

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 28  
The People's Park Annex

1828 Delaware Street  
Berkeley, 94703  
20 July 1970

Mr. R. H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

There's not much book learning on the social uses of parks. "Parks are for People" the happy slogan says. Yet, even if the people were kings and their friends, or ilk (who, after all, had exclusive use of some great parks), the literature is mostly architectural. There are dusty acres of treatises, monographs and theses on landscape gardening, the proportion, decor, decoration, maintenance and style of parks, but practically nothing on how, and for what purposes, they are actually used.

The great American city parks created a vision and version of nature more charming and manageable than the real countryside beyond dense human settlement. Those parks inspired a good deal of naturalist literature, mostly composed on benches. It goes on about seasons, spring, birds, green and the general importance of grass. But, like the creed of museums that also evolved in the nineteenth century and grew like an unchallenged religion until quite recently, it was written from the smug vantage point of the haut bourgeois elitist-- the "stand back and admire, don't touch, be quiet" school of appreciation.

This newsletter is about a small, dig in it, get dirty, sit in the sun, tend a garden, build something city park. It's quite new and it may not last. It's scruffy to look at from a passing car, but friendly and increasingly comfortable for the neighborhood people who use it. The People's Park Annex is just around the corner from where I live. It's my neighborhood park, and since I use it too I am not dispassionate about it. Its initial transformation from an empty lot to a park was political and widely publicized, but since then, most people have forgotten it. I think it is an interesting and encouraging experiment, not for any revolutionary political reasons but because the use pattern and facilities that are developing there are clearly related to the increasingly complex problems of urban recreation.

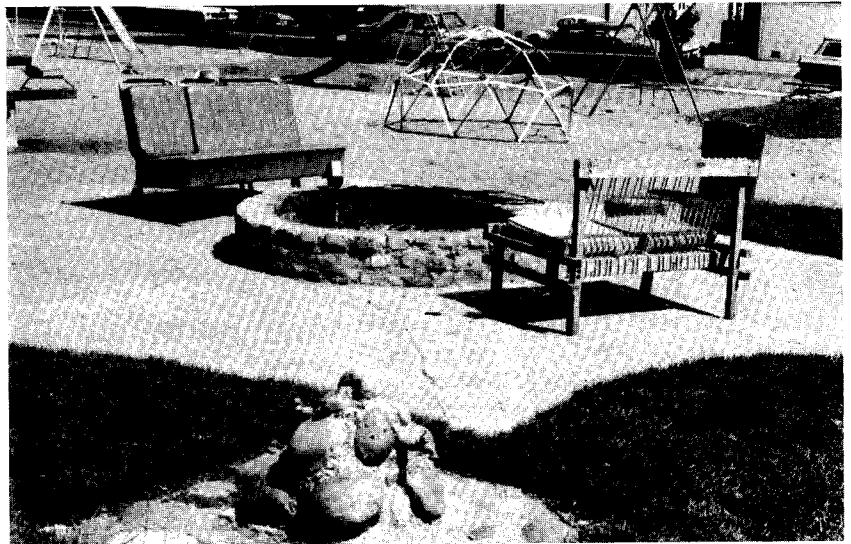
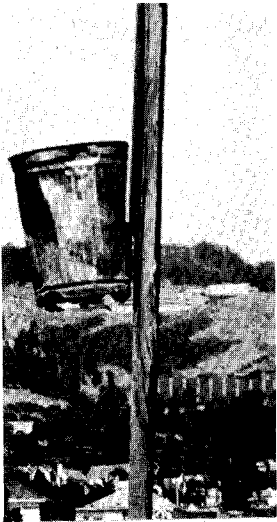
Residential suburbs have existed as long as some people could afford to live beyond the overcrowding and unsanitary conditions characteristic of cities. Today we are told most Americans live in suburbs. But smog hangs over whole regions, while at ground level the double strand lariat of housing and highways tightens around the medium sized cities as well as the megalopolis. The positive American definition of sub-urban life always included and usually emphasized

recreational open space, agreeing with Ralph Waldo Emerson that "There is no police so effective as a good hill and wide pasture in the neighborhood of a village where the boys can run and play and dispose of their superfluous strength and spirits." The difference between city and suburb when Emerson confided that nugget to his Journal, in 1865, was almost the same as between city and rural village. Today's suburbs are not easily mistaken for rural villages; indeed, the difference between many inner city and inner suburban neighborhoods is blurring fast. Low density residential districts sprawl between highway borders. Increasing numbers of families as well as singles and retired people live in apartments. The decline of public transportation leaves the poor, the young, and the old in the neighborhood, while the rest of the society wheels freely (traffic permitting).

