THE RISE AND FALL OF NAYA PARK: THE POLITICS OF OPEN SPACE AND URBAN NATURE IN PORTLAND, OREGON

A Thesis in Geography
by Patrick T. Hammons

© 2012 Patrick T. Hammons

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Science

August 2012
The thesis of Patrick T. Hammons was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Brian King  
Associate Professor of Geography  
Thesis Adviser

Lorraine Dowler  
Associate Professor of Women’s Studies  
Associate Professor of Geography

Karl Zimmerer  
Professor of Geography  
Head of the Department of Geography

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
Abstract

This research investigates the role of a contested plot of green space located on private land within a formerly blighted neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Employing a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival research, this work investigates the physical and symbolic constructions of the park, arguing that they have changed in line with larger neighborhood processes. Known at one point as NAYA Park, the space has been a site of contestation since around 2005, when those originally responsible for its construction were priced out of the neighborhood. Subjected to increased development pressures in an ascendant neighborhood, the park has continued to be used as a public amenity by some in the neighborhood, while at the same time remaining private land. Moving from hazard to amenity to contested space as the neighborhood moved from blight to redevelopment, spaces such as NAYA Park exist at an important intersection, providing much of the aforementioned benefits of a public park, while simultaneously being left to the whims of the private real estate market. Despite political ecology’s traditional emphasis on environmental activism and site-level resource conflict, contestations over vacant lots, green space, and other forms of open space in the city remain under examined in the field. Case studies tend to either treat the city itself as the unit of analysis or predominantly deal with formalized forms of urban nature. Failing to see vacant lots and other undeveloped spaces as crucial spaces of urban nature not only misses much of the story of how both nature and capital is manifest and intersects in the city, but simultaneously glosses over the agency of local actors in shaping their communities. As shown in this work, the implications such informal sites hold for greater understandings of urban nature could be fruitful and warrant further investigation within the field of urban political ecology.

Keywords: Green Space, Political Ecology, Urban, Gentrification, Parks, Planning
TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures..................................................................................................................... vi
Acknowledgements............................................................................................................ vii

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................ 1
  Encountering NAYA Park............................................................................................... 2
  Green Space in the City................................................................................................... 4
  Thesis Questions............................................................................................................. 7
  Introducing Methodology............................................................................................... 8
  Epistemology.................................................................................................................. 9
  Methods.......................................................................................................................... 12
  Positioning the Researcher............................................................................................. 16

Chapter 2. LITERATURE & CASE STUDY ....................................................................... 18
  Introducing Political Ecology......................................................................................... 19
  Connecting the Rural to the Urban............................................................................... 22
  Gentrification and Urban Nature................................................................................... 27
  The Park on Mississippi................................................................................................ 29
  The Park as a Mirror...................................................................................................... 31

Chapter 3. NAYA PARK .................................................................................................. 33
  Before the Park.............................................................................................................. 34
  Origin of the Park.......................................................................................................... 36
  Use of the Space............................................................................................................ 39
  Mississippi Rising, NAYA Falling................................................................................ 42

Chapter 4. MISSISSIPPI RISING ..................................................................................... 48
  Standing in the Shadow of the Lofts............................................................................ 49
  Take a Park, Leave a Park............................................................................................ 51
  Racial Tensions in the Appeal Process......................................................................... 53
  Channeling Resistance................................................................................................. 55
  Representations of a Successful Resistance............................................................... 56
  Upholding City Code................................................................................................... 57
  Lasting Impacts............................................................................................................. 59

Chapter 5. THE 2011 CONTESTATION .......................................................................... 61
  The Boise Neighborhood Association ......................................................................... 62
  The April Meeting......................................................................................................... 63
  Rhetoric and Reaction................................................................................................... 65
  Rhetorical and Organizational Obstacles..................................................................... 71
  The Resistance Online.................................................................................................. 75

Chapter 6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS ................................................................ 78
  From Hazard to Amenity.............................................................................................. 79
  Density and Pressures on Open Space.......................................................................... 80
Property Rights .................................................................................................................. 82
Structures and Vacant Lots .............................................................................................. 84
Use and Status .................................................................................................................. 85
Limitations to Resistance ............................................................................................... 87
The Value of Informal Parks ........................................................................................... 89

Bibliography ...................................................................................................................... 91
List of Figures*

Figure 1: Entrance to the park .................................................................................................................. 2
Figure 2: Property value of the space ......................................................................................................... 3
Figure 3: Concerned Neighbor .................................................................................................................. 27
Figure 4: Albina district in Portland, Oregon ............................................................................................ 29
Figure 5: Demographics for the census tract surrounding the park ......................................................... 30
Figure 6: The Park as a Mirror ................................................................................................................ 32
Figure 7: NAYA volunteers and the completed play structures, c. 2002 .................................................. 38
Figure 8: The Mississippi Lofts ................................................................................................................. 49
Figure 9: The garden project across the street ......................................................................................... 69
Figure 10: “Our Community Space is Not For Sale” display ................................................................... 73

*All figures were produced by the author unless otherwise specified.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the Mississippi House and Native American Youth Association for their help, generosity, and hospitality. Many thanks as well to the neighbors, business owners, and visitors who gave their time to provide their personal histories of the park and larger neighborhood.

I would also like to thank the following professors and mentors for their guidance, patience, and expertise:

Brian King
Lorraine Dowler
James McCarthy
Cynthia Brewer
Douglas Deur

In addition, for their continued inspiration, perseverance, and dedication, many thanks to:

Robert Fitzgerald Diggs
Gary Grice
Russell Tyrone Jones
Jason Hunter
Corey Woods
Lamont Hawkins
Dennis Coles
Clifford Smith
Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION
Encountering NAYA Park

Just north of Shaver Street on Mississippi Avenue in Portland, Oregon, a plot of undeveloped land exists that is, for all intents and purposes, a park. At first glance, this space resembles a kind of garden (see Fig. 1), replete with a gate open to the sidewalk, flanked with reasonably well-maintained shrubs, ground coverings, and flowers. Walking along the brick path leading into the space, one finds soft grass that has been recently cut to three inches in height, along with two fairly ordinary benches resembling those one might find in a traditional park. In the course of a typical summer day, it is common to see anywhere between ten and twenty people wander in from off the street to take a seat, read a book, or smoke a cigarette. One is also likely to see some of these people wandering around the lot, looking at the trees, listening to the birds, or playing with a dog.

With the sounds of cars emanating from the somewhat busy commercial avenue just outside of the space, one might think they were in a city park. However, upon asking one of the aforementioned wanderers where they were would likely elicit a wide range of responses. This space is variously referred to by neighbors and visitors as “an informal park,” “a vacant lot,” “a sacred space,” “someone’s side-yard,” “a secret garden,” or “just a cut-through.” These multiple interpretations are conveyed on a space located on private land, within a relatively desirable neighborhood. Without any built improvements (aside from the benches), the land itself is officially worth $126,500 (see Fig. 2), though the price it could garner on the market is likely much higher. However, focusing on the park at this particular point in time can obscure its contentious history.

Figure 1. Entrance to the park
Over a fifteen-year period, the space has served various purposes as defined by the stakeholders that have owned and used it, coinciding with larger neighborhood patterns. During a period of disinvestment in the neighborhood, the space was a veritable garbage dump, frequented by drug addicts. As the neighborhood emerged as an up-and-coming part of town at another point in time, it was a playground for a Native American after-school program. At still another point, during the height of economic and demographic changes in the area, it was the site of intense contestations over issues of race, gentrification, and development. And now it is the proposed site for a three-story, mixed-use, commercial/residential development. This proposal has been met with some resistance from the Mississippi House housing collective adjacent to the space who argue that it is the last vestige of community space left on the avenue. This public claim on private land is not especially remarkable because it is not a unique occurrence; various stakeholders have continuously redefined the space throughout the years. What is striking, however,
is how this claim highlights the mismatch between *de jure* and *de facto* understandings regarding green space and vacant lots in the city. Further, it raises questions about the role of green space in cities, particularly in areas experiencing redevelopment. How could a vacant lot become a park and what role does it play in the process of redevelopment? How is open space invoked and conceived of within larger political struggles in the neighborhood? What are the property rights implications and how do these connect to common understandings of public amenities such as parks? To begin to explore these questions, it is first necessary to explore the role of green space itself.

**Green Space in the City**

Within the context of the modern American city, the multiple roles and benefits of green space are difficult to pin down. Many times considered an urban amenity, green spaces have been shown to contribute to rising property values (Cho et al. 2008; Anderson & Cordell 1988), reduce noise levels (Cook 1978), improve air quality (Smith 1990), enrich the beauty of neighborhoods (Schroeder 1991), lower stress (Ulrich 1984), and contribute to greater mental and physical well being (Pretty et al. 2005). In arguably the most comprehensive study on the value of American urban parks, a 2009 report published by the Trust for Public Land argues that park systems impart direct economic benefits to cities and citizens, specifically in terms of property values, tourism dollars, recreation opportunities, personal health, community cohesion, clean water, and clean air (Harnik & Welle 2009). Of these benefits, the first two directly impact city governments, specifically in terms of increased revenue. The remaining types of value are spoken of as benefitting the greater citizenry, as elaborated upon in the report:

By far the largest amount stems from residents’ use of the city’s free parkland and free (or low-cost) recreation opportunities, which saves them from having to purchase these items in the marketplace. The second is the health benefit—savings in medical costs—due to the beneficial aspects of exercise in the parks. And the third is the community cohesion benefit of people banding together to save and improve their neighborhood parks. This “know-your-neighbor” social capital helps ward off antisocial problems that would otherwise cost
the city more in police and fire protection, prisons, counseling, and rehabilitation (Harnik & Welle 2009, 1)

While parks impart an economic value to the properties surrounding them, these spaces are simultaneously argued to save citizens from having to resort to the free market for certain services. Moreover, city managers can expect savings in terms of other public services due to increases in community cohesion. In other words, parks are a win-win all around.

In the political ecology literature (see Chapter 2 for a more complete review), the role of urban green space is much less straightforward. Urban green space is variously described as supporting capitalist processes, specifically by defining spaces where economic activities are banned (Gabriel 2011), and by providing a non-capitalist shelter from the harsh urban realities brought on by industrialization (Cranz 1982; Schuyler 1986; Young 1995). Symbolically, green space is seen as critical in defining a kind of urban wilderness (Walker 2007) or as a kind of controlled, manicured urban garden (Spinn 1996; Gandy 2002). At the same time that parks are seen as potential loci for urban crime, violence, and fear (Madge 1997; Brownlow 2005; 2006a; 2008), parks are framed as symbolic rallying points for community engagement (Brownlow forthcoming) and crucial spaces for women in terms of safe recreation (Krenichyn 2006). Recent work in political ecology has also shown the ways in which green space is unevenly distributed (Heynen 2003; Heynen, Perkins, & Roy 2006), with historical racial and class patterns coinciding with the prevalence of green space or lack thereof. Overlapping with similar discussions on the historical production of spatial injustice (Pulido 2000), parks are seen as coinciding with urban movements of capital (e.g. redevelopment, gentrification) that expand the availability of certain amenities, while simultaneously pushing out certain populations.

Among the wide-ranging conceptions above, there are three important points. First, the diverse interpretations of urban green/open spaces indicate that there lacks a unified model both for how they serve communities and the role they play in larger urban capitalist processes. Numerous
factors influence the ways in which green/open spaces are used, valued, conceived of, and constructed, both materially (i.e. building parks physically) and socially (i.e. building parks symbolically), necessitating an investigation that includes the economic and cultural history of a given space within its purview. Many of the above works do just this, but the point remains that the role of a given green space cannot be defined apart from the culture surrounding it. Second, perhaps counterintuitively, by providing both a space free from capitalist activities as well as a suite of freely available services, parks are seen as supporting the larger project of capitalism. On the one hand, the park provides a free space for recreation, shelter from the concrete jungle, and an urban stand-in for nature. On the other it increases property values, dampens the felt impact of industrial processes, and justifies the unnaturalness of the city. Parks are capitalist constructs, despite their non-capitalist appearance as spaces made for public recreation as opposed to private extraction.

The third point is that the majority of research seems to deal with either formal urban parks or professionally designed open spaces that incorporate *nature*, with very little attention paid to their informal analogs. Typical forms of green space, whether public parks, urban forest, or protected open areas, tend to be publicly owned and managed by city governments. Privileging formalized examples of green/open space indicates an *a priori* interpretation of urban nature as that which is actively designed by planners and city governments. From this standpoint, such spaces can be seen as being directed by actors who seek to improve a given urban area and potentially aid the kind of urban movements of capital represented by such processes as development and gentrification. The implications of this ownership and management structure is that such areas are simultaneously protected from development, yet often planned in a way to support larger capitalist projects within the city through delineating boundaries between economic and non-economic spaces and defining proper economic activities within these spaces. While work has been done showing the ways in which green space does just this (Gabriel 2011), relatively little work exists showing the ways in
which these spaces can be appropriated by local communities in a way that works against the processes of accumulation that result in spaces of both socio-ecological harm and good. This is particularly true of cases involving informal green space, where privately held property is used as a veritable commons, while at the same time availing itself to the market and increasing pressures of property demand. Spaces such as these could potentially improve community cohesion in a given neighborhood, but would do so without the protection that comes from being publicly owned. Research outside of political ecology has shown the ways in which vacant lots can become sites of local appropriation during periods of disinvestment, serving as a kind of unsanctioned urban nature in the process, only to become sites of contestation during subsequent periods of reinvestment (see Gibson 2006). Privately owned and publicly-used spaces, thus, could be seen as challenging as well as simultaneously supporting urban development, bearing significant implications for the relationship between urban development and green space.

**Thesis Questions**

The argument outlined above, namely that parks and green spaces support capitalist processes in the city, should be questioned primarily because most studies tend to focus on formalized examples. Failing to see vacant lots and other undeveloped spaces as crucial urban spaces of urban nature (as places for children to play, buffers between houses, garden space, etc.) not only misses much of the story of how both nature and capital is manifest and intersects in the city, but simultaneously glosses over the agency of local actors in shaping their communities. The implications such informal sites hold for greater understandings of urban nature could be fruitful and warrant investigation within the field of urban political ecology. In order to engage with these considerations, this thesis investigates the aforementioned informal park on Mississippi Ave. in Portland first in symbolic terms, asking: *how has this space been interpreted, negotiated, and contested over time*
by different stakeholders? This research is also concerned with the social and physical implications of the first question, asking: how have these interpretations, negotiations, and contestations manifested themselves physically and socially on the space as well as within the neighborhood?

In answering these questions, it is possible to better understand the ways in which vacant lots and other kinds of open space contribute to larger processes of urban development. Spaces such as NAYA Park exist at an important intersection, providing much of the aforementioned benefits of a public park, while simultaneously being left to the whims of the private real estate market. While the role of public parks within larger capitalist development projects could at times be masked, informal analogs potentially highlight these processes by changing along with larger economic patterns in the neighborhood. Public parks, being closed to private development, are not able to evolve as quickly or in the same way private green space can. Private landowners, responding to rising property values, have an incentive to sell or develop their land and can change how it is used far more easily than municipal governments. For this reason, investigating the physical and symbolic constructions of such spaces could perhaps more clearly reveal larger implications for urban nature in Portland as well as other cities experiencing similar patterns of urban investment and reinvestment.

Introducing Methodology

To address the concerns outlined above, this research takes a critical feminist approach both to the knowledge-making it undertakes as well as the set of qualitative methods it employs to accomplish this task. Although the research questions are not feminist in and of themselves, feminist approaches to research have been crucial to methodological conversations emerging in geography in the past three decades. Discussing the increased attention given to methods and methodology within geography since the 1980s, Meghan Cope (2010) notes two critical shifts. First, in reaction to the
quantitative revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, geographers became explicitly concerned with methods themselves rather than simply how they were employed. Second, methods began to be analyzed in more critical and reflexive ways in geography’s ‘cultural turn’, “which turned a newly critical eye toward all stages of research from formulating the questions to data production, from one’s own position along social axes of difference to the problematic representation of other’s views” (Cope 2010, 26). What is important here is that methods are not merely seen as ways to gather data, but as ways to construct knowledge on the part of the researcher as well as the researched. In other words, data is seen not as a reflection, but as a representation of reality. For this reason, this research approaches methodology first in epistemological terms, looking to the ways in which knowledge is produced before discussing the ways in which methods were employed in the given case study.

**Epistemology**

Given that the research questions are centered on the ways in which the park has been constructed discursively as well as physically, an approach to discourse in terms of power and difference is necessary. Understandings of knowledge production and power on the part of the researcher are rooted in studies of feminist scholarship, particularly in terms of patriarchy’s impact on research. Feminist research has been characterized as being "connected in principle to feminist struggle" (Sprague & Zimmerman 1993, 266), meaning that from the outset, research that is feminist has an inherent political intent. Feminist scholars wish to use their work to challenge dominant conceptions of gender, sexuality, and roles tied to each. Alternative definitions offer a more broad definition, seeing feminist research projects as those that are “framed by feminist theory, and aim to produce knowledge that will be useful for effective transformation of gendered injustice and subordination” (Ramazanoglu 2002, 147). From this standpoint, feminist research need not examine
gender directly, but the power structures that frame gender divisions along with all other forms of oppression. In regards to methods, it has been argued that the presence of three qualities—looking first to women’s experiences, designing research specifically for women, and situating the researcher within the same plane as the subject—rather than any consistent or distinctive set of methods, is what defines feminist research (Harding 1987). Taking this approach, one can adapt Harding’s characteristics to fit projects dealing less directly with gender, carrying implications for the oppressive structures undergirding domination and subordination that feminism primarily concerns itself with.

