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Emergent public space: Sustaining Chicano culture in North Denver



Sig Langegger*

Akita International University, Geography - Basic Education and Global Studies Programs Yuwa, Akita-City 010-1292, Japan

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ABSTRACT

Vacant land located in deteriorating neighborhoods collects physical detritus and social malaise; overt signifiers of urban blight, these spaces often become gathering places for garbage instead of people, illicit activity instead of civility. This essay deconstructs what happens when community activists appropriate, develop, and continually manage vacant land in manners that align with and express their community's culture. Moreover, it deconstructs the metamorphosis of vacant land into public space. Part of a larger research project exploring the roles public space plays in neighborhood change, this ethnography centers in Sunnyside, a gentrifying neighborhood in Denver, Colorado. Combining ethnographic and archival methods, I explore how the physical, regulatory, and cultural facets interrelate to form something rather remarkable—public space on private property. The “Troy” Chavez Memorial Peace Garden is at once a community garden, a pedagogical space, and a memorial to the 108 youths who died in Denver's 1993 “summer of violence”. Twenty years later it is still cherished as a garden and a memorial, as a living artifact of Aztec culture, and as a publicly accessible space that contributes to the cooperation between neighborhood old-timers and newcomers. Turning scholarly discourse of the privatization of public space on its head, I unpack the processes contributing to the publicizing private space.

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Introduction

This is my turf!
Bam
Bam Bam
Bam Bam Bam Bam

A mother lays her child beneath the green turf
moist from her tears
and his blood

“Turf” by North Denver priest Marshall Gourley – 1995

It is easy to miss the “Troy” Chavez Memorial Peace Garden (Figs. 1 and 2). Driving east through Denver's Sunnyside neighborhood down the five lanes of West 38th Avenue we notice billboards, taquerias, pizza joints, and Denver's approaching skyline. We travel through concrete urbanization, not urban green. Many neighborhood residents, both long-timers and newcomers, don't even know this garden exists. Discovering it hidden in an urban fabric comprised of brick bungalows and strip-malls fronted by parking lots we emerge into a lush realm bursting with Aztec symbolism. This verdant and leafy place offers a pleasant contrast to the predictably linear, stubbornly concrete environment of the

surrounding rough-and-tumble working-class neighborhood. The Peace Garden is no ordinary community garden. At once it feels sacred and earthly, public and private. Though replete with Aztec statuary, Chicano artwork, and gardening tools, it lacks a front gate. Plum trees arch over its entrance. Shady nooks and intriguing landscape architecture invite exploration. Compelled to enter and wander we find well-tended garden plots tucked into the back corner of the lot.

This apparent grandeur belies a diminutive space. The Peace Garden sits on two parcels of once-disused land barely comprising 1.5 acres that are zoned for residential development. Though it has been an important community landmark since 1993, the Denver County assessor still records these parcels as vacant land. In fact sits on land leased to Denver Urban Gardens (DUG) by Leprino Foods.¹ The lease is revocable, meaning the company could with no notice, vacate the garden in order to sell or develop the land. Nonetheless, the garden remains, though Leprino has expanded its main facility, located directly across West 38th Avenue a number of times.

The 20 year viability of the garden is remarkable considering that community gardens are nearly always considered a temporary use for privately owned land until such time as they can be developed into a “higher and better use” (Lawson, 2004, 2005). As the story of Sacramento's Mandella Gardens shows, even vociferous

* Tel.: +1 303 526 6311.

E-mail address: slangegger@aiu.ac.jp

¹ Included in the S&P 500 index, Leprino Foods is the world's largest producer of mozzarella cheese (<http://www.leprinofoods.com/>).



Fig. 1. The entrance to the Troy Chavez Memorial Peace Garden, with Quezalcoatl's altar; papel picado banners symbolizing purity, intensity and pain; poems written to lost loved ones; and hand-painted personal memorial tiles (located on the corners of the sandstone wall). (Photo by Author).