In 1966 the California Department of Parks and Recreation issued a series of brisk studies called "Outdoor Recreation Outlook to 1980." The reports defined outdoor recreation "of public importance" as: passive outdoor pursuits, physically active pursuits, water and winter sports, and "back country recreation," and concentrated on development of facilities within an hour's driving time of metropolitan areas. The recommendations were based on an unexplained projected increase in free time between 1966 and 1980 of 84%, most of it on weekday evenings, rather than three day weekends or longer vacation blocks.

If you think about extra week night hours of free time, and how ephemeral they are when meshed into the routine of daily living--child and house care, and community organizations and obligations--it's strange the report made no mention whatsoever of the need for increased local recreation facilities. The apparent explanation is twofold--the recreation professionals are geared to thinking in terms of mass society mass needs, (i.e. public importance) not neighborhoods and small groups, and they think in terms of convenience, organization and administration.

For many homeowners maintenance chores fill up free time but are not really leisure activities, done for their own sake and satisfaction. The section on lawns in the fascinating paper called Planning and the Purchase Decision by the University of California sociologists and planners Werthman, Mandel and Dienstfrey gives long excerpts from intensive interviews with home owners in two California subdivisions styled new towns. The summary view might be that of a dentist who explained "Whenever you buy a home you should always buy with the idea of reselling it. (Would it be difficult to sell?) We won't have a bit of trouble here as long as people keep up their lawns." The social pressure and investment obligation on exterior maintenance applies across the middle class in city and suburban single-family neighborhoods.



Furthermore, as the remaining bits of suburban land are developed, the suburban quality of being at the edge of nature vanishes into the sense of "in the middle'ness" just as surely as it does in a city. Thus A.E. Parr's observation of the plight of the city child increasingly applies in the suburbs as well:

The autonomous cruising radius of the urban child has been drastically reduced by parental injunction and public interference. The pre-school child is rarely permitted to move alone in the streets, and then not far beyond sight of his front doorstep...The child is taken to where it has to, or wants to go, by parents or their surrogates, and the pupil is later transported from home to school and back again under the command of adults.

The People's Park Annex is in a lower middle class, working class residential neighborhood. There are main streets one block east and two blocks south of the Annex that have constantly heavy traffic, and Hearst Avenue itself gets a lot of rush hour use. Mainly, however, it is very quiet. The large shingle houses are almost all divided into flats. There are some small apartment buildings in the area, but west of the park it's mainly old California bungalows. The area is racially mixed with increasing numbers of blacks as well as long-resident oriental families. Of course there are a lot of students living in the vicinity, but it is nowhere near being a youth ghetto like the south campus. It is an inner suburb, fully developed to a low density; all the lots have gardens, but they are small, children on bicycles roam quite freely, younger ones don't. Street play with balls, bikes and frisbees is common. There is a municipally maintained Tot Lot a few blocks north of the Annex. It's small, tidy and fenced. It seems to get a lot of morning use but is empty most of the rest of the time. (I heard that the lady who runs a nearby nursery school tries to segregate her charges and, more importantly, their toys, from the other children.)

Alone in the East Bay, the City of Berkeley chose to spend extra money to run the new rapid transit lines underground. Obediently, the concrete BART trestles disappear at the Oakland border, run underneath Shattuck Avenue, the main commercial thoroughfare, then jog west toward the bay just beyond the University of California and turn north again a half mile down the flatlands and emerge soon thereafter in Albany.