Looking to women’s experiences has been central to the ways feminist research is conceptualized, yet significant debate has taken place as to what exactly this means. Emanating from discussions of race, gender, and class, Black feminists, being “at the intersection of oppressive structures,” saw themselves as having a greater appreciation of oppression in general and thus “reasoned that their liberation would mean the liberation of all people” (Roth 2004, 77). Black feminists have often argued that their experiences differ drastically from that of their White counterparts, resulting in a very different approach to feminism. From this view, the goal of black feminism was not to simply overcome gender-based discrimination, but to overcome the patriarchal structures that undergird all forms of oppression. The main concern from this approach is how patriarchal structures are oppressive to all, while giving credence to the notion that women experience oppression universally, but not necessarily evenly. In this light, looking to the ways in which patriarchal structures (e.g. capitalist housing markets, city governments, etc.) produce inequalities for communities in the form of ballooning housing costs resulting in further gentrification and displacement of minorities is a feminist act. Given that issues of justice figure heavily into the proposed research, and that justice is experienced differentially, this research takes an intersectional approach to its methods, giving consideration to the ways in which multiple forms
of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, homophobia) interact and combine to create an individual’s particular experience of patriarchy. For example, a white queer woman experiences patriarchy differently than a black heterosexual man, each with different power implications. Looking to the experiences of the oppressed is central here, as it is to feminist research in general.

Designing research for women rather than explicitly about women is another characteristic aspect of Harding’s formulation of feminist research. This kind of scholarship seeks to put information in the hands of the informants themselves in order to provide them the tools with which to address their own oppression. Others speak of this type of work as operating out of an ethic of care, seeing to the needs of the community during the research process (Preissle 2007). While operating under such an ethic can at times come into conflict when, for example, the researcher’s politics do not align with those of the studied community (Wickramasinghe 2010), this kind of approach can be adapted to serve larger communities facing oppression.

In addition to women’s experiences and designing research for women, the question of where to place the researcher in the research is a common theme within feminist ethics. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher, or considering ones social location, is emphasized (Ramazanoglu 2002; Hessse-Biber & Brooks 2007), urging feminists to question how their specific gendered, classed, and racial location influences the questions they ask, the data they can access, and the way they interact with their subjects, both before, during, and after fieldwork. Positioning either the researcher or the researched is a necessarily complex task, as identities are neither static, nor bounded (Lal 1999), but situating ones identity both in relation to the subject and in relation to the greater academic literature is nevertheless important. The consideration given to positionality informs which questions are asked, who the researcher has access to, as well as how results are disseminated.
Methods

To answer the research questions outlined above, this thesis employs a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival research. Due to the previously stated interest in the space as a discursive construction with implications for physical use, this thesis relies heavily on data gathered during interviews with twelve neighbors, business owners, and former residents of the neighborhood surrounding the space. As opposed to surveys, which tend to rely on more formalized, close-ended questions (Seymour & Wolch 2010), interviews allow informants to more freely express their perspectives, feelings, and beliefs. Interviews are at their heart a conversation, but seeing interviews in this light is arguably too simplistic (De Vault & Gross 2007). Rather than treating interviews as static black and white texts, researchers are encouraged to not take language for granted. This allows for a kind of meaning-making through language that other forms of interviews may not facilitate. The idea of *specialized vocabularies* gives informants the right to use their own speech and implicitly puts the burden of understanding on the shoulders of the researcher.

The second point concerning power, touched on above, emphasizes that the interviewer in the end holds the reins and can, through the kinds of questions asked, shape informants’ responses. This is potentially problematic as the kind of data interviews are intended to uncover, at least ostensibly, are the stories of the interviewee, not the interviewer. Moreover, the “charged relations” between interviewee and interviewer can have a significant impact on they way informants respond, as “interviewing is a form of social interaction, and social psychological research has amply demonstrated that in social interactions we tailor our speech for the context within which we are speaking” (Sprague 2005, 122).

While clear methodological issues exist concerning interviews, it is important to remember the powerful kinds of data they can provide. Oral methods are a way to gain knowledge about and from voices typically left out of dominant histories (Leavy 2007). In order to overcome the issues of
power and difference inherent in the interview process, the interview process should be a casual, collaborative process based on interchange—as opposed to extraction—of information between two like individuals. To aid in this process, feminist researchers should approach the act of active listening as a feminist act (De Vault & Gross 2007). In practice, conducting interviews only between two like individuals seems rather limiting as it suggests that we can only interview those like us, in essence interviewing ourselves. Rather than approaching the proposed research in this way, it seems more advantageous to note these differences going into the interview and approach the construction of interview questions as a collaborative process, allowing the informants to shape the questions asked. Using more open-ended interviews during preliminary meetings helps facilitate this, as well as aid in addressing the aforementioned considerations of difference and power inherent in the interview process.

Conducting interviews with members of the Mississippi House, the Boise Neighborhood Association, business owners, and other neighbors, this work holds that individual experiences, values, opinions, and beliefs are important sources of data in addressing the research questions. Seeing these groups as experts allows for a kind of epistemic privilege (e.g. members of the Mississippi House are responsible for framing their movement), but these responsibilities are assigned by the researcher, implying a certain amount of power over the narrative arising from these interviews. Beginning with contacts made in the housing collective adjacent to the space, a snowball sampling method was employed, with informants suggesting other potential interviewees possessing knowledge regarding the history of the space. The types of questions posed varied slightly depending on the position of the particular informant (e.g. members of those resisting development were asked about their resistance, while business owners were not), but centered on the history of the space in terms of its use both by the informant and by others to their best knowledge.
Informants were not given questions beforehand to allow for flexibility during interviews and to allow for candid responses provided in a conversational tone.

From the aforementioned approach, participant observation was carried out over a six-week period, both on the space and within organizational meetings in the neighborhood to aid in interpreting interview data. The researcher lived in the Mississippi House immediately adjacent to the park, which allowed for a context through which to read claims made during interviews concerning its history, use, and role in the larger neighborhood. Fieldwork was often conducted among groups in a similar socio-economic, political, racial category as that of the researcher, taking place among the predominantly white, mid-20s, and politically alternative members of the Mississippi House co-op. While traditional positivist work tends to see this as a liability, “Being too similar to one's research subject,” is challenged by feminist researchers, who pointed out “how much under such a model goes unresearched, unwritten” (Pillow & Mayo 2007, 162). Being similar to, and identifying with, the group studied provides an insight to issues that outsiders may tend to miss. This allows the researcher to know when things are awry or unusual, serving the feminist notion of “looking at what is missing, what is passed over, and what is avoided” in the group (Pillow & Mayo 2007, 164). Knowing how to read these contexts is important as “in a racist context, race will have more weight of meaning, experience, and politics; in a homophobic context, sexuality may trump gender, even though we might see that homophobia is constituted through gender bias” (Pillow & Mayo 2007, 156). Were this work more comparative, particularly if it required speaking to competing groups, this position would and should be reconsidered.

A daily record of park activity was kept when at all possible, noting which groups used the space (e.g. families, employees of neighboring businesses, members of the adjacent co-op, people with dogs, homeless people), for what purposes, and when. At times, visitors to the space were approached and asked what they knew about the space, how often they visited, whether they were
from the neighborhood, etc. One meeting of the neighborhood association was attended in order to gain insight as to the political structures undergirding development in the neighborhood. In addition, the researcher lived in the Mississippi House and attended strategy meetings held therein, recording observations of group dynamics, networking strategies, and attitudes about the space and larger neighborhood.

Two days of archival research was conducted in order to construct a general history of the space, with historical texts approach critically, giving consideration to topics of power. Textual sources provide a kind of data that is necessarily filtered and focused according to the specifications of the group who produced it. The producer of the text has a certain kind of power over how topics, groups, and debates are represented, a fact that is compounded when a researcher then interprets this representation. The way information such as this is conveyed in texts often reflects hierarchies of identity, so responsible feminist researchers must be able to weed through texts keeping this in mind. Newspaper reports are read with a critical eye, asking how a community’s interests and demographics are represented in the text. Alternative media sources (of particular importance to understanding this unofficial park) are read differently, given that sources such as internet forums and blog postings are produced by different sets of actors under much different conditions. Identities are often masked, access to online channels is uneven, and involvement in the creation of online texts tends to be driven by overtly biased actors, often with particular stakes in the subject at hand. Keeping these questions in mind during the process of discourse analysis reveals the times in which gender, class, or race become important in understanding the way conflicts over environment are produced.

Gathering data on the ownership and building history from maps and permit documents in the Portland city archives as well as the Multnomah County Recorder’s Office provided the ability to cross-reference information collected in interviews, as well as allowing for a longer purview than
could be attained via oral histories alone. In addition, property value information for the previous ten years was collected from the PortlandMaps online database. By making use of archival documents as well as oral histories, it was possible to construct a history of the space both in terms of its monetary and social value. While it should be mentioned that the emphasis in this work is on the latter of these two types of histories, the economic context is a theme woven throughout interviews, and is thus an important consideration in this work.

Positioning the Researcher

In terms of positionality, the researcher’s identity as a white, heterosexual, twenty-something male living in the Mississippi House informed the questions asked as well as the way informants were approached. In some instances, identity with the house was made clear, particularly when informants were met through co-op members. In other cases, particularly when interviewing business members and neighbors purportedly at odds with the co-op, this identity was only given if directly asked, though it should be noted that this never actually happened. It is difficult to know whether certain informants knew about potential alignment with the Mississippi House during interviews, but no open accusations were made on the part of any informant.

Typically, the researcher moved fluidly between taking notes on activities in the park, discussing resistance activities with house members, conducting scheduled interviews, and seeking new informants via email, phone, and by visiting local businesses. In terms of sharing results, data regarding land use history and observations of the park were reported to members of the Mississippi House to clarify their knowledge of the space. In addition, general attitudes expressed during interviews with neighbors and business owners were shared when deemed appropriate by the researcher, with identities and specific quotes kept confidential. Care was given not to instigate conflict between the house and its neighbors, with certain comments kept private, but interview data
was imparted when it could provide insight as to their reputation within the community as well as to the efficacy of their efforts. After formal interviews, some informants were approached in order to clarify certain statements or when contradictory accounts made aspects of the park’s history unclear. During interviews, information was triangulated via probing questions based on information gathered in previous interviews, particularly when representations of the park’s history ran counter to previously expressed accounts. At times this revealed the degree of certainty to which a given informant spoke from, while at others it caused previous accounts to be questioned.

Finally, the political alignment on the part of the researcher should be noted, as it is central to the analysis contained in this work. The research herein is approached from the basic supposition that certain people are oppressed and negatively impacted by many processes taking place in cities (e.g. gentrification, pollution, uneven access to amenities) based on topics of difference (class, gender, race, sexuality, etc.). This belief is not held dogmatically, as said processes do not operate in uniform ways within all cities or neighborhoods, but this approach to the park is woven throughout the research. While this could be seen as a liability, the focus of this work is not on the attitudes of the researcher, but of those living and working around the park. Care has been taken to faithfully represent the multiple interpretations, invocations, and contestations that have taken place concerning the park, which the following chapters aim to show.
Chapter 2.  LITERATURE & CASE STUDY
Introducing Political Ecology

Identifying a unified theme for writings in political ecology is not a simple task, as the field has been described variously as a synthesis of ecology and political economy (Greenberg & Park 1994; Blaikie & Brookfield 1987; Peet & Watts 1996), a political geography of environment (Hempel 1996), a way of describing radical environmental social movements (Cockburn & Ridgeway 1979), a method by which to understand nature-society interactions (Watts 2000), and the political circumstances surrounding environmental degradation (Stott & Sullivan 2000). Perhaps a more straightforward description, political ecology has been identified for the presence of various themes—land rights, international markets, local histories, traditional livelihoods—within specific case studies (McCarthy 2002). While Robbins (2012) organizes the field into five main theses dealing with degradation and marginalization, conservation and control, environmental conflict and exclusion, environmental subjects and identity, and political objects and actors respectively (2012, 6), central to each explanation is the role of global market forces in the production of environmental conflict.

In light of neo-Malthusian explanations linking over-extraction and pollution to overpopulation and poverty, early work in political ecology began offering alternative explanations that centered on questions of political economy within a larger global system (Franke and Chasin 1980; Hecht 1985; Blaikie & Brookfield 1987). As an explanatory tool and framework, Marxist political economy became very important, particularly as green materialist scholars began linking the oppression of the working class with that of the environment. Ecological Marxists, seeking to address the environmental void in Marx’s materialist framework, began to show the ways in which accumulation eventually undercuts capitalist production resulting in somewhat consistent financial crises, while simultaneously degrading the conditions necessary for production (e.g. air, soil, water, energy, etc.) resulting in the second contradiction of capital (O’Connor 1996; see Benton 1996). The
green materialist “notion that capitalist accumulation requires the exploitation of both labor and nature” (Robbins 2012, 58) seeks to place the interests of labor in line with that of the environment. This bridging between the social and environmental resonates with the tied fates of the park and its users discussed in this particular work, highlighting the need to understand issues concerning both spheres.

Tied to topics of exploitation and marginalization, the related conflicts surrounding the disintegration of local environmental identities also began to be explained in terms of political economy (Watts 2000). The dissolution of former cultural ties to the environment was often seen as occurring alongside environmental degradation. Despite this, conflict over land use and access, while tied to larger economic processes, is oftentimes less predicated on topics of access to resources, but more on understandings regarding landscape and meaning. As Neumann notes, “the most vociferous (and potentially violent) aspect of conflict involve not material resources, but aesthetic values” (Neumann 2005, 158), with the most heated debates tending to revolve around maintaining heritages of local autonomy as opposed to material concerns over resources. In other words, conflicts over land are often times more about identity with that land as represented by the various intangible qualities the land holds, such as beauty, history, or symbolic significance. This necessitates an analysis that goes beyond economic explanations, one that seeks to understand conflicts over environments as conflicts over identity with those environments. Moreover, as Watts (2000) notes, local community institutions, founded on concepts of identity, are often the arbiter of land rights, whether formal or informal, and are thus instructive of how resistance is either advanced or contained. These themes figure heavily in subsequent chapters of this thesis, as those resisting the park’s development tend to focus on aesthetic features or political concerns, while those in support discuss city code, property rights, and green building practices. While the conflict is about a
particular space (the park), at its root are conflicts of identity (e.g. anarchist and socialist activists vs. liberal technocrats).

Connected to discussions of land and meaning, topics of ownership and property rights are oftentimes critical in explaining the origin and development of environmental conflict as well as social inequality. Describing the importance of these topics, Neumann notes:

A key concern of political ecology has been to analyse the ways in which the structure of property rights at various scales (e.g., the state, the community and household) influences access to resources and land. Of particular interest is how property rights are defined, negotiated and struggled over among different social groups, be they class, gender or ethnic groups, and how this helps to explain patterns of development and environmental conservation and degradation. The question of who controls access is a critical one in analyzing who participates in, gains from, or is excluded from the process of development (2005, 102).

The ways in which property rights are distributed and the historical processes behind them provide insight to the ways in which access to land is legitimated within a particular societal context.

Property theory essentially consists of conceptualizations of ownership – typically either state, private, communal or open-access – as well as an associated set of rights – usually classified as either use, transfer, exclusion or enforcement (Neumann 2005, 103). Each model of ownership carries different implications for land and resource use and debate over these is significant.

As discussed in the concluding chapter of this work, topics of property rights are central to understanding the park, primarily in terms of governance, since the space is publicly used despite its private status. Augmenting the property rights typology outlined above, critical to this thesis are de jure and de facto understandings of property rights. The park is simultaneously de jure private land (i.e. its official legal status) and de facto public land (i.e. its actual use as a public park). The tension between the park’s official designation and its actual use highlight the ways in which boundaries between public and private often blur, as landowners negotiate use with neighbors and tenants. Official designations tend to take on more meaning as property values rise, bearing significant implications for those using space that they legally have no right to. When such spaces are used as a
park, as represented by this particular case study, this necessitates further discussion about the economic and social links to understandings of urban nature.

Connecting the Rural to the Urban

Rural political ecology has tended to focus on the concept of environmental conflict at specific sites, while the main focus of urban political ecology seems to be more processual, looking to the ways in which both city and nature are constructed along with, as well as in relation to, one another. Rooted in structuralism, conceptualizations of the city as both site for and producer of capitalist development (Castells 1977; Harvey 1982) see the construction of modern cities as the product of an “almost inevitable tendency toward increasing industrialization in which capitalist economic relations drove the accumulation of capital in urban centers” (Gabriel 2011, 123). The development of an urban nature, particularly the emergence of the phenomenon of the urban park, is directly tied to this, as built nature is offered as a kind of compensation for the harsh realities of an increasingly industrial urban life (Crantz 1982; Schuyler 1986; Young 1995). Constructed in this binary fashion, city and nature come to define each other dialectically, with the former being explicitly produced by humanity and the latter being distinctly not so.