Fig. 2. Walking a few more steps into the garden, just past Quezalcoatl's altar, we find more memorial tiles and a mural framing the entrance to the rear garden plots. Ana Chavez describes the mural "Like the Northside, the mural has the barrio, barrio kids, drugs, alcohol and guns. On each side there are two adults; they can be community members, family members, someone who's trying to help them get out of that life, someone to positively guide the two kids. In the center we have Tonantzin—our mother earth—she's pushing them apart, saying my soil was not meant to have the blood of the children in it. We wanted to tell our children and our community this story with a beautiful piece of art." (Photo by Author).

and broad public support often fails to save established well-loved community gardens (Feliciano, 2010). New York City's Lower Eastside gardens, planted as guerilla gardens during the financial crises of the 1970s and officially sanctioned by the city in the 1980s, nonetheless came under intense city-led development pressure in the 1990s (Staehele, Mitchell, & Gibson, 2002; Staehele and Mitchell, 2008b). Saved only by a celebrity promulgated and backed land grant, the majority of these gardens were not bulldozed (Marcus & Morse, 2008). More than simply vulnerable to the whims of large-scale development pressure, successful community gardens often precipitate their own demise by contributing to increasing surrounding property values and subsequently facilitating

gentrification (Voicu & Been, 2008). Yet despite mounting development pressure brought on by the gentrification of North Denver, in concert with the expanding Leprino facility, the Peace Garden thus far remains viable. Planted and maintained by North Denver Chicanos, the Peace Garden is an ethnic garden, however, this fact alone does not explain its permanence. Inner-city ethnic gardens replete with minority gardeners and culturally specific gardening practices often do not fair well in gentrifying communities (Hou, Johnson, & Lawson, 2009). Zukin (2010a) theorizes that community gardens follow a specific evolution from grassroots social movements to a spatial expressions of cultural identity in line with gentrifier values and finally to a form of local food production consistent with the tastes of middle-class *locavores*. Considering the Peace Garden from within this framework, one would expect the type of produce to have shifted towards American middleclass foods. It has not. Though always organically farmed, most of the produce is destined for Mexicano and Chicano tables.

This essay seeks to answer one primary question: Why does this enigmatic open space remain viable? In order to contextualize this question, I will first explore how the Peace Garden emerged. Constructing this context, I will consider urban renewal, neighborhood decay, as well as institutional and structural mechanisms that hold people of color in place. In the early 1960s Interstate 70 cut an east–west swath through the Sunnyside neighborhood eight blocks north of West 38th Avenue. Displacing many, this urban renewal project irrevocably affected trajectories of future development as well as social stability in North Denver. Like many mid-century urban renewal projects, I-70 precipitated the demise of the neighborhoods it bisected. Property values declined, allowing people of color, mostly working-class Mexican–Americans, to move into this erstwhile Italian immigrant enclave. This, in turn, accelerated white-flight to the suburbs. Concomitantly, banks and insurance companies redlined North Denver essentially curtailing economic and real estate development. Lacking political efficacy, neighborhood residents watched as parks declined, streets went unrepaired, and recreation centers closed. Predictably, North Denver began a precipitous decline.

Though neighborhood demographics shifted from Italian–American to Mexican–American in the late 1950s, Italian power

structures undergirded by the Mafia remained. Not until the early 1970s, when the Chicano activist group called the Crusade for Justice took over the day-to-day management of North Denver's la Raza Park (Langegger, *in press-b*) and Chicano-activist Sal Carpio was elected to the Denver City Council, did Latinos gain a toehold of political control of their North Denver barrios. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to interview Sal Carpio. His insights prove enlightening. Mr. Carpio ran against and defeated then councilman Geno di Manna for the North Denver city council seat in 1972. Before his defeat, Mr. di Manna, a vestige of the Italian elite, was instrumental in providing a codified framework that accelerated the physical decline of many North Denver neighborhoods, particularly Sunnyside and Highland. Junkyards, storage lots, dive bars, and liquor stores did not just appear there randomly. Put simply, these outward signs of neighborhood blight were codified into place. Parcel zoning was modified, construction-permitting processes were accelerated, and business and liquor licensing procedures were fast-tracked. After the I-70 renewal project destabilized North Denver, di Manna was pivotal in ghettoizing North Denver. Sal Carpio says:

Geno just came from the "good 'ol boy era" . . . they were good old boys, you know backroom deals, sleight of hand type stuff. Through the years, he really did a number on the *Northside*. Say some guy wanted to buy a piece of land and build a gas station. In those days gas stations were a dime a dozen. It was the same with storage lots or liquor stores or bars or warehouses. They'd go to Geno and say, "hey I want to do this thing, whatever, but I can't because of the zoning". Geno'd say, "no problem. I'll take care of it. Then, I'll tell you what to do". He'd convince council to overlook the zoning code. He'd grease the wheels of the excise and license to get liquor and cabaret licenses approved. He'd make sure the legalities were taken care of.

