SAN FRANCISCO'S PARK POLICY
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:
GOALS VERSUS OUTCOMES

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Since its inception in 1870, San Francisco's Golden Gate Park has played host to millions of nature and sports enthusiasts. Today the park's green meadows, groves of trees, and special events attract more visitors than ever before. By the standards of Jane Jacobs and of many urban planners, Golden Gate Park's ability to attract a large number of people categorizes the park as a success. Ironically, the beauty of the park and its naturalistic image are deteriorating as a result of the combination of intensive use and insufficient maintenance. The park's fragile woodlands are suffering permanent damage from increased auto emissions, inadequate upkeep, and old age. According to a recent survey by the State Department of Forestry, nearly one-fifth of the park's 33,343 trees are in a poor, dying, or dead state.

The original function of Golden Gate Park, as a naturalistic retreat from urban life, is further curtailed by clamorous activities such as rock concerts and disco roller skating, which play a large role in park life. Whether the park should serve its constituency as a naturalistic resort or as an arena for boisterous recreational activities is an unresolved issue facing contemporary park administrators. In the words of Deborah Learner, assistant coordinator of "The Plan for Golden Gate Park," "On the one side you have the concept of the park as a sea of tranquility, a chance to get out into the woods and forget your cares; now on the other side, you have a departure from the original intent of the park with disco roller-skating at the height.

"The Plan for Golden Gate Park," adopted May 24, 1979, fails to resolve this issue. Although the Plan clearly states the Commission's primary goals—to preserve and protect the park's naturalistic image—the plan does not specify how or when this will be accomplished. The Plan addresses the need to curtail boisterous pastimes and vehicular traffic which destroy the rural image of the park, but meanwhile these activities continue to disrupt park life. This split between ideology and practice is a result of the administrators' commitment to democratic practices; rather than exclude popular pursuits, they allow a variety of often conflicting activities such as bird watchers and rock concerts to use the park simultaneously.

This policy of accommodation has led to criticism from San Francisco citizens and from special interest groups. Jeanne Leppaz, Vice President of the Friends of Golden Gate Park, at a Public Hearing of the Recreation and Parks Commission, declared, "There is no reason why anarchy should be allowed to prevail among competing sports and between their practitioners and pedestrians. Yet anarchy is the current state of affairs. Notice should be served that the park is primarily for walkers and for quiet


pursuits that do not infringe upon its enjoyment by others. Those wishing to pursue activities based on noise and special equipment should know that there are controls on such pursuits, know what they are, and know they will be enforced.\textsuperscript{15}

Today many special-interest groups adopt the rhetoric found in nineteenth-century park commission reports to justify their opinions regarding Golden Gate Park’s role in contemporary society. Authors of the latest “Plan for Golden Gate Park” themselves found inspiration in nineteenth-century Park Commission Reports. They noted particular passages from park superintendent William Hammond Hall’s 1873 progress report, which defined the park as a rural retreat from urban life: “Parks are directly influential in promoting enjoyment and popularizing healthful recreation... their influence upon the mind is scarcely less to be appreciated... the greatest benefit [is] derived from the quieting and salutary effect of the surroundings of the visitor, in contrast with the rush and turmoil of urban life.\textsuperscript{6}

Nineteenth-century park policy established the form and activities of most large American urban parks.\textsuperscript{7} Using Golden Gate Park as a model, this paper describes the ideology that underlay nineteenth-century park policy and continues to produce ambivalence in park policy today. The social goals invested in Golden Gate Park and the personal biases of nineteenth-century commissioners establish one direction for park design and management. A contrast of San Francisco’s elite and popular cultures\textsuperscript{8} in light of recreation in Golden Gate Park suggests another more populist direction for park management that the commissioners resisted.