This oppositional relationship is challenged by theses arguing that nature as well as city are socially constructed (see Cronon 1992; 1996). Challenging the conception of nature as being culture-neutral, urban nature is shown to undergird capitalism by helping to “produce a knowledge of the city as wholly capitalist (social) space through the reification of the park as a non-economic (natural) space” (Gabriel 2011, 124). In other words, the non-economic space of the park is constructed in opposition to the economic space of the city, thereby defining the city as that which is devoted to capitalist activity. Along with this, uneven development links environmental concerns with societal
ones in ways similar to previous green materialist discussions. According to Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003, 901):

Perpetual change and an ever-shifting mosaic of environmentally and socioculturally distinct urban ecologies—varying from the manufactured and manicured landscaped gardens of gated communities and high-technology campuses to the ecological war zones of depressed neighbourhoods, with lead-painted walls and asbestos-covered ceilings, waste dumps and pollutant-infested areas—still shape the choreography of a capitalist urbanisation process. The environment of the city is deeply caught up in this dialectical process, and environmental ideologies, practices and projects are part and parcel of this urbanisation of nature process.

In this light, the production of landscapes within the city, be it park, factory, store, or residential complex, is carried out through a specifically capitalist process known as the urbanization of nature. This process is carried out unevenly, resulting in both spaces that serve as centers of environmental harm and good, coinciding with geographical patterns of social inequality. For this reason, Swyngedouw and Heynen call for a “just urban environmental perspective” that considers questions of “who gains and who pays and to ask serious questions about the multiple power relations—and the scalar geometry of these relations—through which deeply unjust socio-environmental conditions are produced and maintained” (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003, 901).

The urban processes above come to be generally referred to in urban political ecology as metabolism and circulation, with capital flows in the latter serving to support the growth and maintenance of the city represented by the former. As discussed in the introduction to their edited volume on urban nature, Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw (2006) describe the metaphors as “guiding vehicles that permit casting urbanization as a dynamic socio-ecological transformation process that fuses together the social and natural in the production of distinct and specific urban environments” (2006, 13). This socio-ecological fusing produces hybrid environments that are at once both natural and urban. Invoking the biological, cities are seen as depending directly on the circulation of resources as blood to the body:
Circulatory conduits of water, foodstuffs, cars, fumes, money, labour, etc., move in and out of the city, transform the city, and produce the urban as a continuously changing socio-ecological landscape...all these flows complete the global geographic mappings and traces that flow through the urban and “produce” London (or any other city) as a palimpsest of densely layered bodily, local, national and global – but depressingly geographically uneven – metabolic socio-ecological processes (Swyngedouw 2006, 21).

The city is seen as simultaneously producing natures within and without its geographic bounds. Further, the city is dependent on these flows for its very survival, with material inputs (e.g. air, water, land, energy, etc.) being consumed and incorporated in ways that allow the city to function and grow. Circulation has been examined in literal terms, as evidenced by numerous studies focusing on flows of air and water (Smith 2001; Gandy 2004; Kaika 2006; Loftus 2006; Oliver 2006; Smith and Ruiters 2006; Véron 2006), but has also been invoked metaphorically, as a way to highlight the precarious nature of urban existence (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Keil 2003; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006). In the latter case, social catastrophes (e.g. international financial crises, regional blackouts, etc.) collide with ecological crises (e.g. outbreaks of SARS and West Nile Virus) in ways that “highlight momentarily that our urban lives depend most fundamentally on global ecologies and the political economies that uphold them” (Keil 2003, 723). When circulation is interrupted, the city cannot function and experiences a crisis analogous to a body deprived of blood flow, which exposes its residents to a high level of risk in the face of natural disasters. The fascination with potential catastrophes in urban political ecology literature underscores one of the primary research goals: to unsettle the idea that cities are unnatural entities independent from nature. Rather, these studies see cities as hybrid environments, produced by and dependent on both social and ecological processes, and thus are neither wholly natural nor wholly unnatural.

The repeated emphasis on unsettling normative understandings of both city and nature in urban political ecology is in contrast with the origins of rural political ecology, with its concern for social movements arising from environmental conflict. Researchers in urban political ecology tend to “study situations in which no open conflicts or changes are apparent. Rather, the focus is on what is
considered ‘normal’ under current political, economical, and social conditions and thus goes unnoticed” (Zimmer 2010, 345). In a site-level case study context, this often involves an interrogation of urban nature at a reasonably large extent, uncovering the social justice issues underpinning the urban tree canopy in cities like Indianapolis (Heynen 2003; 2006) and Milwaukee (Heynen, Perkins, and Roy 2006), the production of “turfgrass subjects” via the American lawn (Robbins and Sharp 2006), and the city-level technical discourse producing environmental policies in Toronto (Keil and Boudreau 2006). At a smaller level, individual waterfront redevelopment projects are analyzed as sites of urban environmental struggle, revealing changes in governance and economic regulation (Hagerman 2007; Laidley 2007; O’Callaghan and Linehan 2007), insights about urban ecological issues and larger nature-society relationships (Kear 2007; Wakefield 2007), and greater understandings of the cultural politics behind land use practices (O’Callaghan and Linehan 2007). In addition, themes of environmental control are discussed via the historical construction of parks in Philadelphia, with park projects constructing park subjects through a redefinition of urban nature as spaces of leisure as opposed to economic activity (Brownlow 2006b).

While it has contributed much to greater understandings of nature-society relationships within the field as a whole, the research agenda and theoretical underpinnings of urban political ecology has underemphasized many of the components central to rural political ecology. In his call for a political ecology of the First World, McCarthy (2002) outlines the components that, in his view, unite political ecology case studies into a coherent field of study:

What is important here is that what unites these disparate cases, and largely defines political ecology as a field, is a shared focus on certain themes in the study of rural resource conflicts. The major themes of political ecology include: access to and control over resources; marginality; integration of scales of analysis; the effects of integration into international markets; the centrality of livelihood issues; ambiguities in property rights and the importance of informal claims to resource use and access; the importance of local histories, meanings, culture, and ‘micropolitics’ in resource use; the disenfranchisement of legitimate local users and uses; the effects of limited state capacity; and the imbrications of all these with colonial and postcolonial legacies and dynamics. It is arguably the presence of most or all of these
themes as objects or components of case studies that defines political ecology more than any consistent theoretical or methodological approach to them. (2002, 1283)

While there does seem to be a categorical difference between rural resource conflict and urban environmental change, it should be noted that urban environments, like all environments, are produced unevenly. Both between cities and within cities, the ways in which property rights are maintained, livelihoods are produced, and state control is enforced are often dependent on social and economic context. Land is used and its private/public status upheld in Midtown Manhattan in vastly different ways than in the slums of Rio Di Janeiro. Property within a neighborhood experiencing periods of disinvestment, while it may be _de jure_ private land, can oftentimes serve a _de facto_ function that is more public in nature. Boundaries between properties often become less important and are more easily transgressed, particularly during periods in which urban crime, gang activity, and drug trafficking limits the capacities of local police forces. This is at one time analogous to, and at the same time an inverse of, the model observed in rural political ecology in which newly implemented private land systems are imposed over traditionally communal ones.

Despite political ecology’s early emphasis on environmental activism and site-level resource conflict, contestations over vacant lots, green space, and other forms of open space in the city remain under examined in the field. Case studies tend to either treat the city itself as the unit of analysis or, in the instances where they do examine individual sites within the city, predominantly deal with formalized forms of urban nature. Private land, particularly in the form of a vacant lot, can and often is used in ways that is analogous to formalized green space. The fact that a plot of land is held privately does not in and of itself preclude it from serving as a park, a community garden, an open field, a baseball field, or a community event space. Property rights and formalized agreements are not the only factors defining a space’s use, particularly in areas that are in the periphery of urban development. For this reason, urban political ecology must look beyond formalized examples of
urban nature if it is to tell a more complete story regarding the process of the metabolic processes taking place in the city.

Gentrification and Urban Nature

With discussions in the urban political ecology literature centering on the socio-ecological implications of capitalist accumulation in the city, it is reasonable to draw a connection between urban nature and the socio-economic process of gentrification. This is particularly important as gentrification is brought up often by informants in this research (see Fig. 4). Defined as a process that brings reinvestment of capital into urban areas previously shaped by periods of continual disinvestment (Smith 1979), gentrification can be seen as a powerful force that reshapes a city or neighborhood in significant ways, both economically and socially. In terms of economic value of land, the Rent Gap as coined by Neil Smith comes about when the potential value of land exceeds its actualized value to an extent to which reinvestment becomes a viable economic strategy (Smith 1979, 1984). Associated rises in property values then displace former residents who can no longer afford to live in the neighborhood, pushing them to other areas of disinvestment within the city (Smith 1984). Economic reinvestment, however, also coincides with the arrival of new residents who can afford to live.

Figure 3. Concerned Neighbor
within the transforming neighborhoods or seek a financial profit by investing in them.

Redevelopment policies, like those advanced by many city governments in the 1970s and 1980s, oftentimes include park projects, indicating a tie between reinvestment of capital and an expansion of access to urban nature. However, public green space designed by a city government, increasingly funded by corporate backers, and implemented within the larger context of urban redevelopment projects does not offer the same kind of possibility as its informal analog, both in social and ecological terms. The act of appropriating private space for common use can be seen as an act of agency, allowing for access to amenities and resources not otherwise provided by the state. Further, the uses of such space are negotiated informally between actors (e.g. land owners, community members, nonprofits, etc.) and thus can be seen as operating in fundamentally different ways than traditional public spaces, carrying different implications for the nature-society relationships they produce. Rather than the construction of park subjects by park designers and managers (see Gabriel 2011), appropriate use is defined more loosely, allowing for activities not typically permitted in typical urban parks.

In terms of this particular work, vacant lots are directly tied to gentrification via histories of disinvestment. When property values are depressed, either actually or artificially, there is less pressure to develop open space and formerly developed spaces experiencing decay are cleared and often not redeveloped. While such spaces benefit from informal, local negotiations, their informality and lack of legal standing also leaves them unprotected from development pressures. During periods of reinvestment, as property values begin to rise, property rights begin to take on more meaning, limiting a space’s use and increasing pressures to develop. In this way, environmental change in the city can be seen in line with the economic and social changes carried out via flows of capital and gentrification.
The Park on Mississippi Avenue

Exploring the aforementioned potentiality of informal green space, this study involves a site-specific study of a plot of informal green space in Portland, Oregon and the current resistance effort to halt its development into commercial and residential space. Located in Northeast Portland, the park is officially in the neighborhood of Boise within the larger district of Albina. The Albina district (see Fig. 5) historically served as the center of Black settlement in the city, with the population of each neighborhood within the district being at least 35% African American in 1970 (Gibson, 2007, 7). While Northeast Portland is still considered to be the heart of ‘Black Portland’, decades of disinvestment and reinvestment drastically reshaped the demographics in the area in general and the neighborhood of Boise in particular. Coupled with periods of disinvestment, a large population boom contributed to rapid gentrification in many neighborhoods throughout the city. Within the census tract housing the park, the last decade has seen a significant demographic shift, with African Americans accounting

Figure 4. Albina district in Portland, Oregon (in Gibson, 2007)
for 49.9% of the total population in 2000, shrinking to just 25.8% in 2010. During the same period, the white population grew to 64.1% from 38.2% in 2000 (see Figure 6). The neighborhood has undergone a rapid increase in popularity, with various new housing developments opening in the area. In addition to this, the neighborhood holds a certain cultural cachet, with a variety of restaurants, coffee shops, bars, and music venues being located along Mississippi. However, this reputation is fairly new and many are not pleased with the changes seen in the neighborhood.

The park has been a site of contestation since around 2005, when those originally responsible for the park were priced out of the area. With permission from the lot’s owner, the Native American Youth Association (NAYA) landscaped what was formerly a vacant lot and installed play structures in order to give their children a safe space to play. After nearly five years of using the space, the park and NAYA’s office in an adjacent building were both sold to the Kurisu family, who subsequently doubled their rent. This rise in rent forced NAYA to move out of the area, selling the play structures to cover moving costs. The Kurisus then proposed development of the space, which was resisted by many members of the community, including a low-income Anarchist housing cooperative located immediately adjacent to the space. Members of this co-op became involved with the neighborhood association, gaining seats on its board, and focused much of their attention on increasing community participation, offering rides,
providing childcare, and handing out flyers. These efforts, along with controversial developments in the neighborhood, resulted in highly attended neighborhood meetings and an increased interest in many of the projects in the neighborhood. With an increased amount of controversy, the proposed project on the space was pushed back for years until the 2008 financial crisis when the landowners decided to forgo their plans. Contrasting the resistance in 2005, a project proposed in April of 2011 by Chris Rogers of Phase Two Development has met with similar resistance on the part of the coop, albeit with completely different members employing different strategies. Citing the need for more green space and more affordable housing, the battle is less about the space itself and more about a community seeking to resist the rise in rent associated with continuing gentrification in the area.

The Park as a Mirror

This thesis is organized into three empirical chapters investigating the physical and social permutations of the park during three distinct periods stretching from its creation in the early 2000s to its most recent contestation in the Spring and Summer of 2011. Chapter 3 discusses the origin of the park, beginning with its use as a trash and drug space to its cleanup and use as a park. When the Native American Youth Association (NAYA) moved to neighborhood in the early 2000s, the neighborhood was known as a dangerous and crime-filled area, and the space housing the park was seen as a hazard. At roughly the same time as property value began to rise, NAYA cleaned up the space in order to provide their children with a safe space to play. Chapter 4 deals with the park’s move from asset to contestation during the larger context of Mississippi Avenue’s ascendency. The rise of property values along with a change in landlords brought about both increased pressure on the park as well as the group that used it. With NAYA’s eventual relocation, the park immediately became the focus of development pressures by the new landlords with visions for a redeveloped
neighborhood, tying the fate of the park with the fate of its former tenants. Chapter 5 represents the park as a contested space. The most recent controversy over a proposed development on the space involved significant disagreements concerning what the space actually is: a park or a vacant lot. Efforts to resist this particular move to develop the space rested on one group’s ability to convince their neighbors of the space’s importance as a community asset, but within the context of high property values and continued redevelopment in the formerly blighted neighborhood, this proved difficult. Together, these chapters show the ways in which the space changed along with the larger economic and social patterns in the neighborhood. In this way, it is difficult to conceive of the apart from the contexts surrounding it. Urban nature and socio-economic shifts are intimately tied in this case, a point that is made in more detail in the chapter concluding this work.
Chapter 3. NAYA PARK
Before the Park

The use of 4008 N. Mississippi Avenue as a park is a fairly recent development, beginning with the arrival of the Native American Youth Association (NAYA) in 2000. Prior to this time, the lot was considered vacant, and very few informants could recall a time when this was not the case. In the words of one longtime Boise resident, “it’s always been vacant, until the last several years where now it looks nice and, you know, everything looks good.” Empty lots, namely the pattern of lots either remaining or becoming undeveloped, seem to have been quite common from the postwar period until fairly recently. Before noting that “that space has been vacant for some time,” one informant described this as being fairly normal, saying, “shortly after the war, these buildings, a lot them were neglected and a lot of buildings—most of the buildings on the street used to look like mine, with a few nice brick ones thrown in. Uh, most of ‘em were neglected badly. Many of ‘em were torn down.” One neighbor noted that “nothing has really been done to that property since the house has burned down over there,” an event that seems to have occurred in roughly the mid 1970s, with city archives indicating a small 7-unit apartment on the lot until 1974.

While the lot itself has been vacant for over three decades, ownership of the space changed hands numerous times during this period and has typically been tied to a building located on a separate lot immediately south of the property. Currently the Mississippi Ballroom, the building was once used as a temple by the Nation of Islam, but also served various other functions throughout the years:

Informant: Well, the temple was right there. Yeah, that building [the ballroom] was a temple. Yeah, they never had any buildings [in the park].

Interviewer: It was just owned by them?

Informant: It might’ve been owned by them, because they owned that building.

Interviewer: I see.

Informant: Right.
Interviewer: Was it – that whole, like the building as-is was a temple?

Informant: Yeah, well, it really wasn’t quite like that back then. It was a temple. ‘Cuz see, since it was been a temple, it’s been a washhouse, it’s been a ballroom, it’s been a few things.

Interviewer: Yeah, but it’s always been connected to [the park]?

Informant: It’s always, yeah, but nobody—you wouldn’t have ever known that was connected to this place because nobody actually did anything to this space…but that was a Muslim temple for many years. We couldn’t even come outside without them talking about, “You want a bean pie?”

While use of the building adjacent to the space changed over the years, it seems likely that the use of the lot also changed. However, with local memory of lot use fairly patchy, and without any built structures appearing in archival records, it is difficult to piece together a history of the space’s actual use.

One informant, recalling the landowner immediately preceding the Kurisus, remembers the lot as essentially spillover space throughout the 1990s:

When Jerry owned it, he just let it kinda grow wild—he used it for his own personal use, it was not public property. He used it for his—he owned that property, he owned the building, he lived there, and he ran his business out of there. He just kept everybody out. He didn’t—there was a lot of drug activity and criminal activity and he kept that place cleaned up. You didn’t mess up over there. Unless you were a friend of Jerry’s, you didn’t touch it.

