

Creating “People’s Park”: Toward a Redefinition of Urban Space

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Abstract

This study examines the development of an urban space, from a vacant lot to a usable public space as a public park, in order to analyze how the transformation of space affects meaning for the surrounding community. I ask: In what ways does this transformation empower individuals to take advantage of subsequent reuse opportunities? Does the process by which the change takes place influence subsequent community engagement opportunities? I argue that *how* the spatial transformation is organized influences the potential environmental and social justice opportunities that can be created for community members, and thus its impact on the community dynamic of the defined space. For this analysis, I examine how the transformation of space affects human social interaction in a community which, historically, has been racially and economically marginalized. The development of the space was spurred by organizers who felt a public “pocket park” would add value to the community, as well as provide a space for social interaction to take place between community residents. Implemented with little engagement from community residents, I document the transformation of this space—and the positive and negative consequences of the transformation for residents—using participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and content analysis.

Keywords: community gardens, qualitative methods, semiotics, urban space

Introduction

Change life! Change society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 54)

This research explores the transformation of an urban space from an unused public parcel to a usable community park and garden, adding to a growing literature on community gardens and transformative urban spaces. I explore how the process of transforming a vacant urban lot to a community garden impacts the use and the

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meaning of space for the surrounding neighborhood and its residents. Exploring the model of social change developed here, I ask: Does the mechanism for change impact the subsequent use of the space? Does how the spatial transformation occurred impact whether gardens become tools for social change in urban communities?

Methodologically, I reference Buffalo specifically as the place of study, for its patterns of racial and economic division that have led to current social and environmental justice concerns (Berube, 2016; Rey & Lakamp, 2011). Through qualitative analyses documenting the transformation of a public space in Buffalo, New York, I argue that once an urban space has transformed, opportunities for cultural and environmental empowerment become available to community members that alter their relationship with that environment. This is evident in other studies of gardens developed with grassroots principles guiding the change process. However, if these grassroots principles are not employed, can the same results be achieved? Employing an environmental justice framework, I suggest that by interacting in the transformed space, individuals can empower community action. Applying an environmental justice perspective in this case is particularly relevant for understanding how sociocultural conditions such as food security are influenced by the lack of accessible fresh produce which are characteristic of cities such as Buffalo.

In order to address this and other issues that arise with lack of accessible green space in urban communities, the park was conceived and developed, but was missing key components usually necessary for successful community spaces. Without a grassroots initiative from the community, park organizers created the park and implemented programs without being mindful of community sentiment. The original top-down approach was met with suspicion, lack of understanding, and confusion over park access. Organizers sought to correct this by becoming mindful of the necessity of community engagement, and with this engagement, met with success over time. By employing a grassroots model of public engagement, organizers collaborated with community residents to support the park in the ways that community members wanted, such as reading circles and accessible garden growing beds. The success of these was due to a specific intent to engage community participants that was not present at the development and inception of the park.

First, I will address the theoretical background and existing literature surrounding the phenomenon of community-driven urban greening transformations. Following this, I include a discussion of political economy of such spatial transformation and connections to the environmental justice framework. I then address the methodology and study background, followed by discussion and conclusions.

Community gardens and social benefit

Human ecological perspectives focus on the relationships between social structures, human agency, and the natural environment. Traditionally, the human exceptionalist paradigm (HEP) and contrasting new environmental paradigm (NEP) offer the development of these conflicting perspectives as a defining moment in the development of environmental sociology; as environmental sociologists call for a shift from a relationship over nature to one within nature—or away from the HEP and toward the NEP (Catton & Dunlap, 1978). Within this shift, research has shown that community gardens offer positive additions to the urban landscape (Beilin & Hunter, 2011; Eizenberg, 2012; Shinew et al., 2004). For instance, community gardens offer individuals places to interact and engage with nature and each other. Yet urban environments, which by their nature are built spaces, often have few authentic green spaces available for relationships and exploration such as engagement with nature, environmental education and recreation, and social gatherings. However, “pocket parks” (sometimes called “vestibule parks”) and gardens, defined as small green spaces embedded in, but not separate from, the urban landscape, offer small spaces of solace amidst the busy city streets with profound impact, although these are not always considered community gardens (Shinew et al., 2004). In fact, researchers have demonstrated the positive impact of community gardening on several quality-of-life variables. For instance, collaborative gardening has been found, at an interpersonal level, to increase positivity in race relations and promote greater cultural diversity understanding among community members (Firth et al., 2011). Drawing again on human ecology, Rishbeth (2004) notes that the visual design of spaces changed by community gardens is very important in fostering (or, where poorly executed, limiting) interpersonal relationships between ethnically diverse groups who use community gardens. She finds that these spaces, when well-designed, support social interaction between those who may not otherwise have opportunities to interact with each other. Rishbeth concludes that the biological and physical structure of the natural world does affect our responses and ability to make social decisions about a space.