The Peace Garden sits on a parcel impacted by Di Manna's handiwork. Though zoned for residential development, it once housed a commercial greenhouse. It burned down in the late 1970s. During the 1980s the charred remains provided easily accessible refuge for illicit activities such as drug use and prostitution. Telling the Peace Garden's construction story, Ana Chavez remarked, "we found lots of drug needles and booze bottles as we were cleaning it up. It was a horrible waste of land." Ironically, according to Denver's zoning code these parcels should neither house a greenhouse nor a community garden. This space has grounded many vicissitudes of inner-city urbanization. The greenhouse arose in a backroom deal; the garden emerged from violence, grief, then healing.

During the 1980s North Denver gang violence increased. Conducting my ethnography, I learned this up-tick was simultaneously linked to worsening economic situations of North Denver families, school bussing, the closure of recreational facilities (Langegger, *in press-b*), a crackdown on lowrider cruising, and Los Angeles street gangs expanding their territory. Mexicano and Chicano street gangs, who defended neighborhood turf with verbal threats and fisticuffs, were quickly usurped by the well-armed Los Angeles *Crips* and *Bloods*, who were not interested in North Denver turf *per se* but expanding drug-sales territory into the Southwest. According to Cisco Gallardo director of Denver's Gang Rescue and Support Program (GRASP), in order to maintain symbolic control over their home turf, North Denver gangs began to assimilate the violent practices of the LA gangs. This included drive-by shootings, gang initiation executions, wearing of gang colors and flashing hand gestures in public. Sadly, not comprehending this new "code of the street" (cf. Anderson, 1990) or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time often had deadly consequences for North Denver youth. The hand painted tiles decorating the Peace Garden

serve as memorials to those lost to such acts of random violence. While chatting with garden co-founder Jim Chavez in the Peace Garden, he became serious, looked me in the eye and insisted each tile tells a story.

The tile, the one with the kid wearing the fedora, that's Carl Banks. He was trick-or-treating with his little nephew. A group of kids wanted Carl's trick-or-treat bag. They shot him for his trick-or-treat bag. The other tile with little boy back there, that's Geronimo Mestas; he had a nice Denver Broncos team jacket. They wanted it; he didn't want to give it up. They killed him for his Bronco jacket; for a Bronco jacket they killed him.

In its essence, the Peace Garden is a memorial to many juveniles and children who died or were injured in Denver 1993 "Summer of Violence", a violent gang war that ripped through the city. Discovering why, 20 years and much neighborhood change later, this green sanctuary remains, comprises the remainder of this essay. The answer to this question is complex. Answering it I utilized both ethnographic and archival methods.

Methodology

This study is a component of a larger research project that examines the roles that public space plays in the gentrification of North Denver. It draws on 60 narrative interviews with people in critical positions relative to the publicness of the Berkeley, West Highland, Highland, and Sunnyside neighborhoods. My interviewees included developers, city officials, middle-class newcomers, working-class long-timers, community activists, community gardeners, community garden leaders, and neighborhood parish priests. Since the nexus of my research was publicly accessible property, observation proved an appropriate research method. A Colorado native and resident of North Denver, I was equipped to draw from decades of casual observation. Long embedded in neighborhood context, I constructed a nuanced and multifaceted research project. My ethnographic research lasted for just over 1 year, beginning in February 2011 and ending in May the following year. Throughout the seasons, in weather both mild and severe, from early in the day until late at night, using both unobtrusive and participant observation methods, I was able to discern various components of spatial practices constituting the publicness of North Denver's various public spaces. These included its neighborhood parks, sidewalks, vacant parcels, businesses open to the public, and the quasi-public spaces of community gardens. By means of narrative and casual interviews I gained insight into how different cultures with often-competing worldviews interpret the garden and shape the social behaviors that produce its unique publicness. I paid careful attention to uncovering a thematic consistency between interviewee insights, observed behavior, and empirical evidence uncovered in various archives. Finally, throughout my research selected residents and experts read drafts and verified and/or clarified my preliminary findings and conclusions.