During this period, the lot’s private nature seems to have been clearly established. While the informant above went on to note that “people would walk through it, they cut through it forever—people cut through other people’s backyards all the time,” they maintained that at this point “it was really a private yard.” The landowner used the open space for his own purposes, allowing others on his property at his discretion. Negotiations such as these are not especially noteworthy, as tenants and landowners typically establish how spaces can be used and who can use them. What is noteworthy, however, is how these negotiations often have a lasting impact. Terms of use beyond those established in basic de jure property laws tend to expire with the end of tenure. In this case, the
ground rules governing the space seem to have been fundamentally altered with the emergence of the park, making a formerly private space more public in nature.

**Origin of the Park**

When NAYA arrived on Mississippi Avenue, the neighborhood was still known to be a fairly dangerous section of Portland and the space that was to become the park also seems to have borne this mark. Renting office space in the building just to the south of the space, NAYA immediately perceived the lot as a hazard. A member of the organization described the neighborhood and the space upon their arrival in very stark terms:

> Every building was basically abandoned…and like, we had bullet holes in our windows. We had—I mean it was [pause] totally a different, different place—and that park was literally filled with garbage up to like [pause] you know, up to your chest almost…And it had been a huge place where people had gone to, like, basically do drugs and, like, our building used to be known, like that Mississippi building, it used to be basically known as like a huge crack den. And I don’t know if you’ve ever—I think he moved away—but our old landlord used to be Jerry Van Norton, he has, like, his stories. Like, he was our landlord and he used to carry a gun with him all the time because there were like, regularly shootings…And so, literally we couldn’t even let the kids go in—I mean it was dangerous, there was so much shards of glass, it was [pause] terrible.

Within the context of what seems to be a generally treacherous neighborhood at the time, the space served as a locus for drug use and crime. Despite aforementioned claims regarding the landowner’s strict monitoring of the space, the statement above describes a space used as a dumping ground, at times appropriated for more nefarious activities. The move to turn the lot from a hazard to an amenity essentially began with facetious remarks made among members of NAYA, as one member noted, “Basically what happened is we would always laugh and call it the NAYA park, like to be funny [laughs]…we would be like, ‘That’s our park – our special park.’” Stemming from these jokes, NAYA began a significant and protracted cleanup effort in and around the lot to create space for their community:
Basically what happened is we started getting different groups of volunteers who would wanna volunteer, and so we did the flower beds, and we repainted the building, and then we were just like, “If you really wanna help us,” you know, “haul away some garbage.” So, literally we had different volunteer groups, like, slowly hauling away garbage, and we did it all on our own, we did it all with our own—like we had volunteers come and, you know, bring their own trucks. And then there was another group called Salmon Corps, which, the organization doesn’t exist anymore, but it’s like a, youth corps of like, kind of workers. And so we had that group, basically we kind of trained them to get rid of all the needles, but we like, you know, got everyone gloves, got the hazard, you know, disposable things, and so we basically started slowly removing all of that. We removed hundreds of pounds of glass shards from there…Hundreds of pounds. And so we basically just—and it took us, like, three good years just to get it to be any place where anyone would walk—and so the play structures, like, yeah that was neat, but it was so much more than that.

Here, the amount of effort exerted by the organization, its community, and allies is remembered in reasonably vivid detail. Simply creating the conditions necessary to plant grass and install play structures required nearly three years of coordinated hazardous volunteer work. This work, while serving a very specific purpose in removing a dangerous space, can also be seen as a commitment to the neighborhood on the part of NAYA. The organization, by cleaning up the lot, planting grass, and installing play structures, made a clear and visible mark on their neighborhood at a time when their organization was establishing a presence on the street. Further, by not cordoning off the lot or tightly controlling its use, NAYA made a community space not for their use alone, but extended it to their neighbors as well. This point is remembered on Mississippi, though not extensively. What is also implicit in the statement above is that the space was fundamentally misunderstood by the larger neighborhood as mere housing for play structures. Obtaining a grant and installing slides in a vacant lot seems a fairly minor act in the view of the informant. Instead, what mattered was the investment represented in the act of cleaning up the space. The project of making the park “drew people in,” according to the informant, going on to describe a volunteer who, seemingly unsolicited, began planting flowers on the space. This person now serves on NAYA’s board in their new location. The project was more than simply cleaning up a vacant lot—it was about a group buying into their neighborhood and creating a sense of community. This, along with their use of the space, continues
to be a significant memory to members of the organization, despite their relocation to another part of the city.

The cleanup effort also reflected a kind of symbiotic relationship with NAYA’s landlord that extended beyond the bounds of what would become a park. Referring to the landowner as “a really great partner,” the informant from NAYA described their cleanup of an adjacent space:

We actually were the ones who cleaned out the Mississippi Ballroom too—like, that ballroom was literally filled to the ceiling with trash and junk—and again, our landlord was really, like he was—he loved us. He was really community-minded, and he wasn’t using the ballroom, and he was like, “Well, if you clean it out then you can use it, and then I’m going to rent it out to other people,” and we were like, “Well we need a place for teen dances.”

The park, then, was part of a package of cooperation and negotiation regarding space. Without the resources to buy land outright, NAYA worked with their landlord to obtain spatial resources through mutually beneficial means and agreed upon terms of use. The informal negotiation represented in the statement above seems to be indicative of a minority community attempting to take the fate of their neighborhood in their own hands, moving beyond basic concepts of strict notions of property rights, and has historical analogs elsewhere in the neighborhood. However, as is discussed later in this chapter, the informality and illegitimate nature of these negotiations lent themselves to being somewhat
temporary fixes that could easily be overturned. Regardless, for a period of time, NAYA’s agreement with their landlord led to a period of use and tenure that marked the space in particular ways.

**Use of the Space**

Following cleanup, NAYA used the space extensively before moving out of Boise in 2006. The space served as a park, providing a place for childhood recreation, a resource for hosting events, and a semi-public venue for NAYA to communicate with both the native community it served as well as the neighborhood at large. According to the NAYA representative interviewed, the space served a multitude of purposes, beginning with its role in the daily functioning of the organization’s education programs:

Every morning—so like, right now we have summer camp, we have, like 150 kids coming, then we had, like, 50 kids coming—but literally every morning, all the kids would gather in the park. And so that’s where we would do all the roll call, like we would oftentimes eat breakfast and lunch in the park, just ’cuz it was cool.

More than a mere playground, the space was described by the respondent as a daily resource for the organization’s after-school and summer activities. Yes, children played in the space, but from the perspective of the speaker above, this is not the most emphasized point. Rather, the role it played within the daily cultural fabric of the organization as well as the native community it served is highlighted:

We did several barbecues a year, like, we dug salmon pits—we cooked salmon out there a couple times a year. We had a little special area we did that…We have a lot of huge community gatherings, so we typically, like when we do a youth and elders council and all of that, we would have four or five hundred people show up, so we would do, like, stuff in the ballroom and then stuff out there. But we pretty much used it on a daily basis.

The space was described as being essential to the functioning of NAYA’s community. The open outdoor space allowed NAYA a certain amount of flexibility in holding events, particularly when used in tandem with the adjacent ballroom. Further, the space provided a venue of cultural expression for the urban native community in a way that might not otherwise have been possible at
the time. Having access to an outdoor space that was not owned by the city allowed for activities (e.g. digging salmon pits) that would not be permissible in, say, a public park. It also provided a space to work out issues and perform community maintenance:

We did talking circles out there for like our youth groups—we had like a girl’s group and a boy’s group—and, you know, go out there. Even sometimes we—I remember there was a controversy [emphasis theirs] in the community and all of that—and we had held the discussion outside there, because it was just like a special place to everybody. And it just kinda calms everybody down to be—it’s a lot, you know, versus a conference room, that place was, was really—so we did a lot of those things.

These statements highlight the important role the space played in NAYA’s community, but they also indicate that the space was used in ways that go beyond those typical in a city park. In many ways, the space almost seems private. The scene described above, that of a community resolving a conflict within their ranks, would be hard to imagine taking place within a municipal space. Conversely, it is equally difficult to imagine an outsider feeling comfortable intruding on such a scene.

While NAYA does seem to have at times used the space in a potentially private way, there is no indication that this was consciously maintained. On the contrary, NAYA seems to have established the space’s quasi-public nature. One neighbor remembered the space as being open to use by those in the neighborhood, especially kids:

[NAYA] allowed other people to use it—they really fixed it up nice. It was more then than just mow the lawn and keep the weeds out, it was a very inviting place and they allowed neighborhood children to use—they were very involved in the neighborhood. They had—they allowed, uh, the neighborhood kids to go to the school, uh, they had a [sic] after-school program that helped the kids do their homework, whether they were Native American or not. They just, you know, they were very involved in making the community, and the youth of the community—‘cuz this is a very poor community. So, they, you know, kids have no place to go, they could go over there and sit there and do their homework and there would be an adult to help ‘em if they got into trouble. Some of the neighbor kids around here, that’s where they spent their afterschool time. They were very, very good neighbors, very, very involved in the community, not only helping their own youth, but they reached out to others. They were—it’s a good school.

By allowing neighborhood children to use the space and attend afterschool programs as posited, the organization is seen as providing a service to the larger neighborhood, not just their own
community. However, this service is regarded as a private act of generosity. NAYA, a private entity, is seen as providing a community service by opening up the space along with their after-school programs, but this is by no means considered a public amenity. Rather, it is spoken of as a charitable act, a sign of being ‘good neighbors’. This is also the way opening access to play structures seems to have been interpreted:

And they received a donation of toys—slides, swings, you know—but they were generous. Rather than fencing it off like most schools do, they allowed the neighborhood kids to also use the area. So, for the generosity of the school, they allowed the community—because there is not—well, there is one park here, but at that time it was not a safe place to be...So, the school was very generous and allowed the people to use the park—or their playground—and it was a school playground, used by the—for their pow-wows, for the kids to play. And it was a nice—it was a very generous gesture for the school.

The neighbor here describes NAYA as a school, which, while not exactly accurate, indicates the perceived role of the organization and of the space in general. NAYA is seen as a school, presumably for native children, and the space is seen as belonging to them.

Perceptions of the space as being somewhat public, as a park, also seem to be tied directly to the play structures installed by NAYA. The informant speaking above described the transition from the lot as a private side-yard to the lot as a park, noting, “When the school used it, they allowed the public to use that park because they had their toys.” Here, it is not the space in general to which the public is being granted access, but NAYA’s toys. Another neighbor who lived in the area before NAYA’s arrival also seems to have interacted with the space primarily by way of the playground:

NAYA did an amazing thing, and that was, like, my favorite time here in this community. Um, they put in a park, a playground...and at the time [laughs]—at the time they put it in I was pregnant and I was so—and I lived here! And I was like, “Oh my god, this is so great!” And so when my son was born, until he was about two, we played in that park all the time.

To this neighbor, the park is spoken of in terms of the structures built within it. The park was put in when the play structures were installed. To the speaker, particularly given her position as a new mother, the space was an amenity because of the presence of these structures. Without these structures her perception of the space changed drastically, as she goes on to note:
I haven’t really gone there personally since NAYA moved away and the park’s gone. So, I’m kind of checked-out…I guess I don’t consider it a park anymore. I look at it now as private property, um, that the owners are going to develop or sell or something. ‘Cuz once the—once the pa—once the, sort of, public space and the public amenities were removed, I—I just—I can’t remember, we, maybe we could go over there, but, um, is there a gate and a fence? Or no, it’s just all open now?

In a reasonably conscious fashion, the speaker equates the park and the public nature of the space with the playground. The park left in the same way it was put in—with the playground. Other amenities that might be considered public remained in the space (e.g. park benches, open grassy areas, maintained tress, etc.), but these were not enough to maintain a public status in the mind of this neighbor. History did play a role—“NAYA moved away” as the informant notes—but to those outside of NAYA, the playground seems to have been the main way that a public status was inscribed on a private space.

Mississippi Rising, NAYA Falling

As discussed in a later chapter, the neighborhood experienced dramatic economic and demographic changes between 2000 and 2006. During NAYA’s tenure, the real market value of the lot housing the park increased by over 370% (see Chapter 1, Fig. 2). At the same time, an influx of new neighbors and businesses began transforming the formerly rough character of Mississippi. For NAYA, these changes precipitated a notable shift in the way its community was treated and perceived in the neighborhood. NAYA and its community became less comfortable on Mississippi, did not feel welcome in most of the new shops, and began to be the target of racism. In late 2005, a slur was spray painted onto one of NAYA’s vans (Beaven 2006), providing a visible marker that attitudes towards the native community had changed in the neighborhood. From ‘NAYA’s perspective, the arrival of white business owners precipitated this shift, asserting, “Basically all these people moved in, and all these kind of, interestingly enough, young, white, um, kind of new business owners started to really have, like, this attitude about, ‘Why is there a Native organization here? Why
are there these Native kids here?” Mississippi was becoming a different place, rendering former residents outsiders within their own neighborhood, as the informant went on to note:

Our community members would try to go into local restaurants and be treated with significant racial bias—um, and you know, I'm sure some of it was perceived, but I, personally, you know, I look white, so I'm able to see things from a different—you know, I saw our community members treated terribly and saw how differently I would be treated versus, um, other members of our community who looked obviously Native American…and so we really started to be treated in a way that was very unwelcoming on Mississippi.

As the neighborhood began to become less crime-riddled, more prosperous, and arguably more hip, there was less room for a small native organization within the social fabric of the street.

While the new, hip character of Mississippi did not lend itself to NAYA’s presence in the neighborhood in a cultural sense, a change in landlords also challenged their ability to physically remain in the neighborhood. In the Summer of 2004, the Kurisu family purchased the ballroom and five adjacent lots, including the park. With the departure of their former landlord, the conditions that allowed for NAYA’s use of the space began to change. No formal expulsion from the park was issued, but a clear signal was given when the Kurisus attempted to significantly raise NAYA’s rent. The Kurisus ostensibly bought with an intention to build, as discussed in the previous chapter, with an article from early 2005 noting that “Kurisu is considering building over the next two years a three- or four-story building on some of the vacant land and a therapeutic garden, open to the public” (Barnett 2005). In the words of the informant from NAYA, “They basically tried to eliminate our space by 30% and double our rent.” While it does appear that the Kurisus made use of NAYA’s former office space, with their eventual proposal to develop the park into a four-story apartment building, NAYA’s use was in direct conflict with their new landlord’s plans for the space. While it would have been entirely within the Kurisus’ legal right to limit or halt use of the space, one can imagine the potential controversy such an act would have raised within the neighborhood. Rather than removing a group of native children from the playground, which would have been a very public act of expulsion, the Kurisus simply raised the rent.
The story of a community experiencing racial and economic persecution seems to have been either glossed over or forgotten among many residents on Mississippi. Overall, informants who lived in the neighborhood at the time remembered NAYA as being a positive presence in the community and their eventual departure as being a reasonably sad occurrence. However, the reason behind their departure is not understood in the way described by the representative from NAYA. Rather, the move is actually presented as a positive step for the organization. One neighbor remembered, “the building was sold and…they found a bigger place for their organization.” Another claimed:

The program grew beyond the capability of that building. They needed more space and they were able to obtain a grant to move up to, Columbia. So now they have a much larger facility that meets their needs better… they’re in a much better place for the school, for the kids, for the community. But, I’m sad that they left, [laughs] ‘cuz they were a very positive influence.

While there is recognition that the change in landlords somehow played a role in NAYA’s departure, there’s no sense expressed by either informant that they were forced out. In addition, neither informant, both of whom are White, made any mention of potential racial conflict. There was mention of NAYA’s drumming programs in the space causing tensions in the neighborhood—one neighbor saying, “Face it, kids drumming at night would drive anybody crazy”—but this is in general spoken of as a matter of noise, not race. One neighbor spoke of the drumming programs as a particularly fond memory and a sign of NAYA’s role in the community:

The other thing that I loved about having them here was they would do, like, Native drumming and even though it was a non-profit, the park was open. They paid for the insurance for the park, but they did a lot of their youth programs outside too. So, the community got to kind of have a window into that, which was really nice. Special.

The argument made here is that NAYA is seen by some as a cultural asset to the community. The speaker indicates a certain level of pride in their neighborhood via NAYA’s activities. While they clearly set boundaries between the organization and the larger neighborhood (e.g. “a window into that”) there is no sense that NAYA was out of place. Despite this, there does seem to have been a certain level of controversy surrounding the program, as one informant noted, “The neighbors were
a little upset with the drumming, but, uh, hey, your kids making too much noise while I'm trying to watch the evening news, it irritates me—it was that type of thing.” The heavy stress on it being solely about noise seems to indicate that some in the neighborhood made claims that it was about something else. NAYA’s earlier claims of not feeling welcome in the neighborhood as it began to change would also give credence to this notion.

The point here is not to deem any particular statement or actor as racist, but instead to highlight the lack of consistency regarding both the history of the space and NAYA’s use of it. There seems to be a general pattern of misunderstanding regarding what the park was (e.g. a mere playground) as well as what caused NAYA to leave. The representative from NAYA noted this, both in the aforementioned statement about the space being “so much more” than a playground and in a claim that “Most of the people on Mississippi have no idea what we went through. They have no idea that we had to sell the play structures.” The painting of NAYA’s relocation as a positive thing—that they obtained a grant and found a larger place—is a counter-narrative that could arise from a resident wanting to represent their neighborhood in a more positive light.