The rural image of a park, as a pastoral retreat from the squalor of the city, attracted nineteenth-century reformers. San Francisco’s Park Commissioners, like others elsewhere, believed that “unhealthfulness is a concomitant of all cities.”\textsuperscript{9} City leaders argued that San Francisco’s urban problems, including lack of sanitation, density of population, and perceived moral decay, could be alleviated by Golden Gate Park.\textsuperscript{10}

Public health was one of the strongest arguments for urban parks.\textsuperscript{11} Prior to Pasteur’s formulation of the germ theory of disease in the 1880s, doctors believed that noxious gases emanating from swamps fouled the air and spread disease. Health officials thought that a tree-planted, unpopulated reserve would counteract the foul gases in the air and provide “lungs for the city.” Planners naively assumed that the population would be “attracted to the salutary place of resort and away from dens of intemperance and vice.”\textsuperscript{12}

Those who supported an urban park also hoped it would reduce racial tension mounting within the city. Completion of the transcontinental railroad (1870) brought an influx of Chinese immigrant laborers into San Francisco. Competition for scarce jobs and a lack of common culture exacerbated racial strife in ghetto neighborhoods. City leaders believed that both European and Asian immigrants using the park would emulate the mores of the dominant culture, and thereby the park would reduce cultural discrepancies which led to conflict between ethnic groups. The park, as a cure-all of urban ills, would serve as a forum for the acculturation of immigrants by providing a theater of American ideals.

In addition, park advocates believed an urban park would reduce potential conflict between socioeconomic classes. The notion of joint proprietorship of the park presum-

\textsuperscript{5}San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, minutes of the Special Meeting of May 24, 1979.
\textsuperscript{6} Office of the Recreation and Park Department, Inter-Departmental Memorandum from the staff of “The Plan for Golden Gate Park” to the Parks Committee, dated December 14, 1977.
\textsuperscript{8}The term “popular culture” refers to “the most visible level of culture, that found between the extremes of the elite and folk cultures.” This definition is one of several found in Thomas M. Kando, Leisure and Popular Culture in Transition, St. Louis: Mosby Co., 1975.
\textsuperscript{9}Report of the Park Commissioners, San Francisco, 1890, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{10}Cran, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{11}Cran, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{12}Report of the Park Commissioners, San Francisco, 1890, p. 8.
ably would encourage those who suffered from the inequities of the emerging industrial economy and/or were subjected to squalid ghetto conditions. Lastly, they credited the “quiet effect” of the park environment with the ability “to subdue without the interposition of police any unruly designs intended by the few.”13 In this sense those who argued for an urban park intended to use it as a mechanism of political manipulation, as well as a mechanism of socialization.

Once the campaign for a natural reserve had succeeded, Mayor McCoppin appointed a Park Commission in 1871 to develop Golden Gate Park. Commissioners were invariably white, upper-class males. Representative of this body was Commissioner Adolf Spreckels, son of millionaire tycoon Claus Spreckels, who had founded San Francisco’s first sugar refining plant and had revolutionized the industry by introducing a shortened refining process. Adolf Spreckels and his fellow commissioners felt no compunctions about imposing their values on the park milieu. They felt that the people should be exposed to activities which were in advance of popular tastes, in order to uplift and civilize the commons; and they felt, on the principle of noblesse oblige, that it was their duty to provide the masses with these activities. Park Commission reports explicitly stated the attitude commissioners adopted in developing Golden Gate Park: “[It is] the duty of every wealthy community to foster such elements of refining influence as will tend toward a cultivation of its least favored members.”14 Many of the San Francisco Park Commission’s goals typified the nineteenth-century park movement in America as embodied in New York’s Central Park, Boston’s Franklin Park, and Chicago’s Washington Park, but they were also a reaction to the city’s unique cultural history.