Moreover, the addition of pocket gardens in city spaces is found to increase levels of food knowledge and education among community residents, as well as to increase community efforts toward sustainable and local food production systems. Empowering individuals to grow their own food becomes a vital and beneficial outcome of gardening efforts where access to healthy, seasonal produce is limited.

Furthermore, community gardens are focal points for collective action of social activists; they have been identified as political spaces for empowerment. Infamous battles over the use of public space for gardening in Berkeley, Los Angeles, and in New York City have shown how public space comes to represent a larger political meaning that includes eminent domain and the right to use public space for the

greater good (Eizenberg, 2012; Rosenthal, 2002). Images of bulldozers destroying gardens unite prospective activists to come together for a common cause. Taken together, much literature has focused on community gardening as a way to increase social capital, a space for researchers to study and locate effects of leisure activity in a community, and as an incentive to attract economic investment in the community which may increase economic gains in areas such as real estate and decrease poverty (Hanna & Oh, 2000; Holland, 2004; Moore, 2005; Putnam, 2000). However, less research has been conducted to examine efforts of residents to construct meaning about the process of transforming space when incorporating community gardens in their urban neighborhoods. The scholarship of semiotics lends itself to understanding how space is constructed, and how this approach is useful for analyzing meaning-making among community members.

Constructing the meaning of urban space

Semiotics allows us to understand that space symbolizes meaning for people. It does so by providing the tools to analyze how we recognize images as meaningful in our daily lives. Transformation of urban space is interesting at many levels. When considering how meaning is embedded in images of physical space, community space is redefined. This can entail defining a community as a place where individuals interact, as well as an idea of togetherness shared among individuals occupying a shared space. Sociologists have long been interested in this process as developed within the symbolic interactionist perspective and the work of cultural theorists. Gottdiener (1994) recalls the importance of Lefebvre's initial conception of "social space," in which everyday activities take place and meanings are socially produced.

It is this sphere of social space, constrained by realities of the natural world, in which I locate this analysis. The acknowledgment that social space is a powerful variable, which can influence how everyday activities take place, is vital for understanding both the importance of the social construction of space and how individuals attribute meaning to different spaces. Lefebvre (1991) used the notion of social uses of space to direct the development of exchange value based on market relations over a given space. In addition, the social construction of spatial meaning flows from how a space is used and whether it has a collective meaning. In community development, the space assumes a new meaning with each different use, as does the exchange value for those who engage in it. This is evident when analyzing why the transformation is taking place and whether new meanings can be derived from the space. Thus, if claims are made about the social meaning of a space, but the space fails to meet that expectation, the space cannot succeed in meeting the needs of its supposed role (Lefebvre, 1991) as defined by those actors engaging in the transformative process.

Communities, then, are constructions that create meaning for individuals who participate within these social structures. Spaces, then, can be transformed to meet community needs. Suttles (1972) argues that urban models become self-fulfilling prophecies for urban distributions of opportunities. Groups become structures within an urban context, whose existence and character depend on their relationship to a wider society (Suttles, 1972). Tranel and Handlin (2006) offer evidence that community gardens address specific structural problems of urban revitalization. For example, gardening efforts produce positive, long-lasting, structural improvements for the local community, from crime reduction to increased occupancy rates.

Political economy of urban space

Castells (1983), Harvey (1989), Gottdiener (1994), and other urbanists have argued that political, economic, and structural considerations of space become vitally important to consider when analyzing social identity struggles. How the meaning of space is contested and framed by different groups often determines how a space will be used and what type of interactions will take place in a given area; whether reinforcing or resisting its existing social characteristics. Current political and economic realities consequently affect the defined usefulness of a space both by and for those engaging in and defining it. Abu-Lughod (1994) details these political economic considerations in her work documenting the battle for the New York's Lower East Side. She analyzes the residents' claims to their land, their space, and the identity of their neighborhoods and community. This redefinition of space is evident in the struggle that residents and developers engaged in—each staking claim to the space, but in different ways. The meaning of urban space was hence transformed by adjusting the emphasis on social capital as the Lower East Side became redefined for its current and future residents.

Schmelzkopf (1995) documents that New York's Lower East Side provided a site of contestation as residents fought city government for the right to garden versus the city's plan to build more housing units. After the city initially encouraged and supported the rise of community gardens in the area, the city reneged on its agreement when it became more economically advantageous to replace gardens with high-rise, luxury housing stock. The argument was framed as either houses or gardens, but activists were able to reframe the controversy to argue that gardens and housing could coexist. Smith and Kurtz (2003) draw on Cox's (1998) argument that spaces of engagement provide a context in which to examine urban political struggles. In this context, they argue that community garden contests in New York City become political struggles that extend beyond the physical gardening space and come to represent struggles over personal and property rights.

Subsequently, Mele (2000) argues that individuals create their own territories within public spaces. Following Habermas (1984), these democratic spheres shape one's norms of the social lifeworld (theoretical space in which Habermas argues social interaction occurs) and the form of discourse that transpires. These spaces become useful to those individuals in ways that others may not recognize. In essence, individuals will create their own meaning about a given space.