There is a fundamental difference between public property and public space. Property can be considered in terms of Euclidian geometry and represented on cadastral maps. Like any social space, public space requires a volumetric space, publicly accessible property. Moreover, public space requires people. In a word, public space comprises various combinations of social practices on property accessible to the public. Interestingly, the publicness of public space is always framed and delimited by interpenetrating often contradictory layers of legal, municipal, and ethical codes, what Staeheli and Mitchel consider as *tissues of regulation* (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008a). Since legal and municipal codes are not observable in the field, I turned to archival research. In addition to researching property records, municipal codes, and zoning codes

I was allowed to peruse DUG's extensive design and financial archives.

The Peace Garden

The "Troy" Chavez Memorial Peace Garden, is named after 16 year old Troy Chavez, my key informants Ana and Jim Chavez's son. Troy was an outspoken anti-gang teenager who was one of 108 Denver youth killed in Denver's 1993 Summer of Violence. He was shot to death on July 5, 1993 as he stood with friends in the parking lot of North Denver's Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. The location of the murder combined with Troy's temperament mobilized the Chicano community. Marshal Gourley, the pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe began a month-long fast to protest the increasing gang violence in North Denver. During his fast he organized a gun buy-back campaign. Neighborhood youth began to hold candlelight vigils and "peace marches" between locations of gang violence. The marches slowly morphed into larger peace marches throughout North Denver. These marches followed trails of violence and of mourning. "Kids were dying throughout North Denver, so we marched throughout North Denver", remarked Ana Chavez. Incorporating both Christian and Aztec symbology, the marches were spontaneous expressions of a collective sorrow that eventually became planned protests for peace. According to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, streets are essential to cultural continuity as they provide an opportunity for a culture to narrate its story to itself (Geertz, 1973). The stories narrated through the peace marches dovetailed Chicano history with an urban present while propagating a groundswell of community activism. Though begun as spontaneous acts of mourning by neighborhood youth, the marches were expanded by community activists like Louisa Vigil, who worked to publicize them to reach a wider audience than the micro-geographies affected by individual victims of gang violence. Vigil says:

Our idea was to have peace marches every Friday night from 38th to the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Highland. And it was amazing. When we got the word out, we had 300 to 400 people there, from all walks of life, even gang members. Seeing this success, I decided to get a group of well-known poets involved; once we got to the church, the poets would recite poetry. 38th became an avenue of poetry, of peace, of saying enough!

Taking note of the ameliorative and conciliatory effects of the marches, members of the Chicano community worried that this positive community-healing energy would fade. Ana Chavez:

You have to fight for things to get better. You can't just say, "okay we did a few marches this year". It's a battle you have to fight forever, to keep our children focused, to keep them on track.

Seeking to perpetuate the positive energy of the marches, community leaders approached Leprino about its disused vacant lot across West 38th Avenue from its North Denver facility. Taking an opportunity to tap community energy to improve the appearance of a neighborhood eyesore, the company agreed to lease the land to the community for a nominal fee. Building from their considerable momentum, North Denver activists sought the gardening and financial expertise of DUG. Not only did DUG provide the landscape-architectural design of the garden, they also secured funds for much of the cleanup and construction costs. Many North Denver residents gave what they could. Some contributed labor to clean and prepare the lot; a stone quarry donated the flagstone; gardening centers donated topsoil; a local artist, asking only to be reimbursed for materials, crafted the Quezalcoatl monolith; and neighborhood children painted tiles memorializing lost family members.

Today the Peace Garden is concurrently a memorial, a pedagogical space, a public display of Chicano²/Mexica³ culture, a site for numerous gardening and cultural events and finally it is an urban garden. It is thus the site of more varied activity than many neighborhood parks even though they occur on private rather than public property. The garden's design celebrates Aztec culture and it continues the cultural narrative begun with the peace marches. The physical space of the Peace Garden therefore concretizes not only loss but also hope.

Immediately upon entering the garden (Fig. 1) we see a stone carving of Quezalcoatl, the Aztec god of the West. As we walk past the carving we enter a space inspired by an Aztec ball-court—essentially two rectangular spaces connected by a narrow passage. One of the many ball games played in actual Aztec ball-courts was pok-to-pok—a game symbolizing the struggle between good and evil. Close inspection of the flagstone lining the ball-court reveals a mosaic of individually painted tiles. These poignant personal expressions of loss articulate families' efforts to come to terms with lives absent loved ones. A few meters further we find a large mural representing a community's grief over drug and alcohol abuse and gang violence (Fig. 2). The Peace Garden is also a community garden; therefore, much of its use and symbolism revolves around gardening. Amongst maize, beans, squash and amaranth,⁴ Mexican gourds, and a chili pepper garden, we find an Meso-American herb garden and a "butterfly garden".⁵

Every aspect of the Peace Garden was intended to be an expression of Mexica culture. Ana Chavez articulates this design philosophy.