Potentially muddy collective memory aside, it is clear that NAYA feels that they were forced out of the neighborhood. In the informant’s words, “We were totally pushed out. Totally pushed out.” Blame for this was not placed solely on the shoulders of their landlords, as the informant went on to note that much of their community had already left the neighborhood due to rising rents, but the overall sense expressed is that NAYA and its community were no longer welcome in the neighborhood:

And so, that is the whole other part of the story, is, like we, we felt really hurt that we basically invested, you know, I mean, that—we bought that play structure, we wrote a grant for the play structure, we put that in, we shared that with everybody—and at the end of the day, they didn’t want us in that neighborhood. At the end of the day, millions of dollars of urban investment was made into that neighborhood and all of our families pretty much got pushed out of Mississippi, um, and then after the Kurisus purchased the building, they tried to like double our rent.
From the point of view of the speaker, NAYA’s record of community service and gestures of goodwill were not reciprocated in ways that could protect their community from the changes taking place in their neighborhood. Abstractly, the statement indicates a sense that both NAYA and its community were the victims of urban investment. With their community already displaced, there was little reason to fight the rent hike, as evidenced in the informant’s question, “Our community got pushed out, so why would we stay in the neighborhood where our community doesn’t live anymore?” Although issues of race and economics are central to the discussion, the informant seems to see these issues as arising from a particular kind of planning policy that privileged certain populations and not others. According to the informant, part of this has to do with the larger racial and class character of Portland:

The whole dirty secret of Portland is that…it’s a very White city, it’s very segregated, but at the end of the day, one out of every three adults is a person of color, and one out of two kids is a person of color. But we have segregated ourselves so much, and Mississippi suddenly became all white, and just because people are liberal and Democrat, which most of the people who hang out on Mississippi are, doesn’t mean they don’t have pretty significant, um, I mean we really have experienced a lot of bias, and a lot of just privilege and entitlement. Um, I mean part of it is the urban renewal, um, kind of investment strategy that they make.

Portland, while it may be considered a bastion of liberal values, does not preclude it from exhibiting racist tendencies. In fact, from the statement above, the leftist character of the city could at times mask its specific racial history in significant ways. In the case of NAYA’s history on Mississippi, this character seems to have resulted in a certain amount of collective amnesia at best, or an intentional white-washing of history at worst.

The narrative of NAYA’s presence, contribution, and eventual removal seems to be disappearing from Mississippi. With the likely development of what was once NAYA Park, one of the last physical remnants of their work in the community will also disappear. For this reason, it is
necessary, in the author’s view, to close out the empirical portion of this work with NAYA’s view regarding Mississippi’s rise via the park:

At the end of the day, millions of dollars of urban investment was made into that neighborhood and all of our families pretty much got pushed out of Mississippi, um, and then after the Kurisus purchased the building, they tried to like double our rent…And, I mean I think that’s the thing is people always talk about Mississippi as a success, and it is a success. I still like to go to restaurants on Mississippi and, you know, it’s interesting, whenever I go into the old building, it’s like, this isn’t—it used to have such a special feeling for me, but that special feeling came with us. Yeah, yeah [laughs], and it’s like, you know, it’s different now. And so, I never feel weird about going there, um, you know, it is what it is. It’s a cute little urban enclave. And it, it’s not for everybody. The question is always, look who benefitted and look who paid the price, ‘cuz you know how expensive it is to move a nonprofit and move your community and reeducate? …A certain class and a certain demographic benefitted significantly. They got the park.
Chapter 4. MISSISSIPPI RISING
Standing in the Shadow of the Lofts

NAYA Park’s move from amenity to contested space came about amid a string of development controversies on Mississippi. In 2005, at the same time as drastic demographic and economic changes were taking place on the street, there were a handful of developments proposed on the avenue, few of which went unchallenged. The Kurisu proposal on the space was made at the same time as uproar over another project up the street was at its peak, which in many ways set the tone for subsequent development discussions in the neighborhood. The Mississippi Lofts, a mixed-use condo project (see Fig. 8) drew a significant amount of ire throughout the community and this energy was later funneled into resistance to the unrelated Kurisu proposal. For this reason it is difficult to understand the controversy on the space without first discussing the Lofts.

Standing out as the first major building development on the street, to many residents the project seems to symbolize the larger development phase the neighborhood found itself in:

For many years there was redlining…so finally banks were lending here again, and so a lot of shifts happened, and all of the old buildings have been restored and purchased. And so then the next phase of development is infill with all this vacant land, which we had some of here on the street, so the very first new development was Mississippi Lofts up the street. And unfortunately, it set a really screwed-up precedent for the street.

Figure 8. The Mississippi Lofts
To this informant, who arrived in the neighborhood in 1991, the Lofts ushered in a wave of development and in their words was “what politicized me as a neighborhood activist and land use person.” The controversy surrounding this first development is interesting in its own right and reveals much about the history of development politics on Mississippi. However, more prudent for this discussion, it serves as a touchstone for those who came to resist development of the park. The Lofts is seen not only as the beginning of massive changes in the neighborhood, but also as the catalyst for larger land use activism in the neighborhood.

Resistance to the Lofts was in response to what was essentially a violation of city code on the part of the developers in terms of the building’s footprint. Wanting to maximize the units in the building, the developing firm responsible for the Lofts obtained a variance from the Bureau of Development Services allowing for an oversized footprint. The impact this had on the historic character of Mississippi was felt particularly hard by some neighbors at the time, as expressed by one informant who resisted both the Lofts and the subsequent Kurisu proposal:

You can come and see it yourself, any architecture student could—is it’s a four-story massive building. And the most heinous crime of the thing was that the city code for new construction is that you need a twelve-foot sidewalk and because we’re in a historic district, all the old buildings and the houses have a ten-foot sidewalk. So any new development, by code, needs to set back.

Setbacks were built into city code in order to prevent neighborhoods from developing in a way incongruous to their historical look and feel. In the words of the neighbor quoted previously, “If you go hang out at that building you feel that it’s not right, and when you drive down the street it’s just too looming.” Sidewalk politics, in an area where buildings tend to be two or three stories at most, became extremely contentious and created what seems to have been a controversy damaging to the social ecosystem of the neighborhood. In the words of one longtime resident, “It created a lot of divisive, bad feelings amongst neighbors. It basically created a rift between, I would say, long-term community members and newer business development types.”
Take a Park, Leave a Park

Intentions to develop the park were made publicly known as early as the spring of 2005 (see Chapter 3), with the Kurisu family proposing a mixed commercial/residential building on the space, along with a showcase garden behind the building. For the Kurisus, the development proposal seems to not have been driven solely by making a quick profit, but by a larger vision for the neighborhood. Included in the proposal was a semi-public Japanese garden that would showcase the work of Kurisu International (the landscape design firm responsible for the renowned Portland Japanese Gardens) as well as provide the community with an ostensibly public amenity. A news article from 2004 reported:

The firm intends to use the garden to conduct research on the effects of therapeutic gardens to supply potential clients with evidence for building such spaces. Kurisu said the firm was not looking specifically to move to the inner city, but the once downtrodden Mississippi Avenue area spoke to other motivations. “We had no business reasons for moving into the city. It doesn’t make sense for a landscape company to be there,” said Koichi Kurisu. “But we have internal business reasons that drive us toward community development” (Swanson 2004).

From this excerpt, it seems as if the project was not being sold by the Kurisus as just another development, but part of a larger attempt to help turn around a depressed community. The Kurisus were moving their business to the neighborhood, ostensibly seeking to be a part of Mississippi’s ascendency, which is perhaps most clear in their choice of Mississippi Rising as the name for the development arm of their company. The article expands on the Kurisus’ vision, claiming “The neighborhood also parallels the firm's interest in healing places, as it is quickly on the mend itself after years of empty storefronts and low property values. ‘This neighborhood is coming back to heal itself; it made sense to us from a spiritual standpoint,’ said Hoichi Kurisu.” (Swanson 2004). To the Kurisus, Mississippi Avenue, was an opportunity to expand their business from making gardens, to healing neighborhoods. While some in the neighborhood may have appreciated this sentiment, others actively pushed back.
Since the existing park space was to be torn up to make way for another building, many saw the associated Japanese Garden as a kind of bait-and-switch, replacing an open park space with a large housing development and a semi-open garden space attached. Of those interviewed, many expressed skepticism about the garden project, with one neighbor describing their memory of the project, particularly the garden portion, as a marketing maneuver:

They actually spun the project as a park project because they not only own this chunk of land, but across the alley there's a similar size chunk that people park on right now. It's just sort of this grassy, gravelly field that people park on, and so the idea was they were gonna build a park over there...it would've been a formal Japanese garden with like, these plants you'd see in that kind of garden, and then a artificial water feature, like a waterfall that would run, and then it would be closed certain hours of the day and have a gate because, you know, kids could drown and it was a liability issue...but tacked on to it was that building that was identical to the size of this building that they're proposing to build [now].

The informant sees the project proposed in 2005 as essentially a housing development with the attached garden being emphasized as a way to sell it to the community. Another neighbor spoke of the associated garden as a gimmick, saying, “They were gonna have sort of this gimmick of having like a little—little [emphasis theirs] garden [behind the building], like a sample garden or whatever.” This informant went on to note, “but at the same time totally remove the open space and replace all the trees and all the grass—you know, everything with this office building.” To this neighbor, taking one park to replace it with another was less about providing a community amenity and more about providing a space to showcase their business. Another neighbor echoed this sentiment:

I was [pause] skeptical and suspicious of their plans to have it be a community space, because they are a landscaping firm—a high-end landscaping firm—and this would be, admittedly, they said—this would be a showcase for them to be able to use with potential clients, and they would open at certain times, you know (emphasis theirs).

The idea that this garden would be a community asset is directly challenged here, mainly because the Kurisus would maintain control over the space. Further, the garden would have been directly behind the Kurisus’ new building, not on the existing park space itself. The project, like the one proposed six years later, involved tearing up the existing park space to make way for a new building on the
increasingly desirable avenue of Mississippi. The difference here is that a garden would have come with it, but this was not necessarily seen as an even trade.

On the other hand, there is a sense that skepticism about the garden project was by no means universal. The vision put forward for Mississippi Avenue by the Kurisus, that of a formerly blighted community rejuvenated by small business and green space, seems to have been shared by some in the neighborhood, in particular business owners who had witnessed the continued transformation of the street. One longtime business owner spoke of the project in positive terms, seeing its cessation as a loss to the community:

I'm really upset with this whole scenario: they wanted to put in a public Japanese garden, and some of the idiots up the street fought 'em to the point where they couldn’t. The cost—the overrun cost, just for the planning, got so great that they—and then the recession hit, and they cost us a beautiful public Japanese garden. It would’ve been open to the public a good percentage of the time.

From this statement, it is clear that while there was disagreement regarding the project itself, there was also considerable divergence among neighbors when it came to deeming a project a community asset. Although the garden portion of the Kurisu proposal was not located on the space of most interest to this research, it does seem to involve the same disagreements over public and private understandings of space as discussions of the park.

**Racial Tensions in the Appeal Process**

The appeal process to the Kurisu project was fraught with contention and some of it became very personal. One neighbor involved with the appeal process said of the Kurisus, “I think that they were very hurt by that whole thing,” going on to note that “the folks that were supporting this appeal were—and I was one of ‘em—we were pretty mad.” Anger towards development in general was funneled into appeal hearings, and the Kurisus used these opportunities to try to make their case to their new neighbors. At an appeal hearing with the Historic Land Use Commission, this involved
an invocation of their Japanese heritage, which was not especially well received according to one neighbor in attendance:

They spoke a lot about their Asian [heritage] in the appeal process, which was totally, totally in my mind, a waste of our time, and it made me angry that they would use the appeal process to they bring their grandfathers, or like the main, you know, patriarch of the family. And, and he spoke in their opening thing, which was just talking about their plans—and the commission didn’t stop them on it, which was stupid, I mean the commission was really kind of a joke...Oh he talked about being survivors of Hiroshima, and blah blah blah blah—ok, I mean that wasn’t the forum.

While in this statement, referencing Hiroshima is considered a low blow within the context of an appeal hearing, it seems to fall in line with the general sense of a neighborhood trying to value the diversity in their neighborhood, whether effectively or not. At the time, in the context of increasing concerns over the racial component of gentrification, it would make sense to bring up ones heritage, at least from a public relations standpoint. People on Mississippi talk about diversity quite a bit, and it’s possible, if not exceedingly likely, that the Kurisus were cognizant of this fact.

Perhaps underscoring this point, another neighbor brought up the racial character of the Kurisu controversy, claiming that their heritage made them a particular asset to the community:

They had a very unique building and, you see, the Japanese were run out of this community. They were shoved into the rail yards and the meat-slaughter packinghouses and then shipped inland, and that’s a horrible record that we have. And, I was so glad when we had a Japanese presence back on the street again. And the way they were treated was shameful. It was—it’s just really, really negative.

In this neighbor’s mind, the Kurisus’ presence in the neighborhood would represent a kind of reconciliation between the larger Japanese-American and (presumably) Anglo-American communities. While it is not within the scope of this research to pull apart the extremely fraught issues within statements such as these, what these kinds of remarks represent are the increasing tensions that surrounded land use politics at the time and that in many ways still do. While developers might shy away from discussions of class, race seems to have been invoked and referred to often in these debates, both by those supporting development as well as those resisting it.
Expressed here, as well as in the previous statement about a diverse neighborhood needing to be healed from its violent and dangerous past, are the ways in which White guilt can be exploited rhetorically. The racial character of Mississippi—that of a formerly poor minority neighborhood experiencing rapid demographic changes and the new White residents who feel discomfort with their role in displacing them—is difficult to separate from any form of neighborhood politics, including struggles over the park.

**Channeling Resistance**

The energy and “bad feelings” mentioned above were channeled into the resistance to the Kurisu’s proposal down the road from the Lofts. Upon failing to stop the Lofts project, concerned neighbors turned their attention to the Kurisu proposal, as one neighbor recalled:

People put a lot of energy and work into working on [the Lofts appeal] and we thought we had it wrapped up...but nevertheless they built that building and the Kurisu who wanted to build their development—I actually filed an appeal about this building, the future building that now isn’t here—and my appeal was just based on how important it was to have that twelve-foot setback.

The Lofts controversy fomented energies and raised concerns among neighbors that directly informed resistance to the Kurisu development. At the same time, the Kurisu proposal sought some of the same variances regarding setbacks that the Lofts did. As one neighbor claimed, “[the Kurisu] were also trying to take advantage of some things that the Mississippi Lofts took advantage of,” indicating that developers, as well as neighborhood activists, looked to the Lofts as an example.

Both controversies were framed within and fueled by larger discussions of upholding city code. In the case of the Lofts, the resistance was not enough to halt the project. For the Kurisu proposal, however, the controversy was maintained for long enough to delay and eventually curtail development. A neighbor filed an appeal regarding the setback violation, but this was struck down:

I lost my appeal, or my case didn’t work out to my favor...all I was saying was, “Hey, we have city code, why don’t you follow it?” basically. I mean, it’s kind of ridiculous. But
because of the economic crisis, the whole banking thing nationally, I think they just decided, “ok.”...and then they got, they kind of got batted around, I don’t know all the details, but you know, I think the city, unfortunately, it doesn’t have consistency in how it applies its own code and so I think even the developers were like getting one story one day, another story another day, and it was kind of a pain, but I really think maybe they just didn’t do it because the financial world kinda sunk. So they bailed out. That’s my understanding. And it didn’t have anything to do with my appeal.

Neighbors filed an appeal regarding the setback violation, but this was not what in the end curtailed the development. In this case, bureaucracy coupled with the economic downtown of 2008 is credited with the project losing steam.

**Representations of a Successful Resistance**

As with most successful political actions, there are conflicting understandings of what resistance to the Kurisu proposal was based on. There seems to have been increased interest in the Kurisu proposal, arguably due to the extremely contentious Lofts project that preceded it. A group of neighbors, taking issue with both proposals, failed to stop one project, and organized an effective resistance to another—but what was this resistance about? Many concerns are cited by neighbors (increasing gentrification, loss of the park, violations of code, etc.), but in the end what did this resistance accomplish and what does it mean for current activities on the space?

Answering the first question, some in the community see the resistance in terms of protecting the park:

I think some cafés and whatnot, like, all recognized that this is a space that benefits the community, it benefits their businesses because it gives people a reason to come buy coffee from them because then they can go across the street and hang out in a green space, and recognized that removing that would be a real detriment to the community. So basically people got together and opposed it and found a couple of points where, um, where the Kurisus’ plan would violate code or would not comply in every way with everything to the point where they were able to drag it on and on and on until, basically, the economic downturn—the most recent economic downturn made it not really feasible for them to build something.
To this neighbor, resistance to the Kurisus’ proposal was about the park itself, the discussion of city code a mere strategy. The park is seen as a community asset by most in the community, and the controversy surrounding the project is about protecting this asset. At the same time, the informant expressed confusion about why more in the community don’t support the current effort to protect the space:

They’ve tried to build shit here before, but people pay attention to this space, or at least some people have and I think a lot of people continue to. But, some of the people involved in stopping it last time have been, I don’t know maybe, something’s different with them and they—they don’t seem to care as much.

