

# Another piece of occupied land: People's Park

*More than 40 years on, the creation of People's Park remains an inspiration for modern movements*

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The year was 1968, the place Berkeley, Calif. When eco-activist Chuck Herrick was killed in a car accident, a few of Chuck's friends planted trees and flowers on a piece of public land at the corner of Dwight Way and Telegraph Avenue, near the University of California. We called the small area Herrick Peace & Freedom Park. The Berkeley Barb, an underground newspaper, called it a "people's park." For a few months, in Chuck's memory, we served free soup and bread at the small piece of "liberated land."

A couple of months later, people started planting flowers on vacant land a few blocks away at Dwight Way and Haste Street. The land, owned by the University of California, Berkeley (UC), was the subject of controversy. Students — until evicted by the university in mid-term — had lived in the large homes that once stood on the square block of land. The students had pleaded with UC to let them stay at least until the end of the semester, but the university administration insisted they needed the land right away. The houses remained vacant for months, eventually becoming crash pads. The administration threw out the trespassers, and in a city with a desperate need for student housing, razed the buildings. The lot turned into a muddy wasteland.

Word of mouth and the Berkeley Barb (cell phones and the Internet did not exist) helped swell the first trickle of gardeners into hundreds of ad hoc beautifiers. Weekends turned into huge parties. Artists brought sculptures. Meandering brick walks were laid down. Merchants on Telegraph Avenue donated money to purchase trees and bushes. The "hippies," instead of hanging out in front of the Telegraph Avenue stores, moved over to the park and solved what merchants considered

a major problem — blocked doorways that turned away customers. A makeshift sign went up in the blossoming lot — "People's Park". The architect Sim Van der Ryn, Professor of Ecological Design at UC, attempted to negotiate with the campus administration to keep People's Park intact. Van der Ryn proposed that the park become a laboratory the landscape architecture department could study. He noted that at a time when it was involved in planning

open spaces and parks, hundreds were creating People's Park.

The Berkeley Gazette (an ultra-conservative newspaper) quoted Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver calling for "the people" to seize all vacant land and grow food for the poor. The UC administration



LONNIE WILSON, PHOTOGRAPHER. COLLECTION OF OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA. THE OAKLAND TRIBUNE COLLECTION.



PHOTO BY NICK ANG WILSON

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reacted, and while the negotiating talks with Van der Ryn were in progress, hastily erected a chain-link fence around the park to keep people out. On May 15, 1969, a burgeoning crowd rallied on the Berkeley campus, marched to the park, and stormed the fence, pulling it down. Sheriff's deputies in riot gear were called to disperse the crowd. Faced with the show of force, people retreated up Telegraph Avenue, blocking traffic. Someone threw a rock. The lawmen fired.

Over a hundred demonstrators and sheriff's deputies were injured in the melee. Two bystanders watching from a rooftop were hit by sheriff's buckshot. One, an art student, Allen Blanchard, was blinded; the other bystander, James Rector, was killed.

Returning home that night, we saw a note pinned to our door. It was from Charlie Devlin, a pacifist and dedicated environmental activist. Charlie quoted Golly Jipson: "This is not the vision I had."

Amid the furor, Councilman Ron Dellums was the only elected official who made any sense. At an emergency Berkeley City Council meeting, Dellums said, "No crummy piece of land is worth a human life."

The ex-Hollywood actor, Governor Ronald Reagan, called out the California National Guard, and a curfew went into effect.

Coming back from Oakland, we were halted at the Berkeley border and had to produce evidence of where we lived. Other cars were turned back.

National guardsmen — young guys, who

were from rural areas and who, in all likelihood, had joined the guard as a means to avoid the draft — were stationed on street corners throughout Berkeley, guns at their sides. A large contingent protected the new fence. The guardsmen stood with rifles drawn, keeping the crowd at bay as policemen in riot gear, stationed behind the fence, pulled up the flowers and plants in "People's Park".

Students approached the guardsmen without hostility, speaking softly; some put flowers in the gun barrels. A coed standing next to me took off her blouse, shimmying her exposed breasts as the crowd chanted: "Make love, not war!" For one guardsman it was all too much; he put down his rifle, sat on the pavement and cried.

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A few days after the guerrilla planting, my husband and I were having lunch with Stephen, our five-year-old, in downtown Berkeley. Emerging from the restaurant, we

*Above top, police march against protesters during the demonstrations in defense of People's Park. Above, People's Park as it looks today.*

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