We saw many problems with the gangs in our community. A lot of the kids named their gangs after our ancient ancestors. We feel that they need to be proud of their culture rather than just thinking of them as just destructive forces. The schools tend to teach only the negative part of our culture, not the beautiful part of our culture. We wanted to bring different things to the garden to show them the positive part. For example, the Aztec had about two thousand medicinal trees and plants and they knew how to work those medicines to heal their community. So we wanted to teach the children this. The front area of the garden is a healing garden. There we have mostly herbs and medicines that we cultivate. We want to teach them to become the healers of their community not the destroyers of their community. We are trying to teach them positive things about our culture. Another example, we have Quezalcoatl in the front, he is the spirit of the west. When he offered his prayers to the

² Briefly stated, the Chicano culture is based in the civil rights movement and in this way it parallels much of the Black Power Movement. Both movements derived cultural expression through the zoot culture and both sought to abolish racism and racial discrimination through revolutionary action. Among many other things, what sets the Chicano Movement apart from the Black Power Movement is the Chicano cultural affiliation with the physical geography of Aztlan—the American Southwest and Northern Mexico, and the identification of Chicanos with both Mexica and Spanish culture. Chicanos see themselves as a *mestizo* (mixed) race, rising from both indigenous American and colonizing European genetics. Generally speaking, Chicanos identify with and possess wholly different systems of codes and symbols than Mexican immigrants use to represent their relationship to the United States of America and to Mexico.

³ Mexica (pronounced Meshica), from which the term Mexico is bastardized, refers to the native American tribes that inhabited the American Southwest and present day Mexico, an area referred to as Aztlan by Chicanos, and include the Aztec, Anasazi and Mayan peoples.

⁴ A grain common to Aztec/Mexica agriculture.

⁵ According to Ana Chavez, much of the historical literature on Aztec culture misrepresents it as only violent. She, the greatest Aztec warriors were servants, not destroyers, of their community. In line with the inherent peaceful nature of the Aztec warrior, she insists that according to Aztec lore unadulterated by the interpretations of the European authors of Mexica history, the greatest warriors were granted eternal life as butterflies. Cultivating plants that attract butterflies thus serves as a method to thank these fallen warriors for their service to community.

creator, he only offered sage, tobacco, fruits—he never allowed the blood of a human being on his altar. We have Quezalcoatl in the front of the garden, because of his positive image. We're teaching them how some of today's ball games are influenced by ancient Aztec ball games. We're trying to convey what our contribution to society is, rather than always giving them the ugly parts. For example, saying the Aztecs were a warrior people, a people who used human sacrifice in their religious ceremonies. We were so much more than that, so much more than that. In the garden we are trying to show this to our youth.

The primary focus of the garden has always been neighborhood youth, who remain potential victims and/or perpetrators of gang violence. As such, the garden was envisioned as and continues to be a therapeutic and pedagogical space for Northside youth. Its design, programming, and ongoing management allows for multifaceted avenues of mourning and learning.

The Peace Garden renders accessible not only ancient Aztec culture and syncretized Mexica culture, but also contemporary urban Latino cultures through festivals such as *Día de los Muertos* (the day of the dead). This process mirrors hundreds of years of the Mexica experience. Vital to understand is that Mexica culture has always been a culture of assimilation and of perpetual change. A colonized conglomeration of Aztec, Olmec, and other tribes, the Mexica were forced to hide their cultural practices, subvert practices imposed by the Spanish, and ultimately combine disparate belief systems into a mixed culture grounded in both ancient paganism and Spanish Catholicism. Importantly, by syncretizing their celebrations into European holidays and changing war dances into forms of entertainment comprehensible to their colonizers, the Mexica people sustained their culture throughout hundreds of years of cultural suppression. Today, celebrating *Día de los Muertos* on Halloween is particularly important to sustaining Chicano culture in North Denver. Community activist Cisco Gallardo insists:

Even as the Mexica were colonized they borrowed from Europeans. So too, the modern day Mexica, the Chicanos, borrow from the past through Aztec dancing and through el *Día de los Muertos*. *Muertos* is a phenomenon. It's a good way to talk about death. At the same time it's a healthy way to talk about life. We celebrate it with both traditional forms and modern music. If you don't save a little bit of this culture you're not going to have any left! But you do need to reinvent it, move it forward. Celebrating 'Muertos at the Peace Garden is a way to do this. Some people say "let's not live in the past!" Traditional people say "if we change things, its not going to be the same!" But things are always changing! You want to have a baseline, a common denominator amongst generations. 'Muertos is this baseline.