It is clear from this statement that something has changed between the two moves to protect the park from development, either in terms of fervor on the part of neighbors and businesses, or in continued tenure of those involved with the former resistance. While either explanation is entirely plausible, from interviews with others involved with the Kurisu appeal, a third option seems more likely; that it wasn’t really about the park at all.

**Upholding City Code**

While some may have resisted in order to address gentrification patterns in the neighborhood, and others to save the park, those most directly involved with the appeal process talk more about code than anything else. When asked about whether their appeal was about the space or about code, the neighbor who officially filed the appeal to the Kurisu project said, “For me it was just about not creating the same mistakes as we see up the street, and wanting to have just better building standards and design that would be more, um, amenable to the neighborhood, you know?” To this informant, “NAYA was gone,” and thus the space itself was no longer the central issue. The park was no longer an asset without the group who built and used it the most (see Chapter 3), and so the challenge to the Kurisus was predicated upon and fundamentally concerning what went in as
opposed to what was being taken away. Underscoring this feeling, the informant went on to speak in a somewhat impassioned tone about code:

...And this is most crazy shit of all, and that is because the city didn’t follow its own code, they actually—you know, when you start not following your own rules and regulations, it fucks everything up, because the city realized, like “Oh my god, [mock amazed voice] we’re breaking our own laws we have to narrow the street! We’re giving this developer two extra feet of building space, oh my god! And um they actually wanted to narrow the street. I would’ve been forced as a building owner and a lot owner to pay for narrowing this street. A lot of new business and like the business association were all for it, because some of the business owners were like, “Great! I can put more seating and I can do this and that,” and they, like, tried to sugar-coat it and make it sound like a really great community idea to make it a happy, fun street for the people, but really it was truly in reaction to the screw-up up the street [the Lofts] and realizing, like “Wow, we didn’t follow the code,” and you know, by law we really do have to have a twelve-foot sidewalk, even though we’re in a historic neighborhood. And so, they—they created their own chaos.

To this neighbor, violating city code represented a breakdown of the planning structures Portland is renowned for, and this code had to be upheld. To do otherwise would seemingly precipitate the downfall of Portland’s planning values and would become an expense to everyone in the neighborhood. The park is not of concern to the person most involved with the appeal here, but code looms large.

The concern over city code is expressed by the neighbor above, as well as elsewhere in the neighborhood. This suggests that developers can protect themselves from controversy simply by following code without seeking a variance. Speaking about the development of the park, the informant who filed appeal to the Kurisu development expressed this in fairly clear terms:

I think [controversy over the Lofts] was crazy enough that whoever develops [the park space]—and every other development has not broken that code, so I’m not worried in that regard. I’m like, ok fine, whatever they build over there, it’s gonna be a twelve-foot—it’s gonna be set-back according to code, which has a very good reason to do that, for new construction.

To this neighbor, developers have learned their lessons from the Lofts and Kurisu controversies. This concept is supported by another neighbor when speaking of Tupelo Alley, a subsequent development down the street, saying “It’s a behemoth, it’s huge—but it’s well within the code and I
think they were really good about their pedestrian access. I mean there’s a ton of pedestrian access, there’s open space. And they stepped it down on the residential side so it doesn’t have quite the impact.” Again, the concern here is about what went in, not about what was being taken away, or even what the impact of the development would be socially. So long as the building itself isn’t obtrusive or incongruous to the historic feel of Mississippi Avenue, in this neighbor’s mind, there is not a cause for concern.

**Lasting Impacts**

As suggested above, one of the main impacts of the development controversies is that city code has been more strictly followed in subsequent development plans. As one neighbor put it, “[developers] understood that this is sort of like a tough neighborhood,” going on to note, “The Mississippi Lofts—that was probably a big turning point. And I think that that set the tone for future developments.” Seeing the rancor that the Lofts and Kurisu proposals inspired in the neighborhood, subsequent developers made sure their designs met code. Further, developers began to use other tactics to propose their projects, as one neighbor noted in regards to Tupelo Alley, “They hired a PR firm, and that was a smart move because that really helped, because the Mississippi Lofts people, just tried to do it all themselves.” Mississippi was clearly an environment harsh to development, and thus more effort was required to sell future projects.

In addition to an elevated need to more effectively sell projects, as the informant went on to note about Tupelo Rising, “One of the developers who's just from Chicago, he would like fly in every month I guess for the meeting? He would just fly in just to come to the neighborhood board and then he ran for land use coordinator. He was like co-chair of land use.” It was no longer enough to simply propose a project to the neighborhood association, but becoming actively involved early on seems to have become an effective way to stave off controversy in the neighborhood. While it is
entirely possible that this was the case prior to the Lofts controversy, the missteps made on the part of developers in regards to both code and attention to the neighborhood association seems to have highlighted the importance of both for future developers.

The combined impact of developers learning both the importance of following code as well as the role of neighborhood associations, is that discussions over development in Portland tend to default to questions of what is going in as opposed to what might be taken away. As is discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis, this tendency favors structures over lack of structures, and formal designations of space as opposed to informal ones. In the words of a neighbor currently seeking to protect the park, development politics are now, “Concerned with aesthetic things about like how it's going to turn out--is it gonna look like the Albina Plan wants it to look? And any kind of objection to the building is also has to be couched in those terms.” This results in certain topics being legitimated politically, as the informant goes on to note:

There's no legitimate way to oppose something on the basis of, "I think it's going to exacerbate gentrification," or, "I think it's gonna cause rents to go up," or "it's going to destroy this park and we like this green space." Like, none of that is in any way legitimate as a basis for stopping something. It's gotta be like literally, "I think that the bricks, ya know, pattern that they're choosing for the front: the color's wrong, because I have this photographic evidence for what it looked like during the streetcar era, and blah blah blah blah." And that's kinda funny, because that's how all of the animosity toward the Mississippi Lofts was channeled into that.

Of the many impacts the Lofts and Kurisu controversies had on the community, this is perhaps the most striking. While historic buildings are protected under city code, there is little protection for open spaces that may have carried historical importance such as the park. Those most involved with planning discussions tend to be most concerned with maintaining the overall look and feel of their neighborhood. Development politics on Mississippi seem to give credence to concerns over sidewalks, parking, pedestrian access, and the like. This arguably began with the ascendency of the neighborhood as represented by the Lofts. Further, it potentially made subsequent attempts to protect the park more difficult.
Chapter 5.  THE 2011 CONTESTATION
The Boise Neighborhood Association

The most recent iteration of the park as a contested space began at an April meeting of the Boise Neighborhood Association (BNA). The neighborhood association system in Portland, as outlined in the Portland Plan, is a forum for business owners, organizers, neighbors, and other community members to voice concerns about neighborhood issues and create a dialogue regarding development. Given the recent history of Mississippi Avenue, meetings of the BNA have often been where some of the most hotly contested development projects have been debated. As described by a former BNA land use chair:

[Developers] would contact me and say, “Hey, we wanna come and talk to you about this.” Well, the city has a land use—a neighborhood contact requirement if you’re doing a Type II or better land use design review, there’s a required neighborhood contact. So you have to contact the neighborhood association and then the neighborhood association can choose to have you come in and present your project, come and talk about the project. The city wants to encourage not necessarily collaboration, but they want to encourage dialogue.

While the BNA is a volunteer-run organization and decisions made therein are not legally binding, as one resident put it, “it would look really bad if they tried to build something over the objections of the neighborhood.” Conversely, seeking out the approval of the neighborhood association can be a way for a developer to avoid potential conflict, particularly if done early on. In this case, developer Chris Rogers sought input from the neighborhood association prior to actually purchasing the property, indicating, “experience has shown him that it pays to involve the community from the beginning” (Boise Neighborhood Association 2011, 2). In addition, working with the BNA in many ways can prove advantageous to potential developers by humanizing them. A former land use chair for the BNA, who described their role as a kind of “liaison between the neighbors and the developers,” noted a conversation that took place with Rogers:

…He was like, “Do I really have to come to these meetings?” and I was like, “You don’t have to, but you know, if you want the support of those people who might be on the fence of your development, you might come to these meetings regularly just to show that you’re not a bad person. You’re a person, you’re not Phase II Development, you’re Chris Rogers,” you know? And I was like, “That’s gonna get you a hell of a lot further than coming and
doing your required neighborhood contact thing and then walking away and throwing up a building,” you know?

Rogers took this advice and made preparations to present his preliminary plans for the space during the April meeting of the BNA.

The April Meeting

The Mississippi House’s role in this controversy began in the days preceding the April 11th, 2011 meeting when they were informed that Rogers would be presenting plans to develop the open space directly adjacent to their house. According to the BNA land use chair at the time:

…We had a special land use meeting for [Rogers] in March, because he called me to talk to me about the project the day after we had our monthly meeting, and he wanted to have the meeting sooner than April…he wanted to have a meeting sooner than that just to like show—just to talk to people and everything. And so, I said, “Ok, we’ll do one, like, March 28th,” and we did one then and I sent out an email through our little contact list to um everybody and we did, you know, that was like an hour-long meeting. And then he came to the April meeting.

Notified of the plans through the BNA listserv, at least two members of Mississippi House immediately took interest. From accounts of the meeting given by those outside of the co-op, reaction to the plan was divided, with co-op members being alone in their opposition. Their position does not seem to have been well received, as more than one informant spoke of the co-op member’s response as disruptive and somewhat childish. Describing their involvement at the April 11th meeting, the former land use chair stated, “They took pictures—that’s when they started the Facebook page and posted the photographs of the plans. And then they came to April 14th—the April meeting—and that’s when, I mean they were like, [mock pouting] “We don’t want you in this neighborhood. Get out.” Although many neighbors expressed empathy for the house, specifically regarding the impact the development would have on the co-op, the concerns of the BNA do not seem to have lined up with those of the Mississippi House. One informant in attendance remembers this disconnect:
The sense I had was that [the co-op members] had already familiarized themselves with the
proposal, I think, enough to know that they were opposed to it. And, so, a lot of us were
listening to, kinda, “Oh, the developer actually talked to people about, like, how wide a
sidewalk could be,” or like, maybe they wanted, like a patio area for you know, a restaurant
or something like that, and those, those details. And I was like listening to that, but I don’t
think, uh the opposition didn’t need to hear any of that, they already knew that they were
opposed to this because it was taking over the open space.

Both the co-op’s hard-line approach to the development, as well as their particular view of the space,
was not shared by their neighbors. The BNA took interest in the details of the plan and listened
somewhat openly rather than rejecting it outright. Details of the building were listened to intently,
primarily because those outside of the co-op were more concerned with the building being
proposed, not the space it would be built upon. In other words, to most BNA members, the space
was a vacant lot, not a park.

The perception of the co-op as being unreceptive to the developer’s presentation is shared
across interviews with neighbors outside of the Mississippi House, and this seems to have become a
liability to the co-op building support. On the other hand, the meeting went fairly well for Rogers:

…A lot of people were impressed that the developer had spoken [emphasis theirs] to land use
people and just was coming to the neighborhood at that point, ‘cuz they hadn’t bought the
land or anything like that yet, so it was a little early in the process, and they were trying to be
responsive to feedback, so that was like, to me, that was the first thing that I remember
about the space, was kinda like, “Oh, the developer’s actually talking [emphasis theirs] to
people here?”

By coming early to the BNA, Rogers seems to have earned support in the neighborhood. Attending
the meetings, with an open-mind to feedback, was taken as a sign of respect.

Members of the co-op also were spoken of as relative outsiders to the BNA, which seems to
have contributed to their relative isolation on the issue of whether the space should be developed or
not. The attempt to speak for the community, as cited above by the former land use chair, was not
taken well by members of the BNA, both because the co-op members present had not been
historically involved with the association as well as the fact that they did not share the same view of
the space. As one neighbor who attended the meeting said:
Yeah, and those people were a little more outsiders I guess to the neighborhood association, and they were like, “Well, this is our basic concern is just we want to keep this space, and we’re just opposed to the type of development,” and kind of because of the way they were a little tense about it, there was other people in the room were like, “Well, actually, we’re not so opposed to this type of development, it seems like the developer’s coming to us early on, and it’s ok for private space to develop along these types of lines.

Both in terms of tone and content, the Mississippi House was seen as speaking out of turn. The phrase “this kind of development” means two different things here. To the co-op, it seems to have meant any building that takes away the park and exacerbated gentrification. To other members of the BNA, it meant buildings that follow code and are respectful to the neighborhood.

The isolation of the house in this controversy seems to have continued since. While most neighbors recognize how the development would impact the co-op in terms of livability, the co-op has in large part failed to create a coalition outside of their particular activist network. The reasons for this are numerous, but seem to result from a mismatch between the concerns of the house and those of their neighbors. Further, the organizational strategies employed by the house do not seem to have helped them overcome this divide. To better grasp how this has operated on Mississippi Ave., it is necessary to more closely examine the rhetoric and organizational strategies employed by the house.

**Rhetoric & Reaction**

The choice of rhetoric employed by the Mississippi House has been very mixed, mainly because they see the space as serving a multitude of purposes. Having an open space directly adjacent to the co-op is understandably seen as an amenity, serving a simultaneous role as a buffer between houses and an open space of parkland. Nevertheless, the co-op has attempted to pitch their resistance at a larger level, as indicated by a position summary on their Facebook page:

The project would kill 3 trees in order to put in 48 small studio and 1 bedroom apartments that each cost $850+ a month! In addition to contributing to the unaffordability of the neighborhood the project would harm the low income housing next door. If built it would
greatly diminish the solar access and over all livability for low income residents of a house owned by 501(c)3 non profit Portland Collective Housing. This house is an example of truly dense green development where 11 people live under one roof sharing resources, gardening and using bikes and public transportation (Save the Park on N. Mississippi n.d.).

In this statement alone, the rhetoric employed is couched in terms of green politics, social justice, and sustainability. First, it is argued that the project would kill trees to make way for more housing. Second, it would negatively impact the experiences of low-income residents who engage in sustainable, green lifestyles—in other words, a particularly Portland way of life. In this statement alone, it is clear that the residents are attempting to frame a relatively small battle over a neighborhood park in terms of larger issues of sustainable living and resisting market forces. In other words, they seem to be resisting both the processes of urbanization and gentrification that on one hand carry natural and social implications, and on the other significantly impact the cost of housing. The organization that owns the house can also be seen as fighting against citywide patterns of rising property values. Portland Collective Housing (PCH), the non-profit that officially owns the house in Boise, describes as its mission “to take real estate out of the profit-driven real estate market so that the space can be used to create an affordable, sustainable community” (Portland Collective Housing n.d.). The fight over the space, then, is not only in the interests of the individual residents of the house, but also the greater organization in general.

Messages put forward by co-op members themselves are also inherently scaled. First, at the household level, the development is spoken of as having a direct negative impact on co-op residents. As discussed by one house member, “…we’re talking about a forty-five foot high wall, ten feet from our window on the South side. So that means that it will eliminate just about all light from the house, from our garden, which relies on the light from this area.” Legally, there is a certain amount of protection afforded by the state in regards to access to solar energy, but according to one member of the house, any such law “applies in Oregon, it applies in Multnomah County, and we’re in Multnomah County here, but [emphasis theirs] we’re also within the urban zone—the urban growth
boundary of Portland [emphasis theirs].” Members of the BNA also expressed skepticism about the idea that solar access would be a legitimate reason to halt development, as described by one attendee of the April meeting:

And then, and [co-op members] also had a few other concerns, one was about that solar rights [emphasis theirs]. They thought the height of the project would block those, but no one else in the room, including myself, had ever really heard of those being a [sic] obstacle to development I guess. I mean they were kind of questioning that one.

This is not to suggest that there is not a certain amount of empathy in the neighborhood towards the plight facing the co-op. As one neighbor living adjacent to the space noted, “I’ll be seeing building instead of sky, but not like the guys next door. You know, I mean, I feel for those guys, that really sucks. If that was me I’d be like, ‘Oh my god, how can I sell my house as quickly as possible?’” Nevertheless, in the same interview, the neighbor concluded, “But [the space], it’s private property,” indicating that empathy does not necessarily translate into support for their cause.

Secondly, house members cite the development’s impact on the larger community as a significant reason to save the space. One co-op member describes this loss as not only impacting neighbors, but local businesses as well:

As far as the community, like, we’re gonna lose out on one of few spaces where you can hang out without paying money. Um, I mean, there’s, you know, there’s a lot of shopping, a lot of restaurants, lot of cafés, but they’re all places that you know, you go to spend money, which isn’t a bad thing, but there needs to be spaces that don’t rely on that. There needs to be spaces where people from a variety of communities do converge and will run into each other. And, you know, there also needs to be spaces where, you know, kids young and old, [laughs] can play games, can do things, be in the outdoors, animals can run around and whatnot. Like, take that away, well then that, you know, that just means that, you know, you’re gonna end up pushing kids and animals to playing around and doing their thing in areas where, like, business owners won’t be happy…

Mississippi Avenue is an increasingly commercial space, as the informant above discusses, but there is considerable disagreement as to whether the space itself is a community asset. One neighbor who lived close by the space since the 1960s supported the co-op’s claim, noting that their family has been over to the space several times, “…just having a little picnic, or just listen to some music,
having, you know, just a little get-together.” On the other hand, another neighbor who lived adjacent spoke of the space as merely a cut-through, saying, “I’ll walk out my front door and cut through the parking lot and then cut through the lot to go get dog food. But I use it as a cut-through. I have a yard, why would I use a space that I have to share with other people?” The same informant noted some sense of loss for the flora on the space, stating, “I mean, the trees. It’d be a shame to see the trees go,” but it is clear that even those living within a close proximity do not universally consider the space a community amenity.

