with the community instead of ignoring it.

Conclusions

By detailing the history of People’s Park, this paper has highlighted the sources of conflict between park activists and the University. First, the university and the park activists have conflicting narratives of the history of People’s Park. The University sees People’s Park as their legally owned property, place where they generously allow the public to use. Park activists believe that the University abused eminent domain to obtain the land and therefore has no legal claim to the land.

Second, the university and the park activists also have conflicting definitions of public space. To the park activists, public space is representational space – that is, space that is appropriated and lived in, politicized at its core, space where disorder is tolerated in the name of free and unmediated interaction. To the university, public space is a representation of space – planned, controlled, and ordered space.

Although activists and the university fundamentally disagree about the purpose of People’s Park, both want to see the park improved. There are areas of common ground for this. For example, both groups want more people to use the park and believe this can be attained by programming activities that appeal to a wide range of the public. To resolve the question of People’s Park, the university needs to reach out to current park users and the surrounding community and listen to what they want from the park. Imposing its top down will on the park will only lead to further conflict.

In the future, the University needs to incorporate current park users as well as potential users when planning park development. Additionally, the University needs to respect the culture of user-development present at people’s park and accept that improvements must be supported and developed by the community. Finally, the needs of the homeless community in the Park must be respected and the University should stop interfering with community developed infrastructure, such as the Free Box, that serves the homeless population.

⁹⁵ Taylor, “A Possible First in Berkeley.”

⁹⁶ Taylor.

⁹⁷ Moore, “The Invisible Natural Cathedral of People’s Park.”

⁹⁸ Denney, “The Cultural Significance of People’s Park - Now More Than Ever.”

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