Fiestas—public festivals and religious celebrations—underpin and buttress the highly public North American Latino culture (cf. Rojas, 2010) as they contribute to its evolution (Paz, 1985). Consequently, public events held at the Peace Garden extend beyond Mexica culture and include a Peace Jam⁶ held during the summer of 1996 with 1992 Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú. What is more, the Peace Garden's unimpeded accessibility continuously allows all interested, from gang members to curious gentrifiers, to use the garden as a space of reflection and respite. Compellingly, it is also becoming a space that fosters cooperation between neighborhood long-timers and newcomers. For example, each year the community stages an annual Urban Farmers Market. Held in the Peace Garden and frequented by middle-class foodies, it is organized to sell the produce cultivated in the garden and to showcase the garden as a memorial. Community activists Judith Gomez tells how:

Many people told Ana (Chavez): you should sell your produce at the farmers markets held swank neighborhoods. She said simply this is all for naught if it's not *in* the garden. Everything she does is to keep people from experiencing what she experienced losing Troy. It's for the kids. You can't break out of that model. It's the sorrow, the culture, the space of the garden, and the kids all at once. The garden is a savior and a communicator of our culture.

An open physical place and a welcoming cultural space, the Peace Garden serves as a bridge between North Denver youth and their Mexica ancestors as well as a cultural conduit between Latinos and other groups. Ana Chavez speaks of reaching out to neighborhood newcomers by delivering both produce from and stories of the garden to Lou's Food Bar, a trendy diner frequented by hipsters located just across Shoshone Street. Max Mackissock, executive chef at the popular upscale restaurant *The Squeaky Bean* uses the garden to hold organic gardening and cooking demonstrations. He teaches about urban and organic farming, healthy cooking techniques. Importantly, these events expose attendees to the complex and violent Chicano history of North Denver that engendered the memorial. All of this is possible due to the inherent complexities of the garden. It is a space wherein Chicanos openly assert, and privately connect with, their culture. A publicly accessible space, the garden stages class, racial, and socioeconomic diversity. Well managed, it not only encourages tolerance, it fosters cooperation.

Cultural sustainability, diversity, and publicness

In the following pages I would like to offer a more complete answer to the question that drove my research. In a gentrifying neighborhood, why does the Peace Garden remain? Clearly, it is not merely a community garden. North Denver community gardens tend to fall into two categories. First, gated spaces where a "dirt" poor community of gardeners, many who do not reside in the neighborhoods in which they garden (cf. Francis, 1987), protect and tend their patch of "turf" (cf. Pudup, 2008). This type of garden constitutes the vast majority of the gardens DUG advises. These gardens, though shared spaces, comprise legitimized labor, planting, weeding, sowing, and reaping. Michele Cyr, the leader of the Bookbinding Garden, located six blocks south of the Peace Garden, clearly articulates this stance saying "it's not a social thing with wine and cheese; it's gardening; it's work really". The second and scarcer type of DUG garden serves a particular vulnerable population. As such, their garden leaders' focus on providing for the specific needs of a community of gardeners. The Fairview Garden in Denver's Sun Valley neighborhood, for example, is managed as a therapeutic space for recent North African refugees; the Mount Saint Vincent Community Garden gardeners are abused, neglected and traumatized children in the care of the Mount Saint Vincent Home; the Pecos Garden in Highland has been maintained by its leader Marty Roberts as a sanctuary for Hmong gardeners and a showcase of Hmong gardening techniques since the mid 1970s. Similar to Lower Manhattan's casitas, which support Puerto Rican culture (Lawson, 2005; Saldivar-tanaka & Krasny, 2004; Winterbottom, 2007) and the ill-fated South Central Farm in Los Angeles, which foster Mexican culture (Mares & Pena, 2010) these DUG gardens serve as bridges to a homeland or to emotional recuperation. This type of garden sustains immigrant cultures. Chicanos are not immigrants; the border crossed them—the 1858 treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo shifted the US–Mexico over their ancestors. Put simply, the Peace Garden sustains Chicano culture because it is a cultural relic, a community memorial, and a public space.