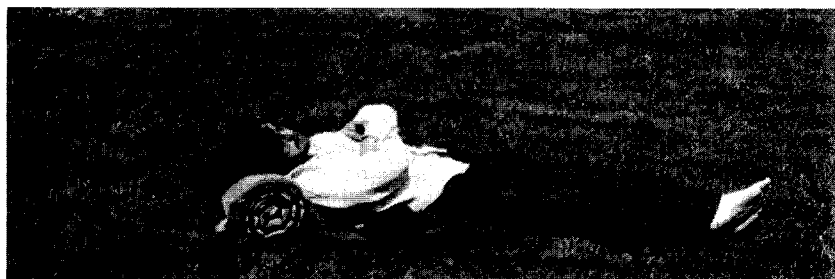
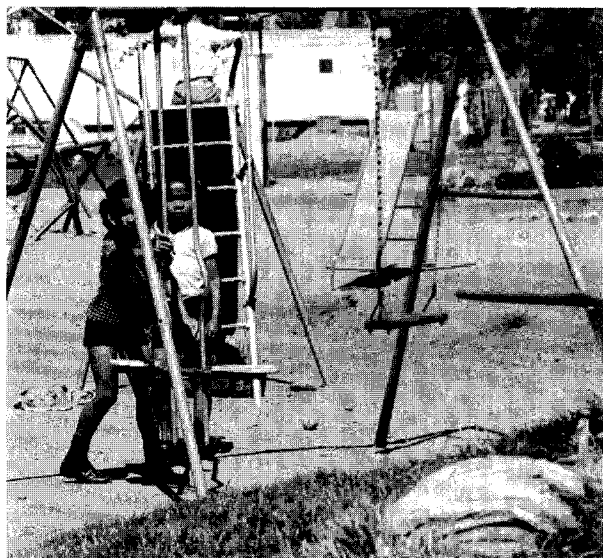
BART cleared existing housing 1/2 block deep along Hearst Avenue for the western job, tunnelled in, shoveled over and moved on. The six block strip was left bare and empty, with vague plans to develop apartment housing and parking spaces some time in the future after BART begins operating.

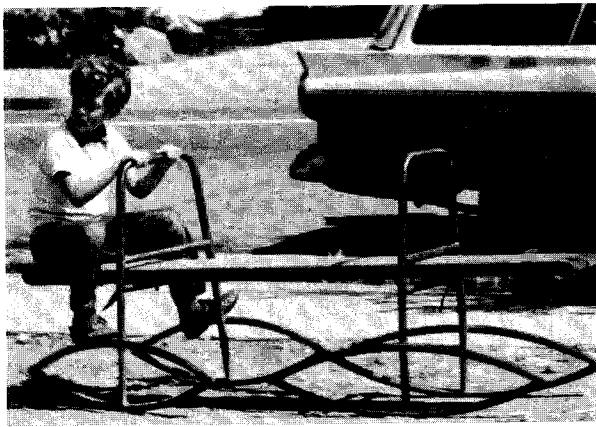
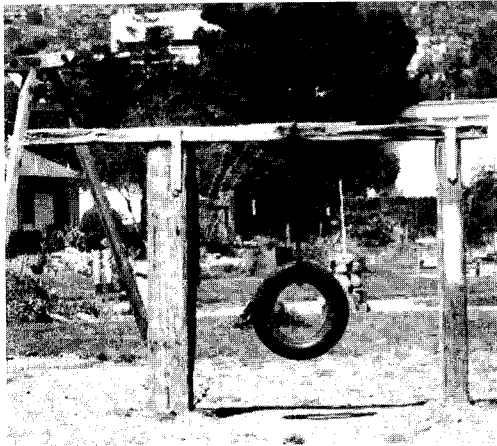
In the aftermath of the People's Park nightmare in May last year, a vanguard of "street people" activists and ordinarys "claimed" about half of one of the BART blocks by hastily putting down some sod, flowers and toys. Unlike the University, the Governor, the County Sheriff and the National Guard, who, in turn, panicked, called a state of emergency and ordered out troops, allowed deputies to use loaded shotguns (wounding 35 and killing one), and dropped tear gas from a helicopter over the central part of the university campus in the dispute over the Haste Street People's Park, BART promptly leased the empty block in question to the City for a dollar a year-- and vanished from view. Thus the People's Park Annex was born.

The land on Haste Street, the original People's Park, was and is a very political plot. The University cleared the existing housing just behind Telegraph Avenue, the commercial strip at its south entrance. Telegraph lures the young from near and far like honey bait. Drugged, politicized, or simply curious they cluster and swarm the six block strip day and night. The surrounding area is a youth ghetto, congested with cops, kids, cars, and drugs. The mood in the last few years has grown mean and tense. Everything is hemmed in by university construction and expansion. The idea of the park, which the Daily Californian perceived quickly noting "The revolution began last Sunday at the corner of Haste Street" was, without doubt, a very good one. It appealed to the activists because it was an action against the University and for the community. It appealed to the street people--it promised space, action and diversion close to Telegraph Avenue. It appealed to the Telegraph Avenue merchants who would dearly like to see the action moved away from their windows, or what is left of them.