As Rosenthal (2002) explains, New York University students expanded on this controversy dramaturgically by creating a play portraying the events. Theater was used to interpret the urban landscape in a culturally new way. For community garden organizers, these spaces were created to foster community relations, beautify the urban landscape, and create a sustainable environment full of food and botanicals. These spaces continue to dot the urban landscape. Community gardens located in areas of abandoned and derelict industrial land offer a sense of hope and growth for a community located in these neglected urban landscapes.

Community gardens as environmental justice initiatives

Gardens offer opportunities to interact, learn, and understand the natural environment, while offering a space to gather and socialize with others. Traditionally, environmental justice frameworks have been applied to communities battling contamination, workplace hazards, and battles for open green space (Bullard, 1993). Capek (1993) broadens the understanding of environmental justice frames by offering a way to apply them to different situations. In doing so, she argues that “the environmental justice frame is built around a concept of rights constructed in part by the actions and rhetoric of previous social movements” (Capek, 1993, p. 8). Central to this argument is the idea that every individual, regardless of race or class, deserves a clean and healthy environment in which to live. The environmental justice framework has been extended to include groups who advocate for health care and healthy environments, including increasing available green space and recreational opportunities. Community gardens offer a component of a “healthy space” framework.

The transformative potential that community gardens have is a powerful benefit for communities. Grassroots initiatives that flow from these experiences are often likely to address environmental justice and other areas of inequality (Bowen et al., 1995; Ferris et al., 2001). Community gardens have also been used as spaces to encourage environmental justice practices that demonstrate food sovereignty (Alkon & Mares, 2012). Empowerment activities such as community ownership of garden plots and growing and harvesting one's own food are both opportunities to engage in alternative forms of political economy for individuals traditionally marginalized

from such practices. Both symbolically and practically, gardens provide community space for individuals to interact and work together where they otherwise might not. Engaging in community gardening activity is often an indicator of civic engagement in the community at large. This is a supported context for social and political engagement (Glover et al., 2005). Hence, community gardens are “wedges” into the neighborhood (Knack, 1994) for such engagement, and can function as a way to foster empowerment and social action among individuals.

Often when a space is framed within an environmental justice initiative, the neighborhood assumes that identity. As Martin (2003, p. 731) asserts, “[such] framings empower a neighborhood-based political community” within the physical landscape. The environmental justice framework ties individual and community identity to a claim over usable space—trying to reclaim identity with space and the area in which individuals live.

Research design

This analysis examines the transformation of an urban space to a community garden and the construction of meaning of space among community residents in Buffalo, New York, from 2005 until 2011. Initial exploration for this research project began in January 2005 (although early inception of the park began in 2004), stemming from my intrigue over a billboard advertising urban space as the “Future Site of People’s Park,” to the park grand opening in 2008, and subsequent seasons and summers of various community activities hosted at the park (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Through conversations with local community members and environmental activists in the area, I came in contact with park organizers and was able to witness this transformation. These interactions facilitated my data collection in the urban neighborhood experiencing this transformation of space.



Figure 1: People’s Park future site.

Source: Author’s photographs.

The community in which “People’s Park” was developed has about 3,000 residents, of which 87% are African-American. At the time of the first ideas of park inception (2004), drawing on Census 2000 data, the average annual income was US\$23,000. Of the total families living in this immediate community, 24% were considered to be living below the poverty line in 2000, with a 31.2% poverty rate in 2010. Of these residents, 49% owned and 51% rented their residences (US Census Bureau, 2000, 2010). This neighborhood is still zoned for mixed use, including residential, light industry, and commercial uses. It is notable to mention that there has been no notable change in Census figures from 2005 to the time of this publication.

People’s Park received a celebratory grand opening in May 2008, yet as park development began in 2005, I was able to document the transformation of this urban space firsthand from its beginnings. Initially, I documented formal and informal conversations and committee meetings, and conducted interviews with community residents and those involved in the steering committee overseeing park programming, fundraising, and development. Individuals comprising the steering committee for the park were involved with community life in block clubs,² crime prevention groups, and/or simply living in the neighborhood. Convenience sampling of individuals yielded 25 participants. Specifically, formal interview participants were recruited from the steering committee (n=6), convenience sampling from those who use the park (n=15), and convenience sampling from members of local block clubs who were not active park users (n=4). Of these respondents, 8 identified as Caucasian and 17 identified as African-American; 19 were from the immediate geographic area, and 6 were not, but lived within 10 miles of the park. Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed. I conducted participant observation by being present in the park for everyday use, as well as attending special events in the park. These observations, as well as the informal conversations with park users, conducted through ongoing participant observations, were part of the data collection and thematic analysis as well.