McKenzie (2004) understands cultural sustainability as a life-enhancing condition in communities that is grounded by equity

⁶ An event that featured poetry readings, political speeches and live music.

and cohesion and manifests in political efficacy. Drawing a parallel with ecosystems that support and maintain a balance in nature, Throsby (1995) theorizes culture as a group of interrelated systems that support and maintain human societies and therefore human perpetuate civilizations. He therefore considers cultural sustainability in terms of evolutionary or lasting qualities of cultures. Low, Taplin, and Sheld (2005), build upon McKenzie's and Throsby's notions by incorporating the importance of place preservation and cultural diversity into a place-specific theory of sustainability. As we saw, by rendering permanent the positive energy of the peace marches, the Peace Garden gave root to community grief. Northside Chicanos consider the garden as an actual piece of Aztlán, the Mexica's ancestral homeland. Moreover, by preserving the unique space of the Peace Garden, Chicano community activists do more than sustain a single culture; they foster cultural diversity. The Peace Garden thus sustains Mexica culture and it fosters dialogue between old-timers and newcomers.

I put forth that the second reason the garden remains is that, though sited on private property, it has become a public space. Although its design and use manifest in singularities—a memorial for fallen teens, a showcase of various aspects of Aztec culture, a garden, a market, and a foodie demonstration space—the garden's use epitomizes the multivalent space lauded by apologists of diverse public spaces. In as many words, public space is 'diversity in space' (Amin, 2008; Crawford, 2008; Sennett, 2001; Watson, 2006; Zukin, 2010b). In essence, the forthright incorporation of diversity into the Peace Garden is vital to its continued existence as a public space.

Public space allows us to engage with other ways of being in the world. Diversity is vital to public space because by encountering others who we may disagree with or even find to be disagreeable people we learn civility and tolerance (Sennett, 2001). This *spatial multiplicity* (Amin, 2008) remains a vital component of the collective cultures comprising cities. Furthermore, diversity in public space remains an important component of a functioning democracy (Lofland, 1998). The vibrancy of the city and the spark of the unexpected are what render the everyday public spaces of the city fundamental to an urban way of life (Watson, 2006). Diversity feeds more than flâneurie though; it fosters mutual empathy and undergirds cooperation with others (Sennett, 2012). Cooperation with those different from us bridges cultural differences allowing cultures to coevolve. At its core, urbanism is the coevolution of countless cultures. Public space is where this coevolution takes place.

Rooting in a dynamic tripartite of solidarity, fiesta, and death, Mexican culture is unrelentingly public (Paz, 1985). Though discriminated against on racial and ethnic grounds and held in place by racist land use and real estate policies, Latinos—Chicanos, Tejanos, Mexicanos, Cubanos, Puerto Ricans, etc.—nevertheless tend to publicize their culture. Whether through the extreme fashion grandstanding of zoot-suiters during the 1940s and 1950s (Alvarez, 2008), the appropriation of public streets by lowrider cruising (Chappell, 2010), the protest-fueled Crusade for Justice movement (Gonzales, 2001), or the slow transformation of parts of East Los Angeles from an auto-oriented mecca into spaces of vibrant pedestrian activity (Rojas, 2010), Latinos work to subvert dominant tropes and assert their right to occupy the city's everyday public spaces (cf. Certeau, 1984). By publicly *practicing culture* (Calhoun & Sennett, 2007) they claim their *right to the city* (Lefebvre, 1996). The Peace Garden is a public statement and a public space. One that bridges cultural divides between ostentatiously public Latino practice, the introspective practices white gentrifiers, and the environmentally sustainable practices of locavores and foodies.

The many public practices of culture in the Peace Garden affect everyday life in North Denver in manifold ways. Still located in

gang territory, the garden has rarely been vandalized by gang members. They understand and respect the place of peace. To passersby, the garden seems a special space. My research confirmed that inner-city residents tend to appreciate well-tended gardens as visual amenities (Blomley, 2005a, 2005b). Many North Denver newcomers shared their delight in unexpectedly stumbling upon the “gorgeous little park”. Jim Chavez tells of notoriously rough motorcyclists who park their rumbling Harley Davidsons at a respectful distance, extinguish their cigarettes and leave bottles of beer at the entrance before spending time in the garden. Finally, the uniqueness of this place is not lost on Leprino. In their administrative services manager Mike Falbo's words:

You know, the lease for the Peace Garden parcel is revocable. Recently, we were looking to expand the parking of our facility. We walked over to the garden to take a look at the site. As soon as we walked in, all of us just knew, *immediately*, that we would have to look elsewhere. What's happening in the garden, the effort put into it; it's beyond words.