According to the 34-block random survey the College of Environmental Design did before the park's demise, 80% of the population in the area was between 19 and 29 years old. 94% did not consider the park a nuisance. Some 56% were pleased with the idea of a community-developed park. An unusual number of people actually donated labor in fixing up the park, and the scene radiated "good vibes."

The horror of the end of the People's Park, the death of James Rector, the state of emergency, and the national guard, did "radicalize" a middle American section of non-student Berkeley in a way the rest of the country has difficulty understanding even now, after Kent State and Jackson State. A park is as fine a symbol as a child. To be wounded or to die for a park is somehow worse, or more horribly irrational than to die in protest of a military invasion. The land opposite one of the most beautiful buildings of the twentieth century, Bernard Maybeck's Christian Science Church, has effectively been hallowed. During the summer of '69 armed guards sat inside the chicken wire fence glaring back at passers by. In the fall the University re-sodded two thirds of the plot for playing fields and offered it to the Intrafraternity Council which quickly refused to use it, as did the student government. The





western third was paved for a parking lot. A local black self-help group was invited to take the concession but refused. At Christmas a southern California firm took the contract. In the first week memorial pickets reminded the one or two people who used the lot where they were leaving their cars. Now nothing but conscience keeps it empty or nearly so. One strip of the unused grass has recently been paved for a university parking lot--(i.e. permit required) but, of course it, too, is unused.

If the People's Park is remembered still, the People's Park Annex was quickly forgotten. Activists from People's Office, a few blocks away, were more interested in developing the Berkeley Tenants Union and trying to organize a rent strike, although a few architecture students stuck with the park. The first fence slogan painting phase of the Annex ended around the time the winos moved into the park last summer. They didn't stay long either. Abandoned by the People and the derelicts, the park was left in the care of its neighbors.

The principle of an adventure playground is very simple. It is "a recreational space where children are permitted and encouraged to build their own play environment under adult supervision." De facto adventure playgrounds--places where kids build and battle over their dream worlds--have always existed without permission and without supervision in vacant city lots. For some they were more fun than organized, supervised, game play; for many there was, and still is, no alternative.

The first international adventure playground was established in Denmark during the second World War and is still used. English children imagined bombed out vacant lots into playgrounds and used them as such before their games in the rubble were sanctioned as proper "adventure" by adults. Since then, the idea of play areas with things rather than equipment, tools rather than toys and open ended play have been accepted all over Europe. They are especially popular in England where they are found in many of the new towns as well as older cities and large suburban housing estates. They range widely in size and amenities but are always popular.

Even so, there is a lingering adult anxiety about them. They are messy. There is just no way that an adventure playground can ever look like the Bois de Boulogne or even Gramercy Park. Despite a rational, or even an intellectual, understanding and agreement with the idea of children playing at building things, burrowing, stacking, or just fooling around, the clutter bothers a lot of grown ups.



The anxiety behind the stated anxiety at all the clutter may explain why adventure playgrounds have not seeded themselves across the United States. There have been a few unnecessarily expensive foundation or philanthropically financed model playgrounds notably in New York and Washington. Scattered neighborhoods in cities as dissimilar as New York, Minneapolis and Richmond, California, have allowed bits of blight to be adapted into playgrounds and then boasted of their transformation. Americans somehow believe that the play of school age children, unlike the play of infants and toddlers, ought to be organized. Therefore they are suspicious of the very idea of adventure play. This, despite evidence that adults usually describe unorganized play experience when they reminisce about their own happiest childhood memories.

According to Herbert Gans, the urban and suburban sociologist, whose Ph.D. dissertation was on recreation planning, the shift to organized sports came around the time of the first World War when responsibility for public recreation was transferred from voluntary associations to municipal agencies. (Does a cynic sniff the rhetoric of administrative convenience?) The emphasis, moreover, has not merely been on organized athletics, but on competitive sports. So the "purpose" of play, in addition to physical fitness, gradually incorporated the myth of playing by the rules, socialized uniformity in the guise of good sportsmanship. Various sports became touchstones of social mobility for individuals from a range of minority groups. The cheap popular sports--boxing, baseball and basketball, along with track and field--naturally produced more minority stars and professionals than the expensive individual athletic events--tennis, skiing and swimming. The emphasis on organized athletics is reflected in the white-lined asphalt playgrounds all over the nation, whose purpose, as Mayer Spivak put it "seems to be to challenge and exhaust the child through physical activity with a variety of intriguing and enjoyable muscle testing experiences...(but) for the child who wants to build, or dig, or hide, or sing, or tell stories and listen to them, there is no proper setting." For a child with a place to play at home or freedom to roam the limitations of organized recreation may not matter. For children with no options but public facilities it is another matter.