Contrasting the park, a garden project across the street (see Fig. 9) made it more difficult for members of the co-op to advance their argument regarding community space. A longtime business owner in the neighborhood, wanting to give back to the community, received a grant to develop their property into a garden and outdoor performance space. In the words of a neighbor, this plan has been years in the making:

[The property owner] wants to do like a mixed-use building at the back and then have this courtyard space in the front. I mean, they were talking about that eight years ago, you know? And now it doesn’t make sense to invest that kind of building because it’s so expensive, and they own it outright and has for some time, so it’s not a big deal.

Discursively, the project is presented not as a park, but as a “courtyard,” a private form of green space. While it would be open to the public much of the time, the lot’s owner would retain control of the space, being able to determine hours and terms of use. To this owner, NAYA Park across the street used to be a form of community space, but no longer fulfills that role, further underscoring the need to develop their garden project:

I guess since the Kurisu took out the playground, I guess for me—and I’m really interested in green space and plants and having a pause from commercial activities—it has a lot of value to me. And I feel fortunate and lucky that I own it—I own the lot and I can do—I can create this other space that’s not—that will be like a blending of commercial and passive park space. So, it’s really important. And—and you know, like everyone was like, “Ok, yeah!” Yeah, like who wouldn’t a place to hang out?
Agreeing with the need for community space on Mississippi, this neighbor does not see the park as meeting this role, citing the lack of play structures as signaling the end of the park being a community asset. The park ceased being a park when certain amenities were removed from the space, namely the play structures. This communicated that the lot was no longer the space it once was to the informant. At a meeting of the BNA, there seemed to be overwhelming support for their project, and as one neighbor put it, “one thing is going away but another thing is coming in from a property owner who wants it. You know, who’s encouraging, who’s being generous.” Neighbors outside of the co-op, many of whom desire more non-commercial space on the avenue, are uncomfortable with the idea of telling a private property owner what to do with their land. For this reason, a community-minded individual giving their property freely, albeit with certain conditions, provide an easy out for arguments concerning the park as community space.

Finally, resistance to the development is spoken of as a way to obstruct gentrification through a challenge to private property. While this claim seems the most abstract, it tended to be the concept most talked about by informants from Mississippi House. As part of an alternative community that was one of the first groups of white people residing on Mississippi Avenue, one house member sees their resistance to this development as a way to resist larger patterns of gentrification:

…Gentrification would sort of like to roll over us and spit us out at this point because we’ve already performed our function. Now we’re sort of dragging people down. Um, so, I feel like
our role should be to set up roadblocks to slow it down, to do whatever we can, to, um, to—
to combat, like, the early effect that we had, and also just because it’s the right thing to do.
And because if we, you know, if—if we, our household and a household like us, get
displaced, then we’ll just be the cutting-edge of gentrification somewhere else. And so it’s
important to dig your heels in, and be like, “it’s gonna stop here.”…

Resistance to this development, then, is not only about saving an amenity close to their house, but a
way to politically justify their presence in the neighborhood. In the minds of the Mississippi House,
challenging the system of private property and redefining it as public is a way to slow down the
rising rents that perpetuate the displacement of preexisting communities. The park provides the
house with a space to advance this challenge, primarily because of the mismatch between its *de jure*
status and its *de facto* use. As one house member put it, “I think it is right now a de facto part of the
commons, um, but legally it’s still private, and I think that the goal would be to getting the law to
align itself with the active reality.” The park’s vague status as private property that is used as a public
amenity allows the house to make claims on it in ways that other vacant lots in the neighborhood do
not. In their view, the park has always been a park and should continue to be used publicly despite
its official designation.

In regards to gentrification, it is harder to see how resisting the development of this space
would help slow down gentrification. The fact that it is undeveloped means that currently no one
resides on the space and thus, no one would be directly displaced if it were to be developed into
apartment space. One house member recognized this, but claimed a direct connection:

I feel like even though currently this property is considered undeveloped because there’s no
building on it, and that’s what developers would prefer to do, just because it’s easier, and less
[pause] rancorous if they don’t, you know, they’re not actually displacing anyone directly.
But, it still has that effect, if you’re arguing that sort of like, abstract cause-and-effect
argument about like, yeah, it’s gonna to preserve land on the outside, you know, you you
need to also accept the argument that like, when you plop down several units of really
expensive housing, it has a bigger effect than just the people that live in that housing…it
helps fuel the overall trend of, you know, this being an up-and-coming desirable
neighborhood for wealthier and wealthier people. That means that even though house rent
prices a couple blocks off for any enterprising landlord who sees that this property is gonna
be renting out these tiny little apartments for eight-fifty is gonna be like, “well, I’ll create a
bargain for sort of the like, not-as-wealthy yuppies that want to move here.”
The connections the Mississippi House makes between preserving this undeveloped space and slowing or even halting gentrification indicate that their resistance is not simply about maintaining their solar access or ensuring access to a *public* amenity, but about issues that occur within the larger city and region. In the minds of the co-op, the scale of their resistance, then, is not limited to the space or the neighborhood within which it’s located.

**Rhetorical and Organizational Obstacles**

The Mississippi House faces an uphill battle, both in terms of competing understandings of the space itself as well as the strategies it is using to portray its message. In this very place-based, neighborhood-level controversy, the co-op has relied heavily on the Internet for establishing a network. On one level, this has allowed for a certain amount of visibility, resulting in at least one news piece on the controversy. Overall, however, it seems that this networking strategy has served to further isolate the co-op within the larger neighborhood and proven unsuccessful on the scale at which the problem of the development resides. The Mississippi House in general seems disconnected from many of their close neighbors in numerous ways. While their use of the Internet in organizing resistance should not be seen as the cause for this disconnection, it has done little to help them make their case to their fellow neighbors, or help them overcome the significant obstacles they face in the neighborhood.

First, the concerns that co-op members have about the development differ vastly from those that their close neighbors express. During one interview, a neighbor stopped by and asked another what they thought of what was happening on the space:

Neighbor 1: It’s private property; he can do what he wants with it.

Neighbor 2: No, no, but I mean there’s more—that I know, that’s not what I mean.

Neighbor 1: What do you mean?
Neighbor 2: Have you seen their plan or design?


Neighbor 2: Ok, that’s what I wanted to know.

Neighbor 1: It’s more thoughtful than that pile of shit that they’re putting up on Beech and Williams.

Neighbor 2: So you like the design of this one?

Neighbor 1: I mean the design—what they showed us was really rough schematic—but they’re stepping back the top level, I think they’re gonna step back the top level on the back side because of the residential aspect. I’m like, “You guys need to respect that.”

The concerns expressed in this interaction are not about the space itself, but about what is being built upon it. To these neighbors, the space is not a park or a public amenity, but essentially just another vacant lot to be filled in. From this perspective, matters of importance are how the building will look, the presence it will convey along the avenue, and if it will leave enough room on the sidewalk. As is discussed in the previous chapter, issues such as these have historically galvanized larger public resistance to development on Mississippi Avenue and the fact that Rogers’ plans can be seen as respectful shows an awareness of this history. The fact that co-op members have not been able to engage the development at this level rhetorically seems to have limited the amount of engagement they have been able to muster from their fellow neighbors.

Second, many neighbors seemed nonplussed by claims of gentrification and completely unswayed by the assertion of community space on the lot. The past decade of swift demographic and economic change on Mississippi Ave. seems to have left many neighbors discouraged and unsure as to what can be done. One neighbor who had lived in the neighborhood for over thirty years noted how most neighbors are directly implicated:

There’s so many people that are so controlling, “Now that I’m here, I don’t want any more changes,” and yet when you came in, you changed the community. Some of ‘em changed it for good, some of ‘em changed it for bad. The only person who has come into this community who hasn’t really changed anything is an old man that was born in the house. Up
the street, his father built the house, he was born in the bedroom and lived there all his life. Now he’s probably the only person in this community that [laughing] hasn’t changed anything.

Residents and business owners on the street are very aware of the history of their neighborhood, some even seeming a bit self-conscious about their role in perpetuating change. However, none seemed to think that this development would contribute very much to this process, as so much had changed along the street already. Challenges to private property through the claim of community space also did not seem to have much currency outside of the Mississippi House. One neighbor discussed their resistance, asserting the primacy of private property in the process:

You know, and they don’t really have a whole lot of recourse, um, and I mean I’m in the same boat with—with [another property owner], you know? He’s gonna put up two-and-a-half-story townhouses five feet from the property line, right up against my house and I’m like, “Ok, so there goes my garden,” you know? But I—I kinda like, my hands are—what can I do, you know? There’s no—there’s nothing I can do about it.

Unsurprisingly, this sentiment is expressed nearly universally across interviews outside of the Mississippi House. While some might express empathy or mourn the loss of trees, the fact that the park is on private property is often where the conversation ends.
Finally, and perhaps most indicative of isolation, community sentiment regarding the co-op is overall very negative and members of the Mississippi House are often spoken of as failing to meet the standards of being good neighbors. In discussing the private property issue, one neighbor discussed the co-op’s own property:

There are some people, like [the Mississippi House], who believe in community property rights. But, there are also people who feel that we have community obligations, and some of us feel that they’re not meeting their community obligations to main—having maintained property… Now, we’ve got a small group of people that feel that they have a right to dictate what other people do with their own property, and that’s wrong. The thing is, is we should be able to dictate on the same ground that they restore the house that they’re living in to the beautiful [emphasis theirs] condition that it used to be. Talk about rights? Why should I have to look at an eyesore—every time I see that I just cringe, because it was such a beautiful little house. Now it’s being overpopulated—the house is a four-bedroom house that has eleven people living in it. The basement is full of mold. It’s a dangerous place to live now and they’re destroying a very beautiful—they’re doing more neglect in that house than what it had in the previous hundred years, all in the name of communal living. I don’t care, they can run around naked, they can eat carrots and peas and be vegetarians, or they can just be carnivores and eat nothing but meat, I don’t care. But their impact is the negative thing they put out in front, and if they can’t control that negative impact, why should they be able to control what they view as somebody else’s negative impact? They see what they’re doing as positive. The people who own the property see what they’re doing as positive. So who has the right?

Clearly, this informant does not think highly of the co-op and does not share their viewpoint regarding community superseding private rights. While this could be written off as just one neighbor categorically disagreeing with the way of life promoted by the house, the sentiments expressed indicate that the co-op does not seem plugged into the same behavior-guiding channels as those of many of its neighbors. It should be noted that members of the Mississippi House do show care for their neighborhood in different ways, such as through the practice of cop-watching in which house members observe police action in the neighborhood in order to prevent potential abuse of power on the part of individual officers, but these activities are not sanctioned by the larger community as a way to obtain community buy-in. In this case, keeping up the appearance of one’s property is a way to show respect to the larger community and not doing so directly complicates the co-op’s ability to organize in the neighborhood.
The presence of the co-op at the April meeting is also cited by neighbors as a very negative showing. One neighbor who used to be allied with the house in the past expressed disappointment in their behavior and organizational tactics thus far:

Yeah, so I think that I really have been, um, I guess I’ve—I’ve been very disappointed in, in, in the way that the Mississippi House has thus far presented their case to the developer and the Neighborhood Association. It’s been very, um, immature and, um, and in some—and sometimes it felt very, um, [pause], it felt a lot like harassment, or threats… They need to file appeal, they can’t just say they don’t want this, stomp their feet, and cross their, you know, eyes and, and spit, and say, “Let’s go to [the developer] and tell him he shouldn’t live in a house like that and get away from us, we don’t want you, we don’t want.” I mean, that’s a direct quote, [whiny voice] “We don’t want you here.” So, that’s not, I mean, that’s immature, that’s like giving them exactly what they want, and it pisses [emphasis theirs] me off, ’cuz I have come to their defense so many times, and now here they are doing exactly, acting exactly like they were characterized in the past. It’s just a shame.

Here, the informant seems personally slighted by house members and their behavior. By showing up the April meeting and expressing unwavering opposition to the development, house members seemed to indicate that they were immature, unreasonable, and perhaps more importantly, unwilling to listen. In the sentiments expressed above, the relationship with a potential ally, with someone who might help them file an appeal with the city, seems to have been badly damaged. During fieldwork, there was little indication that house members knew of this rift or had been communicating directly with this neighbor about it.

**The Resistance Online**

The perceptions above seem to be in stark contrast with conceptions of the former members of the same co-op. One neighbor, in describing how friends would talk about the co-op residents as anarchists, she would jump to their defense saying, “No, they aren’t anarchists! They’re good people!” While public perceptions are not necessarily indicative of an ineffective local resistance, they do seem to indicate that a lot of work has to be done to overcome these attitudes, necessitating organizational strategies that encourage communication. From observations made in the field, there
is a kind of avoidance of reaching out to neighbors via direct contact on the parts of the co-op in favor of online networks, which seem to have exacerbated the problems facing the co-op. The primary limitation of this kind of organizational strategy is that it is difficult to build broad-base support within the neighborhood given differing levels of connectivity. Further, with the tendency of social media to cater to specific niches, users often pick and choose the channels they subscribe to, turning to networks of information that often do little than reinforce their own previously held beliefs.

Representation in the wider Portland media has been in the main sympathetic. During the month of July, three separate journalists sought out interviews from co-op members and upon publication, co-op members received the articles overall positively, albeit with a few claims of mild misrepresentation. One article from the Portland Mercury notes “some neighbors are digging in their heels to keep their green haven alive,” (Lascher 2011) representing the space as a positive contribution to the street. The article goes on to represent other viewpoints, many criticizing the co-op’s claim to the space. In addition, the comment section to the same article reveals a large amount of ire towards the house. Referencing a picture of co-op members sitting in the park, one commenter vents larger rage about what he sees as 20-something hipsters complaining about the gentrification they directly contribute to:

Wait, wait, wait...those white kids in the park? The ones who pay out the ass to live in shared housing in the hip neighborhood of Mississippi? The ones who pay $9 for a fancy drink at a fancy Mississippi bar? The ones who sit outside Fresh Pot trying to look as if they are trying not to be seen but deep down inside are really desperate to be seen? They are the ones who these developers know will fill the apartments and patronize the businesses in the new retail spaces. Newsflash, there exist a crap ton of neighborhoods with affordable housing, parks (huge ones!), and a mix of income levels and races within Portland city limits. Amazing I know. Oh, shit...but you wont [sic] be seen and you have to move away from the cool place to be. Damn (Lascher 2011, comment 41).

The amount of ire represented above and in much of the comments section reflects the difficulty co-op members face in attempting to cast their resistance as addressing larger issues like
gentrification. There are sympathizers on the forum and one house member even participated, attempting to create a certain amount of dialogue, but the overwhelming majority of comments seem to be negative. Although attitudes expressed on an Internet forum are hardly representative of larger attitudes in Portland towards the co-op, there does seem to be evidence that even online, the co-op faces considerable pushback.

The organizational strategies employed by the Mississippi House have not seemed to help them overcome the basic difficulties facing their attempt to save the park. Not only are there major differences between how they view that space as opposed to their neighbors (e.g. public vs. private, park vs. vacant lot), but their own position in the community complicates their effort. While it is not within the scope of this work to analyze their use of the Internet in depth, it does seem somewhat likely that this choice has not helped them to overcome the aforementioned difficulties, and has perhaps further isolated them from their neighbors. Understandings of this space as a park are dependent on the position of a given informant and attempts to convince their neighbors about the legitimacy of their particular viewpoint do not appear to be working in the favor of Mississippi House.
Chapter 6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS
From Hazard to Amenity

The changing role of the park has largely followed the larger demographic and economic changes taking place within the larger neighborhood. The park played an important role to many in the area, particularly during the period preceding the neighborhood’s redevelopment. As one former resident put it, “People walking down the street, and reading their books, and playing with their dogs, like that is my association with that space is that it was obviously not an officially-designated city park, but it was definitely used by folks as the spot on Mississippi to hang out in. So, it felt public.” The space has always been deemed a vacant lot, but this doesn’t convey its true role within the daily lives of many who have lived on Mississippi.

To NAYA, the park represented a labor of love as such was one of the first projects carried out by the organization. When informed of the potential development of the space, the representative of NAYA interviewed responded with a simple, “That’s heartbreaking.” The respondent described a personal connection to their space on Mississippi, saying:

We loved that building, we spent a lot of time and energy and volunteer hours remodeling it, we totally, I mean, I think some community members, you know, felt—feel connected to that park because they planted some flowers, and they put a bench in, which was great, but the whole, like—and I’m not, it’s not a competition of, like who did the park—but we literally, just nobody was there when we were taking out all the trash and the glass shards and all of that.