As part of data collection efforts, two undergraduate students, trained in qualitative methods, assisted with observations. The two students also carried out participant observation methods as participant observers (in-depth field notes, informal interviews, and observation) throughout the summers of 2008 and 2009. They observed the park throughout the daytime hours (from 9:00 a.m. to early evening) for an average of 15 to 20 hours per week. The detailed notes of these observations, as well as my own observations (ongoing through 2018), in-depth interviews, photographs, and architectural plans of People’s Park provided the context for the thematic analysis of the park.

2 Block clubs are popular neighborhood organizations in the United States. Such organizations include officers, such as president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary, and generally focus on neighborhood crime prevention (i.e., neighborhood watch), as well as beautification projects. In Buffalo, block clubs must formally register with the Board of Block Clubs of Buffalo and Erie County.

Through this thematic and document analysis, I highlight the importance of the space's original context, its size and location, and the work to transform the space through park programming for community members. Additionally, I include a historical analysis to frame the foundation of the space's transformative process. These components of the space and efforts to transform the space empowered local residents to act as agents of social change through this form of building community.

The making of People's Park

Members of local community groups, led by a local businessman, began discussions to create a park in Buffalo in late 2004. The proposed space for the park was a former gas station connected to an automobile parts store located in Buffalo's Masten District. Historically, this district has been and still is was one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the city. In 2004, 36% of the population was earning an income beneath the poverty line, and the area hosted a 21% housing vacancy rate (Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency, 2004). Although usually referred to as the East Side of Buffalo, or "east of Main Street," the Masten District actually encompasses the central portion of the city. Colloquially, East Side continues to refer to communities characterized by high rates of crime and poverty (McNeil, 2009, 2018).

Revitalization of this area has been evident in recent years in the numerous endeavors that serve to support small businesses, repair roads, and invest in community infrastructure in parks and schools. The location for People's Park was intended to extend these efforts by providing much-needed green space—current census maps reveal that less than 1% of Buffalo's land use is dedicated green space. Gardens have played an important role in communities, whether addressing food scarcity or neighborhood beautification. Introduced as models for growing sustainable sources of produce and food, community gardens provide nourishment in times of need, such as with "victory gardens" following World War I (Hanna & Oh, 2000). More recently, community gardens have been growing in popularity in urban areas as a way to reclaim vacant urban space. The construction of these spaces as viable gardens offers a sense of revitalization for areas that have been virtually ignored as locally unwanted land use, as was the case with the gas station set to be transformed into People's Park. Moreover, community gardens offer a sense of pride in one's community space as well as an incentive to invest in one's local space. The community garden efforts in many rust belt cities, such as Buffalo and Detroit, have expanded, reclaiming community space from vacant, polluted, crime-ridden lots as spaces that offer a sense of empowerment, hope, and redevelopment for local residents (White, 2011). People's Park is an example of one such community revitalization project.

Early conversations to develop the park involved a local architect specializing in green design techniques who would eventually be responsible for the design and architecture of the park. The People's Park Steering Committee was formed as the group of individuals responsible for fundraising, publicity, and landscape design. The funds for this project came from a local business owner who created the nonprofit organization, MAKEDA Inc., to oversee the park's development. MAKEDA became the organization of ownership on record, receiving further support for brownfield remediation of the former gas station from New York State's Brownfield Cleanup and Reclamation program and maintaining liability for injury as the property owner. And, even with the private funding support of MAKEDA, steering committee members were responsible for raising matching funds to support the park project. With three years of effort and community support, People's Park was born.

The naming of the Park was intentional and significant for shaping meaning for the space and initially created controversy among organizers. Although People's Park in Buffalo was formed free from struggle with local political entities, historically, the name "People's Park" refers to the Berkeley, California, park and gardens created in 1969, as an initiative of the New Left and Free Speech Movement to beautify a neighborhood after the removal of low-income housing projects. Individuals came together to clean, plant, and beautify the now vacant space, transforming it from an unused and abandoned space to a community park. The University of California at Berkeley, with backing from Governor Ronald Reagan and the Board of Regents, subsequently blocked access to the park by installing a chain link fence. Protests followed, resulting in numerous arrests, injuries, and one death. The university bulldozed the remaining gardens, but the community eventually reclaimed the space in the years to follow, and today it is signified as a space on the urban landscape where freedom of expression and transformative power reside.

Drawing on this historical significance, organizers chose the name "People's Park" to evoke a sense of ownership to the people of the surrounding community. They felt that this park would come to represent a sense of freedom and openness that community residents could experience as part of their daily lives. However, at a planning meeting before the park opened, some questioned the name as referring to what they saw as "communist ideology, seemingly 'off-putting' to the larger community and potential financial supporters" (Researcher's field notes, fall 2007). A few organizers present were concerned about potential political ramifications of the name's "association with communism," as was offered at the meeting, given that their primary objective was simply to provide a community green space, free from restriction for residents. In the end, group consensus was that the naming would not deter potential donors and would best convey the intended meaning of the space.