At the Center for Planning and Development Research in Berkeley, Clare Cooper has recently published an informal and readable paper with the very academic title "The Adventure Playground: Creative Play in an Urban Setting and a Potential Focus for Community Involvement." She offers an elaborate definition of a full fledged adventure playground, but notes that even with full-time adult staff, a sheltered area for foul weather and full toilet facilities, adventure playgrounds are cheap to establish and maintain. She details the variety of activities that surprising numbers of children of different ages can participate in on decidedly small sites, and reports examples of reduced vandalism in areas around existing adventure playgrounds.

Adventure playgrounds, as she describes them, are inevitably neighborhood playgrounds. They are immediately and independently accessible to their pedestrian users. They are obvious community centers and objects for community, i.e. adult organization and support.

There is no reason, except carefully socialized self-consciousness, why there shouldn't be adventure playgrounds for adults. They are quite acceptable commercially if they are called amusement parks, resorts, Las Vegas, or dude ranches. But why not close to home? Why not self-constructed fantasy environments, or projects? Why not indeed?

BART leased the block of the People's Park Annex to the City of Berkeley for \$1 with the public understanding that nothing permanent would be built on the site and that no one would sleep in the park overnight. BART left a dittoed notice to that effect on the back of the bulletin board poster in the corner. The city has contributed nothing to the construction or maintenance of the park. It has all been put together from leavings. People have left a bizarre assortment of things in the park and a surprising number have been put to good use. Old car seats became benches. One car tire was carved into a snug swing, another whole one is also a swing. A tin garbage can without a bottom became a basketball hoop. Lumber was pieced together into swings, a sand box, toys. The East Bay Regional Park District dropped off some broken picnic tables from Tilden Park that were repaired and are sturdy again. Plants, toys, even seedlings were left at the curb. One day a man dropped off a load of bricks and pipe from the demolition of something. The bricks, as is their fate in a college town, disappeared to bookshelves, and perhaps pave patios. The pipes lay in a heap on the ground. Then, one day a man with a torch appeared and began welding the pipe into a free form jungle jim. He said he was from L.A. and had made one there. He painted his finished thing bright red and yellow and moved on to build another one someplace else. Donated paint covers a lot of things made out of pipe, old toys, battered garbage cans and barrels. There are also a lot of signs.

The park is supported by donations left in the padlocked boxes or sent to the post office box Bob Smith has set up for it. Averaged out, the park gets about \$2 a day, but most of it comes on weekends. During the week the box is usually empty, although it is checked several times a day. There was one major cash contribution just after Christmas and the \$100 was spent on seedlings planted at the western end of the site. Most of them seem to be surviving.

It's a good park. A lot of things happen in one long half block. There is a sandbox and swing area for small children, toy houses, and large play equipment for older kids. There are lawns for sitting on or sunbathing, benches for sitting, picnic tables, and a few barbecues. There are also gardens, a drinking fountain, a man-made hill and creek and the free tables.

The free tables at the western curb side of the park are in the political spirit of the park's founders. The sign says it all, Free useable only, items please. What mostly accumulates are clothes and shoes, although there is a table for pots, pans, glasses and china. Occasionally a book, radio, records, or even an old television set appear. Scavengers of all ages frequently check the tables. At first it was used mostly by hippies and kids. The "straight" looking also poke through the piles. Lately black people from the neighborhood and other areas arriving in cars, have been using the tables. The whole park is an experiment that works on the basis of consent and cooperation. The free tables are the most vulnerable of the innovative components because they can be abused so easily by strangers. There is a problem right now with people using the free tables as a free dump, which isn't fair. There is also a problem with litter, which isn't nice.