This space also proves instrumental in efforts to bridge differences and to ameliorate social problems between Latino communities. To illustrate, community activist Cisco Gallardo often utilizes the Peace Garden for community events aimed at redirecting energies of area youth from predatory street gangs toward community outreach programs.

More than a memorial, the Peace Garden is also a community garden and a pedagogical space. Neighborhood residents tend individual plots; however, students from the Escuela Tlatelolco, a North Denver Chicano charter school founded by the Chicano rights activist Corky Gonzales, tend the bulk of the garden. Tlatelolco teachers see gardening as an effective way to teach and practice culture. Tlatelolco students shared stories with me of finally comprehending the totality of the Aztec myth of the three sisters simply by cultivating their garden plots and learning to prepare recipes. Metaphorically similar to how different types of people sustain a cohesive community, the “three sisters” of maize, beans, and squash thrive in cooperative relationships. The cornstalks provide a structure for the beans to climb, the beans enrich the surrounding soil with nitrogen; finally, the low-lying squash leaves create a microclimate that retains soil moisture. Not only do the sisters grow cooperatively, together they constitute a balanced diet⁷ that forms the basis of Mexica cuisine. These ingredients now serve as the foundation of contemporary cooking in the American Southwest. However, they are the cuisine of ancient Aztlán. What is more, using the fruits of one's labor in family recipes connects people to their families and to their culture. For example, one Northside Latina shared how “roasting chilies grown from seeds you put in the ground completes your soul” and how learning the traditional methods of tending the Peace Garden's chokecherry bush and then making chokecherry jelly alongside her mother deepened their relationship.

The Peace Garden is certainly not the first plot of vacant land to be appropriated by a disadvantaged community in a working-class neighborhood (Franck & Stevens, 2007; Hou, 2010; Staeheli et al., 2002). Nonetheless, many community gardens, community playgrounds, and plazas disappear with the passage of time simply because community enthusiasm focuses on initial planning and construction, essentially on the satisfying process of transforming a vacant lot into a special place. Communities tend not to center on sustaining these spaces' meanings, uses, and evolution (Linn, 2007). What sets the Peace Garden apart from similar spaces is how it evolved into an integral component of North Denver Chicano culture as well as how it fosters cooperation between neighborhood

⁷ Maize lacks two essential amino acids that are found in beans.

long-timers and middle-class newcomers. Imagined as a memorial and designed as a representation of ancient Mexica culture, its public practices sustains Latino culture in a modern urban milieu, one that includes neighborhood newcomers interested in organic food and trendy restaurants, working-class and middle-class Latinos, street gangs, and motorcycle clubs. In the end, the Peace Garden remains a clear expression of the cultures that fostered and continue to sustain it as a *public space* and as a *green space*.

The new “urban green”, the recognition of value in vacancy, roots in concepts such as environmental sustainability, sustainable development, and green urbanism. Vacant land can be utilized by cities to demarcate boundaries between land uses or by speculators to decrease surrounding property values to “investable” levels (Bowman & Pagano, 2004). This essay along with the others in this special issue has shown that vacant land can be worth so much more. Scholars, city planners and managers, and community activists use the notion of greening communities as both as a measure of environmental justice (Walker, 2012) and a means to achieve social equity (Hou et al., 2009). Community gardening can either be a temporary solution to blight (Hou et al., 2009) and food justice issues (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010) or means of neighborhood gentrification (Zukin, 2010a). Exploring the history of the Peace Garden, I offered a new perspective in conceptualizing the new “urban green”.

The Peace Garden is community garden and a memorial. It is a pedagogical space and a marketplace. Always unlocked, it is a publicly accessible space, a place wherein diverse peoples learn from one another. Gang members learn to respect life. Chicanos learn of their Mexica heritage. And, while learning about organic farming, newcomers learn about their new neighborhood. By doing so, these groups sustain not only their individual cultures but also this emergent public space. A public space with roots in the soil Aztlán, in Mexica culture, and in complex social processes, the Peace Garden sustains the cultures of its participants, be they gentrifiers, locavores, or Chicanos.

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