The space for People's Park

An analysis of blueprints and notes from meetings reveals that park architects and organizers took much into consideration in its design for public use. The design of People's Park is one that displays characteristics of pocket parks of other urban areas, such as New York City. The design is functional as an open space, providing picnic tables, gradation in the landscape offering dimension, a retaining wall that doubles as seating, a separate fenced raised bed area for flowers and vegetable growing, and many garden beds full of annuals and native perennial plants. The space is aesthetically pleasing and offers a sense of solace from the bustling activity of the city.

Designed intentionally for social gatherings and outdoor entertainment, the park's amphitheater and stadium rows built of brick facilitate easy communication between people in the park. The park offers plenty of space for planting and growing, educational exhibits for teaching composting and other environmental practices, and social interaction.

However, from interviews and observations, major concerns about the limitations to public use were noted among residents. The narratives include a wide range of concerns, including the lack of shade and the physical inaccessibility of the garden behind the protective wrought iron fence and the gate, which is locked overnight.

The lack of shade in the park is a serious concern for most visitors. Visitors complained about the lack of sun protection, especially for young children. In addition, lack of facilities such as a drinking fountain or restroom also emerged as limitations. Two picnic tables with removable umbrellas were usable at times, but were usually kept locked in the facilities building, leaving everyday visitors no access to shade for sun protection. Park users commented that the environment does not lend itself to a relaxing atmosphere for networking and meeting—core aims of the project—when physically uncomfortable. Residents have stated numerous times since the park's opening (in 2008) that they would use the space more if shade was present. Organizers appreciated the full sun exposure as helpful for the limited growing season that a Northeast city has, and capitalized on this by planting native trees and perennials. However, the trees would not provide shade for some years, until the trees mature. Residents convinced organizers to draw up modifications, including building a shade structure that would block direct exposure from the sun, allowing more social activities to take place in the heat of the day. It has been noted in interviews that if the shade structure had been built into the original plans, the use of space would have been very different.

A second concern exists in the wrought iron fence that limits public entrance. The presence of the fence creates a literal and symbolic boundary limiting public participation. Some organizers felt the fence was needed to protect and maintain the

space. The conflict over the fencing was warranted; to some, the park would be more inviting without the symbolic meaning the fence brings, but, to others it was socially constructed, as a barrier to unwanted behavior, such as graffiti which was defined as art to some and vandalism to others. Moreover, because the city public works department does not maintain the park, insurance liability for the space became a very real concern for park organizers. Mishaps that occurred at the park were the responsibility of MAKEDA, the property owners. Their rationale was that keeping the fence locked from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. reduced the likelihood of mischievous activity, including acts of vandalism, during the overnight hours.

The neighborhood itself was another barrier to access. The stretch of Main Street where the park is located has very little foot traffic and the neighborhood itself is dotted with industrial and residential properties. It is not a cohesive residential community. Main Street symbolically represents the racial divide between the East and West Sides of Buffalo, based on race and income, and Buffalo has historically been ranked as one of the most racially divided cities in the United States. According to the Brookings Institute, in an article entitled, “Region’s Segregated Living Cited in New Data,” the Buffalo–Niagara Falls Metropolitan Area ranks sixth in the nation for most segregated metropolitan area, and third most impoverished. Commenting on previous Brookings Institute’s findings, Rey and Lakamp (2011) explain:

The index is based on a percentage and what it would take to achieve an even residential pattern between blacks and whites, using scores ranging from 0 to 100. Anything above 60 is considered a very high level of segregation. Buffalo Niagara scored 74.4. That’s actually a slight decline in segregation from a decade ago, when the region scored 78 on the index. “It’s moving in the right direction. Certainly, it means there’s something going on,” Frey said. “But you know, in some ways, the die is cast in these older metro areas.” (Rey & Lakamp, 2011)

These concerns among residents and their contrast with park organizers’ intentions for the space’s use affected how residents viewed and accessed the space. Additionally, the residents’ lack of perceived ownership over the space ultimately described and shaped what the space meant to them. This top-down model that MAKEDA embraced—if we build it, they will come—did not come to fruition as they had hoped; the lack of community engagement in the planning process was reflected in the numerous complaints and lack of use of the park area.

Community use of People’s Parks

Organizers sought to make the park an enjoyable space for residents by developing a myriad of different park activities. These included informal uses of the park for nature exploration to more formally organized programs such as farm market days and gardening activities to morning reading circles and evening concerts.

While opening celebrations took place in May 2008, the park began providing opportunities for social interaction much earlier than the official opening. For instance, Science Firsthand³ used the space as an outdoor natural science laboratory where youth, especially those from the surrounding neighborhoods, could engage in hands-on activities. In this program, youth were able to investigate the natural environment with their adult mentors, taking note of plant species and other evidence of the natural world. As the director of this program shared, for most children in this community, this was the first exposure to “the environment” as a place to begin to understand ecology—life in an ecosystem. As Louv (2005) points out, involving children in nature and spending time outdoors is vital for childhood emotional and physical health. In another example, children from the parochial school across the street used the park for their butterfly release that year. They celebrated with songs and a ceremony to commemorate their role in raising the butterflies from caterpillar pupae to adult insects. As with many environmental activities, this began with having access to a space for exploratory science (Hoffner, 2006).