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 foretold the end of village life in Yerba Buena, which later became known as San Francisco. In the next two years the population of the nascent city grew from 844 to 20,000.15 The influx of gold seekers, nearly all young males, soon overwhelmed the slow-moving streets of Yerba Buena with their riotous festivities. Portsmouth Square, the miners’ favorite meeting place, was described as “ringed round of three sides by saloons and gambling dens... a bedlam that roared day and night.”16

The miners favored gambling above all other pastimes. They had a superstition that it was bad luck to return to the mines unless they were flat broke. Every saloon had tables for various games, including monte, roulette, and chuck-a-luck. Gambling revenues provided the bulk of a substantial income for proprietors of establishments frequented by miners. The disproportionate ratio of men to women made prostitution a highly profitable business as well.17 Outside of gambling dens, saloons, and brothels, miners were entertained by a variety of offerings, including dramatic performances and vaudeville.

With the end of the Gold Rush San Francisco’s aristocrats took their place as the city’s dominant social group. This emerging class perpetuated many aspects of the city’s cultural heritage, yet in doing so they chose to form socially exclusive entertainment clubs. The seeds of this trend were planted in 1850 with the founding of the Pacific Club, San Francisco’s first gentlemen’s club. Formerly Steve Whipple’s Gambling Den, a favorite of boisterous miners, the exclusive club attracted a clientele “girded in swallow tails and flashy diamond cuffs.”18 The Pacific Club eventually merged with the rival Union Club to form the Pacific Union Club, a sophisticated meeting place for leading businessmen. Today the pacific Union Club continues as one of San Francisco’s most exclusive establishments, where prized memberships are passed on like inheritances from father to son.

San Francisco’s upper class initiated most sports activities, many of which were

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17Ibid., p. 128.
18Works Projects Administration, op. cit., p. 101.
quickly adopted by the laboring class. Certain active sports, however, excluded those of lesser means: tennis, horseback riding, carriage racing, and boating were among these, because they required expensive equipment. In contrast to the socioeconomic stratification characteristic of active sports, spectator sports attracted upper- and lower-class citizens alike. A single page of the San Francisco Examiner in 1898 attested to the enthusiasm for spectator sports: "Date of the fight is November 15th" (boxing), "Close Coursing at Union Park" (dog racing), "Football at the Pacific Grove," "American League Score Board" (baseball), and "On the Turf" (horse racing).

Baseball was one of the first sports to win popular acclaim. The beginning of organized baseball can be traced to a group of New York businessmen and professionals who began playing in 1842. Typically, New York was in advance of the West Coast, where baseball did not find a mass following until after the Civil War. By 1872 the game was so popular that the magazine "Sport and Game" claimed that baseball "had become the national game of the U.S."  

The history of sports is marked by trends or fads in which one sport captures popular enthusiasm, later to be overtaken by a new sport. The nationwide craze for roller skating, which lasted approximately ten years, until the mid-1890s, typifies this pattern. Beginning as early as 1880, entrepreneurs across the nation built rinks where admission charges of twenty-five to fifty cents suited those of lesser means. San Francisco's Olympia Rollerskating Ring boasted 5,000 pairs of skates and 69,000 square feet of hard maple floor; its size alone indicated its appeal to the general public. But this appeal failed, forcing many rings to close, when the roller-skating craze subsided. Bicycle riding, which reached an unprecedented level of popularity, was the next novelty. The upper classes originally introduced bicycling as they had other sports. The first national bicycling club, the League of American Wheelmen, was established in 1881 by bookkeepers, businessmen, and professionals. The invention of the safety bicycle, which had two wheels of the same diameter, stimulated general participation because it was much safer to ride than the old "nose-breaker" with one large and one small wheel. In addition, mass production reduced unit fabrication costs and made bicycles economically available to most.

Besides sports activities, San Francisco's newly attracted population also patronized a variety of entertainment events, which, like active sports, were marked by class separation. Wealthy citizens supported serious dramatic performances while lower-class people patronized minstrel shows, polka dances, circus performances, and vaudeville productions. The San Francisco Chronicle routinely reported the many vaudeville companies performing in the city. A typical article in 1898, "It's All Vaudeville," described how "Mrs. Alice G. Shaw, whistlin' prima donna, crowded the Orpheum last night. Of course, there were other things in the program—acrobats, dancers, ventriloquists, grotesque musicians, electrical effects and hypnosis... The mixed program at Stockwell's was rendered to a very large and enthusiastic house last night when Mrs. Dolores Arguilla made her first appearance on the professional stage." Although vaudeville theater and singing and dancing performances were extremely popular, Park Commissioners considered these activities inappropriate for Golden Gate Park.