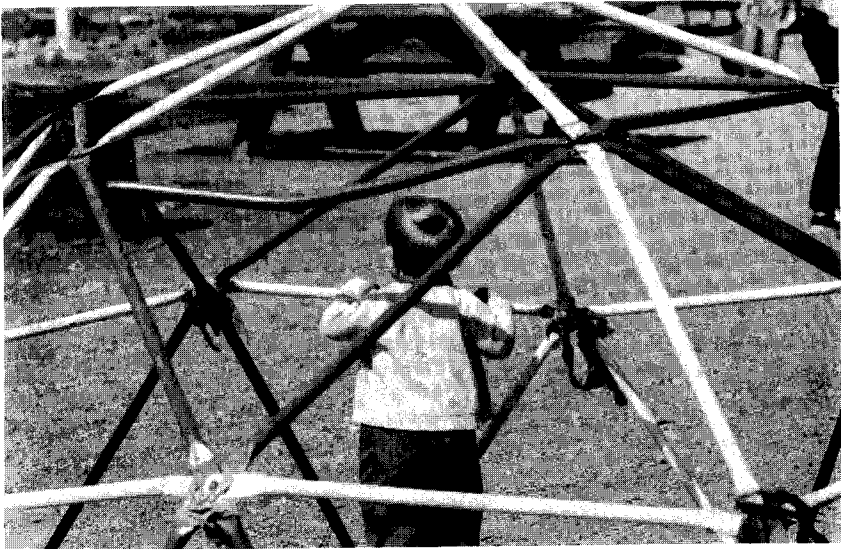
As an unauthorized, unserviced, ongoing facility the park has three main problems: maintenance, refuse and water. The last was easiest solved. The People's Park has an account with the East Bay MUD (Municipal Utility District--the water company) and has a free flowing drinking fountain and three sprinkler heads paid for from the donated funds. The summer water bill runs \$50 a month. It is the major cash expense. The park has brightly painted garbage cans, but no regular access to a truck to haul them to the city dump. The rubbish accumulates very quickly, and there is no solution in sight.

If the academic revolutionary theories were more than words, innovation in the park and maintenance would be no problem at all. But it is not the best of all possible worlds and Candide is home minding his own garden. Meanwhile an a-political corps of self-appointed park leaders has appeared and very quietly taken charge. There were perhaps a dozen in all. Four or five regulars, plus Bob Smith who is there all the time, take care of the park. They are all men, all thirty or over, and the park is all they had in common when they started working there.

Smith, who is as long as Lincoln, bearded, and always wears a floppy felt hat that somehow gives him the aura of a mountain man, was a high school teacher in rural California for a while, and before that a graduate student at Princeton. He had decided to take a year or two off and had moved his wife and two sons to Berkeley last summer. They live in an apartment a block away from the park.

The peering professionals--planners, architects, revolutionaries, etc., who stop to look at the park and take slides for their collections--always include Smith because he's there and because he's so...picturesque. He keeps the gardens going, changes the locks on the well stocked portable tool shed when vandals break into it, notices wandering children and dogs, encourages games, gardens and people, and keeps meticulous account books for the park.





Norman, craggy-faced, grey-haired and probably somewhere in his 40's, is a furniture salesman three days a week. He keeps a vegetable garden at his uncle's house where he lives, but tends the tree forest - free table area of the park at least part of most days. His nephew from Fresno who spends the summers with him in Berkeley got a free Siamese kitten in the park one day recently and named it Ugh.

Howard works mostly on the lawns--watering, cutting, fertilizing, re-seeding, and watering some more. The park has just bought a new, used, lawn mower. One of the garden plot couples is putting in a new piece of lawn.

The volunteer and private purpose gardening is another of the tenuous experiments in the park. About ten people started twenty-foot plots late in the winter, a few have worked dilligently, as dilligently as Bob Smith, and are now harvesting a full range of garden produce from radishes to corn via squash, onions, beets, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, and eggplant. The most enthusiastic made rubble stone borders around their plots and trimmed them with flowers. Some lost interest and faded away. Smith kept up most of their plots, or suggested to new enthusiasts that they harvest what was already planted before starting new plots. Wild blackberries grow against the back fence and a young apple tree that somehow escaped BART's tractors is loaded with fruit. Two women have gardens--one, a small patch of struggling herbs, the other an extensive and thriving display of succulents.