Researchers are increasingly aware that the local urban food environment influences one’s access to food (Alkon & Mares, 2012; Raja et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2010). Organizers heard these concerns from residents as well and developed another popular programming use for the park as a space for access to fresh local produce. Food deserts, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), are low-income areas (as defined by census where 20% or more of population is below the poverty line) in which 33% of the given census tract live further than a mile from a large supermarket or grocery store. The USDA further explains that under these income and food access criteria, about 10% of the 65,000 census tracts in the United States meet the definition of a food desert. These food desert tracts contain 13.5 million people with low access to sources of healthy food, especially fresh produce. The majority of this population—82%—live in urban areas (USDA, 2017).

Raja et al.’s 2008 study reveals this pattern in Buffalo, especially for East Side communities. Similarly, for this specific East Side population, grocery store options were limited to corner markets with little, if any, fresh produce, usually at prices 50% higher than larger grocery stores. Factors limiting access to fresh produce are linked to legacy pollution from previous industrial land use in residential neighborhoods. Because of this, community members were hesitant to create gardens in their own backyards without the means to perform necessary soil testing. Unfortunately, because of Western New York’s heavy industrial past, issues of legacy pollution have historically plagued Buffalo and the surrounding cities and towns. At People’s Park, programs such as a weekday mobile farmer’s market and educational opportunities for how to grow food led by local residents were introduced.

3 Science Firsthand is a National Science Foundation federally funded program that connects youth to teen and adult science mentors in urban communities.

Local residents, including families recently arriving to the United States through a local refugee resettlement agency, who struggled to find safe spaces to garden—free from soil and water contaminants that may have been lurking in their own backyards—began to frequent garden programs and began adopting growing beds at People’s Park. To date (as of summer 2018), given the continued global refugee crisis and Buffalo’s commitment to supporting this population, refugee agencies continue to provide food security and gardening opportunities at the park for their clients. Garden beds, both those containing vegetables and perennials, are maintained by refugee populations and clients from adult rehabilitation agencies. While this involvement gives individuals a space to relax and enjoy the outdoors as part of their therapy, community gardening has also become a form of respite for these individuals seeking some semblance of agency over their lives.

Studies reveal that a key element for success is strong local leadership developing staff and volunteers who work with community partners, as well as provide ongoing skills-building workshops (Twiss et al., 2003). Still, despite the investment in community-building activities and opportunities for social engagement, evidence of continued community support was scarce; few people were attending park activities or using the park outside of organized events. The short history of People’s Park left organizers struggling with how to increase neighborhood involvement in order to maintain a meaningful park experience for the surrounding community. Ironically, residents we spoke with were not without enthusiasm. Many echoed the overwhelming support for a neighborhood park, stating “A park is exactly what we need around here. Something to make the neighborhood look nice” (Researcher’s notes: field interview with park user, summer 2008). Yet few actually made use of this particular park. In part, residents identified an ambivalence in access to the space for residents that shaped their low levels of involvement, which originated with the top-down bureaucratic approach that emerged with the park’s origin story.

For instance, many respondents noted that the space appeared closed to the public for enjoyment. One resident notes, "I am never really sure if the park is open. I like the idea of visiting, but I feel as though I may be intruding on something" (Researcher's notes: field interview with park user, summer 2008). Many respondents referred to the issue of whether they were able to just enter the park and take respite, or would doing so intrude on another purpose or use of the space. This is particularly heightened by the use of a locked fence. A common survey response to using the space read like this: "Not sure whether the park is public or private. I want to come in, but I am not sure I am allowed" (Researcher's notes). Questions arose about availability: was something planned, would the gate be locked, would they be expected to weed or maintain some part of the garden? Moreover, there were issues with governance. Organizers were intent on having community members as the main caretakers of the park. However, as revealed through interview data, while most community residents appreciated the space, they neither had time for the responsibility of a community garden, nor did they know they were expected to do so. The lack of shared governance over the park resulted in confusion over the park's role for the community and expectations of how it would continue as a viable open space for the community. Similarly, this post and comment in an online newspaper blog addresses these concerns:

Not just a park where lawnmowers show up and the gates open, People's Park has become a destination of sorts for the surrounding community. That means there are bigger plans that are needed despite the park's understated size. (Queenseyes, 2008)

So, I'm confused. Where does the money for the upkeep of this place come from? Is this now a Buffalo public park? Does the city (or county) do the upkeep? (Anonymous, 2008)

In conversations with organizers, they acknowledge that there had been very few efforts to work with community individuals to determine what programming they would like to see occur in the park and the maintenance of the park; but, in fact, initially there was no effort at all to involve the community in the creation of a space intended for their use. About a year into park development and programming (2009), as part of our ongoing research, we offered to administer feedback surveys that could offer some indication of what the community wanted to see in from this space. After community feedback through our surveys and meetings with vested neighborhood organizations, organizers were better able to understand why the park had as little community involvement as it did. Thus, they began working toward a more collaborative approach to the park's use by involving block clubs and neighborhood groups in programming and planning for the next gardening season. Without community input, assumptions of space use and design were made by organizers. Determined uses and availability of the park may not have been in line with the community's wishes; however, through communication with organizers, community members sought a balance between formal and informal uses of

the space. The most successful formal programming initiatives introduced were a summer concert series, a children's reading circle, and youth nature programming such as building bird houses and the basics of composting.