In contrast to contemporary planners, who describe a successful park as one which attracts a large number of users, nineteenth-century park commissioners defined the value of a park qualitatively. They saw the utility of a park in terms of its ability to uplift moral quality, educate, civilize, and promote mental and physical health.

Nineteenth-century park commissioners claimed that the park, by uplifting individual users, would serve its entire constituency either directly or indirectly by bettering society. "No one visits the park who does not leave wiser and better." In this way parks are

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2 Quoted in Rhea. op. cit., p. 189.
3 Ibid., p. 194.
4 San Francisco Examiner, May 7, 1894.
civilizing in their work and compensatory to the country from which the cities have their life." Aside from park programs and institutions, commissioners believed that the naturalistic park environment itself would have a civilizing influence on visitors. "... Parks in collecting and growing of trees, shrubs, plants and flowers... of the world so as to be seen by the multitude compensates... in a great degree, for want of travel and produces the same educational and cultivating influences."25

Because its creators wanted to uplift park users, they were selective in their choice of park activities, including only a few of the less raucous activities from the variegated palette of popular culture. The programs offered within the park were antithetical to popular pastimes. Commissioners deemed vaudeville theater, the circus, and popular music unfit because they did not educate. They explained their position on music: "The wish of the management of the park is to satisfy all as far as possible, always anxious to please, while at the same time the music shall be a little in advance of average taste such that it may be educational with a progressive influence."26

In programmatic terms, this meant that Sunday concerts held in Spreckels Temple of Music excluded polkas and minstrel shows and featured classical music in original or modified versions.

While the commissioners banned virtually all popular entertainments from the park, they encouraged popular athletic activities. The Park Commission stated that Recreation Valley "will soon become a beautiful lawn where football and baseball will not only be permitted, but encouraged."27

The commissioners, however, did not include facilities for active sports in order to cater to popular taste, but rather to promote mental and physical health.

While a limited number of facilities supported popular activities, many accommodated the pastimes of San Francisco’s fashionable society. A description of the music concourse indicates that carriage owners, synonymous with the upper class in the nineteenth century, were obviously favored: "A grand corso 160 feet in width and making a complete circuit of the colosseum [will] permit a double stream of carriages to travel in opposite directions without interruption."28 Likewise, athletic facilities built within the park before the turn of the century obviously catered to upper-class tastes: the Recreation Field (football and baseball), a boathouse on the fringes of Stowe Lake, both a speedway and a promenade for carriages, an equestrian tract, and several tennis courts.

This favoritism resulted primarily from the Commissioners’ assumption that the culture of the wealthy was inherently superior to that of the laboring class. In addition to the Commissioner’s bias in their favor, San Francisco’s social elite also directly influenced the park milieu by donating funds earmarked for specific purposes. A favorite sport of affluent citizens, carriage speeding, was luxuriously accommodated within the park by a speed road paid for "by a fund from private subscription."29 Similarly, two equestrian clubs, the Golden Gate Driving Club and the San Francisco Driving Club, joined forces to build a trotting tract from private funds.30 Lastly, public officials justified yielding to wealthy citizens’ requests because of the higher taxes they paid. For example, equestrians once appeared before the commission to complain "with justice that they [were] large taxpayers and loudly demanded recognition" (emphasis added). In response, the Commissioners "propose[d] to construct a bridle path exclusively for their use."31

Besides failing to promote popular culture, the park may have been psychologically exclusive as well. John McLaren, Park Superintendent from 1886 to 1943, recognized and objected to the predominance of San Francisco’s fashionable society in park

26Ibid., p. 9.
27Ibid., p. 10.
life: “The immense Sunday crowds which throng the music grounds and immediate neighborhoods of Golden Gate Park are not of poor or distinctly poor working classes. . . They are, by far the larger part, well dressed, even richly dressed in many cases, and the people who most need a park do not feel at ease in such assemblage.”32 Contrary to the commissioners’ hypothesis that the lower class would be drawn to the park to observe and emulate cultured people, McLaren claimed that laborers did not feel comfortable surrounded by the wealthy.