I am bemused by the passion of apartment dwellers for gardening. Allotment gardens have a long history. Ebenezer Howard included them in his Garden Cities along with the Agricultural Greenbelt so theoretically the workers would produce their own food as well as manufactured goods in that tidy mercantile world. When the British started building new towns they automatically included acreage appropriations for allotment gardens, as automatically as they assumed they should build 90% rental housing and that only one family in five would have a car. By the late sixties allotment gardens were being paved over into parking lots. When I lived in Harlow there was a wistful cancellation stamp that used to amuse my correspondents whose letters would arrive asking "Dig Harlow? Dig and allotment!" The optional allotment could be a recreational solution for the person who likes to dig and putter but lives in an apartment in a city, suburb or countryside. The crucial word is optional. The New York Times occasionally describes the dedicated city gardeners who persist in corners of Washington Square or the islands of Broadway. The Garden Club of the Nathan Strauss Houses, an older public project on East 28th Street works intensive wonders in one flower bed and some tubs every summer. But how many other housing projects--subsidized or luxury--permit, let alone encourage residents to putter on the premises? Balcony gardens and window boxes convince me that urban Americans are no different from anybody else. Touring housing projects in Poland and Mexico, Scandinavia--high-rise urban housing

for all kinds of people at all price ranges--I saw some sort of balcony for storage, garden, fresh air, included in design and in use almost everywhere. But not in the United States. And there is no reason why.

Anyway, there is no natural topsoil in the Annex. Some was donated. The gardeners carefully nurture their compost heaps. Natural fertilizers are also gratefully received. (The gardening, of course, is organic.) Some people bring cocoa chips from the Co-op (\$2 for 40 lbs.) and spread it around before trying to loosen the soil. Occasionally the park fund accumulates \$50 for a truckload of sewer sludge which is spread over both the lawns and gardens. Low chicken wire fences around most of the gardens discourage galloping dogs, frisbee and football players.

An architect designed and built most of the hill earth-work in the park, and about half planted it with flowers. The other half is still bare and lacks topsoil but is perfect for king-of-the-mountain type games and gets a good deal of use from neighborhood boys.

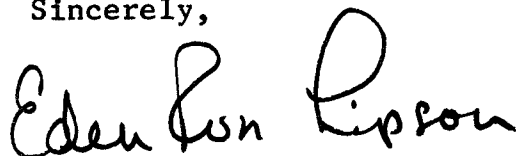
Many of the park regulars never meet, or meet only on occasional weekends. One young man works nights at a shipping company. He and his girl friend garden early in the morning. Others stop in the park in the late afternoon on the way home from work, and there are after dinner strollers who kibbitz and visit with the gardeners but never see the day time children and mothers or teenagers. Last fall a hate filled stranger poisoned some of the trees and plantings at the east end of the park. The incident has not been repeated.

The theory of the self-started People's Park committee and its friends is that if the park lasts for five years the city of Berkeley will have to accept it as a permanent installation and protect it from development. There is no guarantee it can last that long. There is a constant turnover of users in addition to the regulars and their enthusiasm waxes and wanes. There is no way to insure anyone's continued commitment to the park. No one thanks the people who clean it up, and only some of the users share the work. The fact that the park steadily looks nicer and more inviting helps keep it going. If it were to go into a decline it might not be salvageable. Should the park be politically threatened--by BART or the city--a coalition of radicals, street people and residents would rally round for meetings and demonstrations. Berkeley is very good for that kind of participation. Long on words and short on sweat. But if the faithful, men like Bob Smith or Howard, left abruptly the park would really be in trouble. There isn't enough of a community.

The People's Park Annex may not be authorized, or have any permanent physical amenities, but it clearly is a kind of community adventure playground complete with self-trained leadership. It is not a children's playground although kids use and enjoy it. In many ways it is more of an adventure for the adults. Standing back from its Berkeley-ness--long hair, slogans, succulent gardens shaped like the peace symbol--it has at least four intangible but replicable qualities. It has no limits. It encourages individuals to do their own "thing" at their own convenience. The variety of activities encourages respect for old time virtues and skills, like industry, gardening, enthusiasm, carpentry, and patience. And, the park makes use of existing materials. In an age of inflation and a time of declining budgets for civic distraction projects, it costs practically nothing.

The United States is a land of easy opportunity, including a lot of lost ones. A great many people recognize the disastrous inequities and disparities in urban America and despair. But so much hand wringing, like so much planning, and grant giving, and financing goes on at a mass scale; small chances for improvement are missed almost systematically. The outer city and innersuburban residential rings developed haphazardly and defensively, using the legal tricks of zoning to fend off further change or responsibility. The need for flexible, local recreation facilities is creeping up behind them. Local recreation, by definition, can't rouse the interest or the passions of conservationists or prominent politicians. It's just another annoyance for middle Americans. Another avoidable annoyance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Eden Ron Ripson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name "Eden Ron Ripson".

Received in New York on July 24, 1970.