Of these, the weekly reading circle was the most successful. This program was supported by a local group called Fathers Armed Together to Help Educate, Restore, and Save (FATHERS), whose mission was to engage youth who had had brushes with juvenile detention at a young age. FATHERS volunteers provided mentorship and leadership to these disenfranchised teens, and supported them in turn with opportunities to themselves become leaders and mentors in their own volunteering. The reading circle met these goals: youth volunteers from the FATHERS reading circle program distributed books and engaged in one-on-one reading time with younger neighborhood children. The park served as a nice setting for this event due to its amphitheater-style stone seating. Organizers collaborated with local social service organizations, such as The Salvation Army, in the neighborhood to best serve children directly in the surrounding neighborhoods. In an effort to create a sense of lasting change, organizers wanted children to own the books they were reading. The children attending this reading program were at or below their age-standard reading levels and few had books of their own at home. So that book ownership could be a reality, they held a book drive prior to the event and gave away nearly 600 books each season.⁴

This program led to families returning to the park to engage in reading; and even the teens who were volunteer readers returned on a regular basis. As one resident stated, "My children love the reading program and I love that they can read in a relaxed atmosphere surrounded by the park." Another woman who regularly brought her grandchildren to the park for the reading circle stated, "You know, these kids don't really have much at home and they feel so good about being able to come here, use the books, and take one home each week" (Researcher's notes: field interview with park user, summer 2009).

This was evidence that the park was becoming more than simply a green space, but a space where children felt comfortable and relaxed outside of their homes. Another respondent stated that her grandson needed to come to the park in order to be safe, after a violent incident he had suffered while playing in a vacant house (such houses were attractive as play spaces for children, but were unfortunately also attractive to older youths and adults engaged in criminal activity, such that it was not uncommon for children to be exposed to violence as a result of this overlap in use).

⁴ The book drive was supported by a local organization, Project Flight, which for 25 years has been collecting and distributing books to low-income children and families in the city of Buffalo.

A sense of empowerment was also visible in the teen volunteers of the reading circle, who benefited from the strong father-like influence from the men organizing as FATHERS, and, as one-time disenfranchised youth, became an important liaison for education in this space. Many went on to volunteer in more diverse ways, joining the Mayor's Summer Youth program, assigned to a variety of outreach programs across Buffalo similar to the reading program at People's Park. The park, though initiated as an environmental project, became a space for furthering education, both for those who were just starting to learn to read and those offering their services to read to groups of children.

Members of FATHERS became further involved by using the park as an informal meeting space to engage youth in crime prevention education and awareness. The park became a safe space for youth to discuss their concerns and fears with neighborhood mentors; and, in turn, mentors became more aware of the challenges youth were facing in their everyday lived experiences.

The FATHERS reading circle was an outstanding example of the potential for community transformation that was made possible by the creation of People's Park. It is a "close the loop" approach which proved a successful model for youth engagement.

However, while the park offered a physical space where individuals could engage in activities, it was ultimately the park organizers' pursuit of conversations and continuous engagement with individuals and organizations in the community which has begun to endow the space with the potential to support the overall transformative goals of the community at large.



Figure 2: People's Park in use.

Source: Author's photographs.

Exploring meaning of People's Park

Even with the improved programming at the park, overall, questions of the community's sense of park "ownership" continued to surface. Community members did not feel as though they owned the park, let alone had the right to pursue their recreation there. Nor did they feel they should be left with the responsibility for its maintenance, despite the responsibility as assigned when determined by organizers that the park would be a "community-maintained garden." Additionally, they did not feel as though they had authority to direct the programming decisions, or even a voice in the decision-making process. As Lefebvre (1991) recalls, social space cannot succeed in its intention if the needs of the agents within the space are not met. Ironically, while organizers felt that the park was community-owned, they expressed frustration with the lack of community participation toward the park. Overall sentiment was that there still needed to be a distinct effort to provide an opportunity for the community to take ownership of this park. Without that, community members would not take ownership, even if the opportunity for involvement is present.

Despite the lack of initial overall community investment, the park offers respite and opportunity for those who access it. Transforming a vacant lot to a vibrant community garden involved the cooperation and collaboration of many individuals on many levels. Individuals ranging from community organizers to successful businessmen brought a variety of assets to this process. While the creation of a community garden is most often considered a grassroots initiative, in this case support came from a top-down structure—decision-makers were those with vested financial capital and social interests in changing this space. Although many steering committee members considered themselves local community members, at first, they implemented change with little input from the community at large.