Nineteenth-century park commissioners altered the exclusive demeanor of Golden Gate Park when in 1894 they allowed a commercial fair to be held within the park. The nation was in the midst of a widespread depression; in San Francisco eighteen banks had already closed.33 To facilitate a business revival, city leaders led by M. H. de Young promoted the Midwinter Fair. The economic basis of the fair differed dramatically from the initial ideology which directed the development of Golden Gate Park. Although the major fair buildings—mechanical arts, manufacturers, agriculture, and fine arts—were educational, the plan accommodated many other less “noble” activities, such as concession stands and sport tournaments intended to attract a large number of participants.

Popular enthusiasm abounded for the “plebeian” activities of the Midwinter Fair. According to the Examiner, “The concession that seems to be paying the best at the fair nowadays is the ‘Nickel in the Slot’ Machine. . . . There is a stand where a dozen or more of these are in operation and yesterday every one of them was patronized constantly.”34 In other words, gambling was encouraged in Golden Gate Park; this is especially noteworthy when we consider the Commission’s original goal to attract the populace into the park and away from “dens of intemperance and vice,” i.e., gambling dens. But ideals were compromised in the interest of profit making, and Commissioners went all-out to attract a widespread following by including popular pastimes. Golden Gate Stadium provided the arena for bicycle, horse, and running races, and football, baseball, polo, and shot-putting tournaments. The bleachers were packed with citizens from all classes who came to watch teams compete.

In addition to the full participation of lower-class citizens during the Midwinter Fair, ethnic minorities also penetrated the exclusive park environment. Both Scottish and Irish groups held social days dedicated to their national games. A small tea garden, which represented San Francisco’s large Japanese subculture, was so popular that when the fair was over citizens requested that it be established as a permanent park structure. Today the Japanese Tea Garden continues as a cultural symbol as well as a very pleasant concession; but it would probably not have found a place in the park under the auspices of nineteenth-century park commissioners.

The Midwinter Fair was an economic as well as a social success. After it was over, the Commission reported a $126,991 budget surplus.35 The social success of the fair lay in its appeal to all classes of society; here, for the first time, the function of the park as an arena for all of San Francisco’s citizens, rich and poor alike, was realized. The Old Guard, however, disapproved of the Midwinter Fair, maintaining that “plebeian” commercial activities were inappropriate for a park. They insisted that the park should refine and improve popular culture, rather than encouraging or promoting it in its “raw” form. The Park Commission salvaged some of the buildings from the Midwinter Fair, but they quickly reintroduced the policies and practices which hitherto guided the park’s development.

32. Panama Pacific International Exposition Site: A Review of the Proposition to Use a Part of Golden Gate Park,” addressed to the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of the Panama Pacific Exposition.
34. San Francisco Examiner, “Drop a Nickel in the Slot.” May 7, 1894.
35. Wilson, op. cit, p. 52.
CONCLUSION

Nineteenth-century park commissioners, like other architects and planners, believed that the environment could shape human behavior, implicitly endorsing the theory of environmental determinism. The commission assumed that a pure park environment with only civilized activities would suppress vice and uplift visitors culturally, educationally, and morally. Commissioners promulgated two criteria which defined appropriate park activities: (1) park pastimes should have a reforming influence on participants, and (2) recreational pursuits should not infringe on the serene park ambiance.

But a comparison of San Francisco’s elite and popular cultures with recreation in Golden Gate Park revealed that the implementation of restrictive criteria was inconsistent. For example, on the one hand, popular musical performances were excluded from the park because they were allegedly incongruent with the societal function and naturalistic demeanor of Golden Gate Park, but on the other hand, carriage racing, an upper-class pastime, was lavishly accommodated by smooth speed roads that allowed participants to race across the park purely for the thrill of doing so.

