

PEOPLE'S PARK: STILL BLOOMING

BERKELEY LANDMARK CELEBRATES 40TH ANNIVERSARY

By Terri Compost

(This article is excerpted from "People's Park: Still Blooming" — see next page)

Some years ago, I stumbled upon a cut-up copy of "People's Park," Alan Copeland and Nikki Arai's 1969 collection of photos.

That book came out when the Park was surrounded by a chain-link fence and the story seemed over.

But it wasn't. For forty years, the spirit has lived on in the struggle for this land.

Tilling the soil of People's Park, I have found something precious, alive. It is not healthy and thriving. It is worn and tired, desperate, and in danger. Fed on kindness and sharing and persistence, this little light flickers in a cement capitalist world, in the shadow of a corporate university so lost from life that it mechanically destroys.

People's Park exposed all this.

And the Park is still an antidote. The Park turns the mad race for money on its head and relies on an economy of sharing. It brings people together in peace and equality.

It shows us the way to bring back nature to land that was built over. It



teaches us how to get along with others. It reconnects us with soil and life and the sacredness of the land.

It reminds us of the importance of history and our roles in it. It offers blossoms and birds, mud and softness to our poor city souls. It gives us

sustenance and purpose, a chance to make a difference, a chance to help. A place to sing and dance.

It is our victory, tattered as it is.

This small piece of land holds a big story: of creation and loss, cooperation and reclaiming, neglect and decay, celebration and persistence, but mostly of the sharing of common land.

Born in struggle during the Vietnam era in 1969, People's Park is a tale of people uniting to stand up to injustice. Many people's dreams, sweat, and tears nourish the soil of today's humble-appearing Park.

The Park is alive. It did and does embody the hopes of the sixties, and more. It also carries the scars and awkwardness of her brutal suppression as she came to bloom. She hides the shame of the father, misunderstanding his child and worse reacting with violence to her freedom and

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PHOTOS

This page — John Jekabson, April 1969

Next page — Zachary Ogen

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beauty. How much was lost? Could it have been other?

And yet miracle, she is still. And beautiful to me. And to many. Wretched, frightening, disgusting to others. What does she still tell and ask of us? Here she is with her failures and lack of becoming, her hope and incredible beauty, a place where miracles happen.

People's Park is such a trouble maker. And it attracts such a cast of characters. It remains free. Liberated by stubbornness, love, work, and rebellion.

So many claim her, people with not much to lose, people who still believe, people who need people and freedom and wildness.

There is truth here. The pulse of American travelers is measured on her skin. The health of society, the creativity of resistance, the hope of the people are all played out on her soil.

The web of people that remember, care and act for People's Park is tentative and fragile. There is such chaos in our lives: refugees, activists, dreamers, outcasts, survivors, those who think for ourselves, and try to be free



Zachary Ogen

in a controlled society, meeting in our sacred refuge to hold hands and know that community, land, hope, sharing... are here in our hands. Acts of obstinance and generosity, need, hope, loneliness, desire, but acts for the commons.

The web is fragile and yet the park has such deep roots and strong ghosts. They rise up to give us strength and righteousness. They call out supporters

hidden in the fabric of a society that seems to have forgotten. They link us with a larger struggle and remind us of the potency of symbolism.

The park is rebellious by nature. It comes to life when threatened. It doesn't behave.

The moment of history at which we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the creation of the park feels like a precipice. Berkeley, the country, humanity and nature are all falling into something else. Trying to hold onto what is alive.

As I write this, the University has plans to build a bunch of creepy evil labs up our precious Strawberry Creek Canyon in Berkeley... and what are you going to do about it?

Ever the bold nemesis, UC will rationalize the torture of millions of animal lives in its expanding labs at the top of University Avenue as if they are something to help humanity.

And which part of humanity will be killed by killing our animal kin and refusing even to talk about it? Nanotech, biotech, genetically engineered fuel crops. Hello... there is a web of life out here... talk to your Biology Department.

We know so little. With all our money and scientists we couldn't put

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NEW BOOK ABOUT PEOPLE'S PARK FROM SLINGSHOT

Edited by Terri Compost • Published by Slingshot Collective

This book is for those that hear the name "People's Park" and know deep down that the park is theirs and something to defend. And create.

"People's Park Still Blooming" is our family heirloom, our memories, our scrapbook, the story of the courage and hope that freed and tended this sacred piece of earth. It is for us to remember, but mostly it is for the next to come. This book is an attempt to capture the spirit and story of the Park.



It was published with the hope that, like seeds, copies will find fertile ground in the hearts of young people and encourage them to try again. We are connected. The land wants to live. Let a thousand Parks bloom.

Available at www.whoopdistro.org
Bulk copies: www.slingshot.tao.ca
Also available at Long Haul Infoshop, 3124 Shattuck Ave, Berkeley, CA 94705 — and at many independent bookstores.

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Strawberry Canyon together again. And is it to be UC's gift to the world — inventing a way to make it financially feasible to destroy “fallow” and wild lands the world over, so Americans can keep driving SUVs using biofuels? Not my idea of progress. Frankly it is tough to keep up with UC's uncaring “progress.”

Is People's Park a distraction? Is it a real example of resistance? There

have been few victories in stopping the UC steamroller. It's kind of a stand-off. Why does the Park matter now, as the world changes on large economic and ecological scales?

People's Park holds some secrets we will need to make it through the changes. Secrets like Sharing, Diversity, and Loving the Land. It is an ecological ark, and one of the most fertile and productive acres in the neighborhood. People's Park can show us how to turn asphalt to food gardens. How to make it work. How to take care of each other.

Like a bulb that pushes through the black dirt, we seek light, truth, the promise of something new. Justice, Peace, Life, Freedom. Can it bloom in the compost of chaos? Can we hold this land open and free enough to keep blooming? Can we hold away the jealousy, the fear, that want to control through concrete and pain?

Push, little bulb, push! We need your sweetness. Surprise us with your beauty. We need the Park.

Terri Compost has been a People's Park activist and user since riots there in 1991. She has attended protests and meetings, helped organize the People's Park Anniversary concerts, and nourished the soil of the Park's gardens, seeing how the Park has created community both through sharing and struggle. Terri has also helped create the North Altar at the San Francisco Spiral Dance for many years.



PHOTOS

Photographs by Lydia Gans.

Above: The Funky Nixons perform at a People's Park anniversary concert in the early 2000s. Reclaiming activist and saxophonist Dress is in the witch's cap.

Right: Food Not Bombs has served free meals in the Park on weekdays since 1991. Reclaiming co-founder Judy Foster is second from left, wielding the serving spoon.