While the park offered a physical space where individuals could engage in activities, it was only conversations and continued engagement that supported continual interaction for groups of individuals. The physical transformation of the space began to support the transformative goals of the community at large. Overall, data from formal and informal surveys with park users support evidence of more facilitated, direct communication over park usage. Data reveal that individuals enjoy using the park (90% of respondents), disclose sentiments in favor of returning (75%), although seldom share specifics of these plans, such as a date or time. The park, therefore has improved its potential to serve as a community space and become an accessible space for social interaction as well as environmental education, recreation, and of course, relaxation.

On the other hand, another narrative of the park simultaneously emerged. Organizers struggled with vandalism to vegetables and other plants in the first summer of planting. Organizers would enter the park only to find that tomatoes had been picked and used in fights; seeds and juice splattered over fences and neighboring

walls. Planted beds would have had the freshly planted seedlings pulled out of the soil, unable to be restored. Gardeners were disappointed and expressed their concerns to organizers. As one organizer conveyed, "it is frustrating to do all of this work and have our work ruined. But the fence just seems so unwelcoming." Others saw this in a different light, stating "if kids are going to use the tomatoes this way, and it is their park, why not let them? It's better than rocks or bullets" (Researcher's field notes). However, the following growing season, fewer tomatoes were planted.

Other forms of vandalism arose visibly as well. Graffiti tags became a regular occurrence, costing organizers time and money in removal. Again, it was suggested, that if the park is owned by the community and it can be used as a safe place to graffiti tag, maybe the graffiti artists could be invited to create a mural of their choosing. The idea was immediately dismissed and the quest for graffiti removal techniques endured. This conflict illustrates the tension around what community-owned meant. Organizers still had an idea of how the park should be used and these community-initiated suggestions were seen by organizers as inappropriate uses of the space.

Although organizers have begun to increase their collaborative efforts—to draw on a network of individuals with neighborhood affiliations to promote park activity, respond to vandalism and negative uses of the park, and increase park foot traffic—the community residents were not those making decisions regarding the park. This called into question the meaning of space influenced by a philanthropic act of doing something for a community, without consulting the community for which the gift is intended. Though residents note the role of the space as primarily positive, especially through the social interactions that take place through activities such as the reading circle and environmental education workshops, there is also a recognition that the park symbolizes do-gooder, top-down organizing. The struggle to symbolize change for the community, and how or if the park will continue to transform while meeting the needs of the surrounding community is yet to be seen.

Conclusion

Involvement in gardening activities often opens opportunities for networking and skill-building that may not have been immediately obvious. Studies on youth involvement show that participants were able to benefit by developing skills such as interpersonal communication, mapping, planning, and following directions through their involvement in gardening activities (Doyle & Krasny, 2003). While People's Park has offered social spaces for engagement and empowerment, it is the steering committee, not the community members, who were dominant as the primary organizers. They have begun to understand that their role as sole organizers is limiting to the park's success and have shifted their strategies in order to foster community ownership of the park.

The goal of People's Park was to provide a transformative space for members of a community in an urban space dense with industrial and residential properties, but very little green space. Community garden literature provides a backdrop for understanding the impacts of gardens on communities. Evidence shows that community gardens foster socialization among individuals, enhance the basic quality of life in a neighborhood, and offer basic avenues for enhancing community relations and empowerment. I examined how the meaning of this urban space has been transformed by the development of People's Park. However, the transformation is ongoing. Continued community engagement through park programming offers the best chance for long-term success for the park. Successful programming encourages participation that in turn encourages ownership and responsibility to be taken for the park. It also encourages socialization among community members at events. The spatial determinants of the park tend to be the physical and geographical realities of the park space; yet these have become less of a barrier to community use since community members have been engaged in a more grassroots approach to organizing.

In my study, I share a story of a social space that became actively challenged—from one of a vacant used space, to one that provides environmental justice opportunity and transformative potential for a community. Organizers hoped to address issues such as nature deficit disorder and other social conditions that can be resolved by offering a connection to nature for a youth and adult urban population; however, until they engaged the community, these ideas were not successfully realized. Today the park enjoys much more use than in the past, especially evident in the current uses of the park by refugees and the adult rehabilitation population. In essence, the role of a community garden and park signifies a space where one can engage in kinds of social interaction that differ from those inherent in a concrete, urban setting. People's Park has been successful in that goal—the transformations did influence the conceptual meaning of the space. However, the extent to which community empowerment was established is less certain. Arguably, initially, community members felt further burdened rather than empowered by this neighborhood transformation. In many ways, though, meaning is constantly evolving to meet the needs of park users at any particular time and space. By providing educational opportunities, offering sustainability initiatives, and enhancing community-building, and above all active engagement with community members, this site holds grand transformative potential for this community.

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