The predominance of facilities for elite pursuits built in Golden Gate Park before the turn of the century could suggest to the contemporary historian that park commissioners’ motives were corrupt; that commissioners used public funds to create a retreat congruent with their upper-class culture; that they intended to use the park as a mechanism to suppress rebellious tendencies and thereby protect the dominant socioeconomic status of themselves and their peers. But when viewed against the background of social philosophies popular in the nineteenth century, the actions of the Park Commission gain credibility. The prevalence of upper-class facilities within the park was a logical outcome of the assumption, in accordance with the principle of noblesse oblige, that the upper class should share with the lower class the benefits of their theoretically superior culture. In this context the Park Commission’s policies could be interpreted as civic-minded and altruistic, although naive.

Regardless of their motives, nineteenth-century park commissioners created an urban park with physical accommodations and a psychological character that discouraged widespread patronage. As a result the commissioners’ own goals were made unattainable. They envisaged Golden Gate Park as an arena for socialization of the lower classes to upper-middle-class mores and for the integration of social and ethnic groups. But these larger purposes were limited, because the masses did not use the parks, proportionately, as much as the elite.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the park commissions followed a top-down model of social control “in which a few people [had] charge of social norms which hardly ever change[d].”36 This top-down model, which allowed commissioners to set the standards for appropriate conduct, produced an ethnocentric policy, for the most part excluding both foreign and popular cultures from the park milieu.

Today many powerful special interest groups, such as the Friends of Golden Gate Park, argue that original park policies should be reinstated in order to preserve the “natural” ambience of the park. In criticizing the recently adopted “Plan for Golden Gate Park” they claimed, “The Statement of Purpose itself attempts to wed two incompatibles: preservation of Golden Gate Park as originally conceived and planned by William Hammond Hall, [and] accommodation to ‘society’s evolving needs’ and the ‘future needs of institutions within the park.’ We contend that you cannot serve both these ends. As long as the Statement of Purpose contains this ambivalence there will be no reprieve for Golden Gate Park from the destructive tendencies of the past 30 years. . . . The Draft Statement contains no built-in protection from recreational fads such as roller skating.”37

If the Friends of Golden Gate Park were allowed to dictate contemporary park policy, rather than serving as one of many influences, popular pursuits would be forbid-

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37San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, minutes of the Special Meeting of May 24, 1979.
den within the park. Park policy would restrict activities that were incongruent with the original conception of Golden Gate Park. Horseback riding, tennis, and symphony concerts would therefore be appropriate park activities, whereas rollerskating, frisbee playing, and rock concerts would be deemed inappropriate. Obviously, once again public funds would be used to provide a retreat that catered to the interests of the upper class.

Assuming that we no longer endorse social theories that presuppose the innate superiority of the upper class, and that park administrators are interested in creating a democratic institution—one which appeals to all of San Francisco’s diverse social groups—we cannot rely on the original conception of Golden Gate Park as a model. New criteria which define the appropriate use of Golden Gate Park must be formulated.

“The Plan for Golden Gate Park,” adopted May 24, 1979, addresses this issue in Objective V: “Foster appropriate use of Park recreation resources.” “Appropriate use” is broadly defined as “recreational activities [that] are compatible with the park’s environment.” In other words, activities that do not conflict with the rural, naturalistic demeanor of the park. The criteria of appropriate use are “necessarily general because they are intended as long-range policy guidelines which should have validity for many years in the future.”

Although the nonspecific nature of “The Plan for Golden Gate Park” is justifiable, it has inherent drawbacks. Most importantly, it leaves the authority to decide what is an appropriate park activity to the discretion of the park commissioners. It does not build in guarantees that egalitarian policies will be employed. We can only hope that individual commissioners are earnest in their desire to serve all San Franciscans and that they are cognizant of the social and political implications of nineteenth-century park policy.

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.