What is remembered in this statement isn’t the grass, the trees, the play structures, or even the actual use of the space, but the time and effort put in by the informant’s organization. The fledgling nonprofit took an area that was dangerous and ugly and, with the help of their community members, turned it into a functional park. This act was clearly meaningful to the organization and the park it built bore that mark in a symbolic way. It is not difficult to see how empowering this must have felt and conversely how impacted they must have been by their relocation. However, despite the park’s role as an amenity and touchstone to certain people within the Boise neighborhood, the space was created amid a particular Portland context that put an intensified pressure on open space within the
city. Given the neighborhood’s proximity to the central city, along with the lot’s suitability for development, cleaning up the hazard in the neighborhood seems to have made the space particularly attractive to developers. This pressure to develop the space then combined with vague property rights, opposing understandings about defining vacancy, and uneven use of the park, fueling and sustaining a prolonged contestation over the space.

Density and Pressures on Open Space

The intense pressure on open space in Portland has made this space particularly attractive to development and has complicated efforts to protect the park, particularly as the neighborhood began to be redeveloped. A combination of cultural and structural factors set the context for this pressure on open space, with living close to the central city being considered more desirable over the past two decades, and Oregon’s urban growth boundary planning system limiting outward development. While the latter factor limits sprawl, when combined with historical population booms (as outlined in Chapter 2), this focuses development on any piece of land available. As expressed by one resident, Portlanders are keenly aware of the city’s continued growth:

We gotta have some place to put these kids that grow up—and you know they keep having babies. Your generation just keeps having babies! Can you believe that? Just because your parents did, you think you oughta? Yeah, so where we gonna put these babies? And where we gonna put that wife you bring in from Connecticut? And your three friends that are moving from Texas, and Louisiana, and Idaho? And they’re coming, so we need places for them to live.

Along with Portland’s rise as an attractive city for relocation, its particular development pattern has been credited for staving off the negative social and environmental impacts experienced by other cities. Portlanders are proud of this and continue to support the structures that have helped produce this patterns by-and-large. One neighbor noted, ‘There’s sort of this, like, drumbeat of like, ‘Dense, green, means that there’s gonna be less development on the outside, and that’s better,’ ya know, like, ‘yes, we’re cutting down trees in here, but we’re gonna preserve trees on the outskirts of the city...’
limits.’” Portland’s planning structures, while they do seem to have certain environmental benefits, also can be seen as driving development inward, with implications for spaces like the park, as well as residents facing gentrification.

In addition, spaces large enough to build something like the Mississippi Lofts are becoming more and more rare in Portland, especially on Mississippi Avenue. The fact that the space is sufficiently large for a mixed-use apartment project endangers its ability to remain a park in a neighborhood where such development is seen as increasingly attractive. In the minds of those resisting this space’s development, this, along with the arguments regarding dense development, has clear gentrification implications:

If you’re arguing that sort of like, cause-and-effect argument about like, yeah, it’s gonna preserve land on the outside, you need to also accept the argument that like, when you plop down several units of really expensive housing it has a bigger effect than just the people that live in that housing.

This argument, while reasonable, also underscores the point that the current effort to protect the park is not only about the park. Protecting this open space serves those resisting in multiple ways, providing a buffer around their house as well as a space for recreation. Further, by remaining undeveloped, the space can’t be used to drive further rent increases in the same way that a new building could. This underscores the intersections this space exists at, simultaneously serving a role as urban nature, as well as a speed bump to rent change.

Within the larger neighborhood, however, this argument doesn’t seem to be holding up in the face of continued population pressures. As put by one longtime resident, “Now, we have a choice—and I’m not particularly happy with all the choices—of either urban sprawl or urban tall. You have to have one or the other; you cannot eliminate both. And as a community, they have selected urban tall. So therefore, somebody has to do the tall.” Density has been chosen by the neighborhood, both for the environmental and social reasons previously outlined, so contestations
over open spaces have to be seen in this context. This point is especially true on Mississippi, as one
neighbor notes, primarily because of its history as a more commercial street:

Now, I would have a real different view if—now, we own a piece of property over on
Vancouver [Avenue]. That can go tall. One block in, I would say no. I own a piece of
property on Michigan [Avenue]—now, I should not take that building down and put it up
tall, even though we intend to do that on Vancouver. That’s a commercial street. It is a tall
street. Neighborhoods—I’m actually going to be building over here, but I’m going to be
building small, because it needs to blend in and not overpower all the neighbors. So, we have
to make choices as a community. We don’t—never will we please everybody, but we either
go urban tall or urban sprawl.

Although many might express the desire to keep buffer zones and other kinds of open space, the
dominant belief in Portland from a development perspective seems to be that density is a positive,
green choice. The validity of this can be argued extensively, but more importantly this development
strategy can be seen as fueling the pressures to develop the park.

**Property Rights**

In light of these pressures, the park is simultaneously rooted in and challenged by loosely
maintained property rights and the lack of built structures. Beginning with property rights, the
original terms of use established between NAYA and their landlord in the early 2000s can be seen as
the beginning of this space occupying a status of being privately owned and publicly used. This
allowed for the space to be turned into a public amenity, imparting value to the neighborhood
surrounding it at the same time that its value on the private market was growing. Although NAYA
maintained a certain amount of control over the space via their agreement with their landlord, their
lack of official ownership of the space was a liability, both to their use of the space, as well as their
ability to stay in the neighborhood. When the park along with their office space was sold to the
Kurisus, their use of the space stood in opposition to their new landlord’s vision and they were
actively pushed from the neighborhood via rent increase. In other words, cleaning up and turning a
space that was not under their official ownership left them exposed to the development pressures
around them. Without purchasing the space directly, their use depended on the longevity of their landlord.

In terms of the more recent resistance, private property is where conversations in the neighborhood tend to end. To those outside of the co-op, there might be sympathy expressed for the house in terms of livability, and some might even give credence to the community space thesis, but in the end it is difficult to get around the fact that the space is privately owned. One neighbor expressed this earlier in fairly stark terms:

They don’t really have a whole lot of recourse, and I mean I’m in the same boat with [another property owner], you know? He’s gonna put up two-and-a-half-story townhouses five feet from the property line, right up against my house and I’m like, “Ok, so there goes my garden,” you know? But I kinda like, my hands are—what can I do, you know? There’s no—there’s nothing I can do about it.

Private property is an insurmountable fact governing this space. The neighborhood is extremely desirable, and most living on Mississippi don’t see any basis for fighting the development on the space primarily due to this. Further, claims of community space (e.g. challenging private property) undermine the self-determination of individual property owners in the neighborhood, as one neighbor noted, saying, “I support the Kurisus’ right to develop the way they wish to, because I want to do it my way. But I don’t think I have a right to tell you what to do with yours, and that’s the difference here. We have some people who feel they have a right to enforce their view on the community.” Perhaps challenges to private property would go a long way with renters, but many of the people who hold the most power on Mississippi are property owners themselves. Trying to assert dominion over property that doesn’t belong to the co-op is seen as not just a challenge to the Kurisus, but to the ability of individual landowners to govern their own spaces. Even if they wanted to, landowners would put themselves in a double bind by supporting the co-op.
Structures and Vacant Lots

In terms of built structures, the fact that this space has never been fenced off has allowed its use to continue amid contestation. However, as noted by one neighbor who used to use the space, with NAYA’s departure, the removal of play structures seems to have conveyed certain messages to the larger community about this space’s public nature:

I haven’t really gone there personally since NAYA moved away and the park’s gone. So, I’m kind of checked-out…I guess I don’t consider it a park anymore. I look at it now as private property that the owners are going to develop or sell or something. ‘Cuz once the public space and the public amenities were removed I just—I can’t remember, maybe we could go over there, but is there a gate and a fence? Or no, it’s just all open now?

Even to those in the neighborhood who might have formerly seen the space as a public amenity, the removal of the play structures, done so NAYA could afford their move across town, communicated that this space was not the public park it once functioned as. To the larger neighborhood, allowing access to the play structures was the way in which the park was made public. One neighbor even went as far to conflate the park with the structures, saying “NAYA did an amazing thing, and that was, like, my favorite time here in this community. They put in a park—a playground.” Other structures such as the gate to the sidewalk, the benches, open grassy areas, and the like are not seen as communicating the space as a park to much of the neighborhood in the same way as the play structures did. It’s possible that their removal was symbolic of NAYA’s displacement, but nevertheless their presence seems to have in part maintained the public essence of the park.

In addition to the play structures, the lack of buildings on the space also makes it difficult to challenge development, primarily because the main basis on which resistance to development has been predicated in the past has been city code. Built into code are protections for historic buildings, sidewalks, parking, and pedestrian access, but there doesn’t seem to be legal precedence for protecting undeveloped land, even if it is used as a public amenity. Rhetorically, it is difficult for the co-op to make claims that the space is more than a vacant lot, while simultaneously there is support
for protecting historic buildings in the neighborhood, as one neighbor noted, saying, “I would argue with taking down a historic building to replace something like that, but most—this is what’s happening: vacant land needs to be filled-in to the max.” Structures get protection here, not open space.

There is a sense that the planning structures put into place in Portland are predominantly focused on questions of what is being developed as opposed to what could be lost. Further, in a neighborhood with a history of gentrification, the fact that there are no existing structures providing housing to poorer residents means that developers can more easily avoid accusations of displacing the poor. As one member of the co-op put it, “I feel like even though currently this property is considered undeveloped because there’s no building on it—and that’s what developers would prefer to do, just because it’s easier, and less rancorous if they’re not actually displacing anyone directly.” In other words, the fact that the space is undeveloped without official park status means that developers would prefer to build on it first before going through the hassle of tearing down a derelict structure. The term vacant lot is a way by which to categorize land as aberrant, suggesting that development is the norm, that all space will be developed eventually. Vacant land is typically owned by someone who, if deliberately not building structures, is holding onto the property for speculative purposes. For open space to have longevity in the face of continuing development pressures, there has to be a move to legitimize the space as a park, garden, or some kind of sanctioned form of community space.

**Use and Status**

Private or not, it is also clear that the lot’s vacant status does not indicate that it went unused, only that it did not house any structures. In other words, vacancy is about formal buildings, not actual use, and as such, it is not a good indicator of how a space functions within a neighborhood.
In the case of this space, use, whether formal or informal, is what seems to have determined both its function as well as its *de facto* private/public status, as noted by one longtime resident who lives across the street from the space:

“They consider it a vacant lot, but they’ve never walked in there, you know, because the trees and stuff kinda hide it a little bit, you know, but they’ve never been in there. I mean, we’ve been over there many times, you know, just having a little picnic, or just listen to some music, having, you know, just a little get-together.

To those who didn’t use the space as a park, it was a vacant lot and nothing more. To those who used the space, whether continually or at one point, the space was a park and an asset to the neighborhood. Similar to preceding discussions of rent gap, what allowed for the disparity between actual status and perceived status seem to be the lowered property values that precipitated the original clean up, use, and appropriation of the private lot. There are analogs of this pattern elsewhere in Mississippi, with a neighbor describing their family’s use of an adjacent property for a food garden:

“As far as this side over here, that lot over there, that was, like my mom been owning this house for years, but that was an empty lot like [the park] was. But see, they let us use it for forty years, as long as we kep’ it up. And what my dad did, he planted a garden in the lot, a community garden, and so we had greens, tomatoes, onions, corn, everything you could even ask for—I did all the work.

Here, in a similar fashion, the conditions leading to the establishment of the park were informal agreements between the landowner and their neighbors which allowed the informant to benefit from a space they did not own. Spanning a claimed forty years, during the era of disinvestment on Mississippi, access to an amenity that would otherwise be out of reach was granted. Eventually this arrangement fell apart when, as the informant noted, “[the current owner] bought the place, that’s when they wanted to do something with the yard, and that’s when we actually stopped doing things over there.” This example follows the same pattern of dissolving agreements as discussed in regards to the park.
**Limitations to Resistance**

In terms of limitations, members of the Mississippi House seem to feel constrained by the traditional channels of neighborhood decision-making such as the BNA, noting:

There's no legitimate way to oppose something on the basis of, "I think it's going to exacerbate gentrification," or, "I think it's gonna cause rents to go up," or "it's going to destroy this park and we like this green space." Like, none of that is in any way legitimate as a basis for stopping something. It's gotta be like literally, "I think that the bricks, ya know, pattern that they're choosing for the front: the color's wrong, because I have this photographic evidence for what it looked like during the streetcar era, and blah blah blah blah."

To members of the house, focusing on the relative minutiae of building design and city code does not afford them the proper means to resist. The venues deemed legitimate according to city managers and planners in the Portland Plan, do not lend themselves to rhetoric regarding gentrification and justice, but tend to focus predominantly on concerns about individual buildings and projects. In other words, issues such as parking, aesthetics, and footprints take precedence. For this reason, it would follow that the co-op would begin to organize above the neighborhood and begin to reach out to their larger activist network across the city. Following the April meeting, one of the first things house members did was start a Facebook page that quickly amassed over a hundred “likes.” While it is difficult to ascertain how many of these fans of their cause are from the Boise neighborhood and how many are part of their larger activist network, there seems to be a particular focus on rallying activists around the cause as opposed to fellow Boise residents. As discussed by one house member:

So, I mean—and then we’re just—we’re trying to mobilize—ya know, because it’s a pretty particular concern in one way, but, um, we also are trying to mobilize, like, other radicals just around this thing, which is kind of been sitting there for a while this—of just, like, being able to—to make a strong criticism of this development pattern of, like, make it a “green” building and then you can kind of do whatever—do the same thing that you’ve been doing.

When asked about whether the resistance can be seen as a rallying point of sorts, the informant responded, “Totally, yeah. I mean, this is a way to have that conversation.” From these statements, it
would seem that the primary focus of the house has been to gain as much support as possible, regardless of geographic location. The choice to focus on gentrification and property rights indicates an attempt to reach outside of the neighborhood, to jump scale, and apply the politics surrounding a small plot of open space to a larger discussion. While in many ways this might make logical sense, it is unclear as to whether it has helped them resist development of this particular space. One of the early events organized through the Facebook page was a barbecue aimed at organizing phone and email mobs to contact Chris Rogers directly. One house member described this event:

We don’t really have a good way of gauging how many have happened, but we—that was one thing at the barbecue, like, everyone called him together. We’ve been distributing his phone number pretty regularly on flyers and stuff like that. He’s told us that he’d prefer that we not call him at home [laughs], we don’t care, we keep calling. So we’re just sort of, like, we’re pursuing a strategy of, you know...we need to do more, but we’re trying to surround him with a sense that, like, a lot of the neighborhood doesn’t like this, rejects it, isn’t into it. It’s not just the cranky next-door neighbors, it’s, like, a lot of people. And it’s, you know, people have come out of the woodwork in support, you know. It’s, um, it’s clear that we’ve touched a little bit of a nerve with this thing, ’cuz, you know, there are people out, way outside of the neighborhood that are, like, “yeah, right on, that’s totally, you know, something that I’ve been wishing to—that was part of the conversation,” you know, so.

In this statement it is asserted that the event was a sign that a lot of the neighborhood, not just the “cranky next-door neighbors,” are opposed to the development. At the same time, the informant notes that the event drew people from “way outside of the neighborhood,” indicating that the barbecue attracted people other than neighbors. When asked whether other neighbors attended the event, the informant responded, somewhat succinctly, “Right, yeah, um, definitely. We met some folks at the barbecue, which was really good. There’s a neighbor across the street you might want to talk to.” There isn’t a clear sense as to whether or not a lot of neighbors came out in support, but the nature of this response, as almost an afterthought, seems to suggest that the focus of the event was reaching out to their network, not to the neighborhood. Another house member did express interest in gathering neighborhood support, claiming, “We’ve done some amount of, like, educating the neighborhood. I did some door-knocking talking to folks, inviting them to this barbecue that we
had. We’re just trying to get other neighbors on board with this idea that we’d like it to stay a park.”

However, upon following up informally months later with the same respondent, there was a sense that the door-knocking approach had been abandoned.

In terms of this resistance, it is important to consider the implications of both the rhetoric and the channels by which it is disseminated. First, there are the scalar implications of their rhetoric. On one level, they speak of the need to preserve community space. On another, they discuss how this development contributes to larger patterns of gentrification in the neighborhood. On quite another, one informant from the co-op claimed that this resistance is about larger discussion about private property vs. community property. While many neighbors do seem amenable to these claims (save attacks on property rights), the co-op’s resistance has at times struggled over which message to emphasize, although at the time of interviews topics seemed to have centered on gentrification and property rights. Settling on this type of rhetoric seems to have impacted the kind of network available to the co-op, as house members recognized that there was “no legitimate way to oppose something” based on the impact they believed this development would have on the larger neighborhood. The Mississippi House appears to have turned to the Internet as an organizational tool out of a desire to both gain support for their cause and to contribute to a larger conversation. However, this decision to jump scale carries with it a certain amount of organizational baggage. The confusion as to determining an appropriate scale on which to operate has exacerbated the isolation experienced by the co-op within their larger neighborhood and complicates their ability to gain tangible support in their resistance.

**The Value of Informal Parks**

The cleanup of the space and its tenure of use can be seen as an inspiring story of a minority community exercising agency over its surroundings, but it can also be simultaneously interpreted as
the efforts of a community being co-opted by developers. At the time of cleanup, the space was a hazard within the context of a generally blighted neighborhood. Cleaning the space up and building the park happened at the same time that reinvestment began to occur and property values began to rise. The emergence of the park did not in and of itself produce the reinvestment of capital that eventually led to NAYA’s rent-hike and the redevelopment forces that eventually descended upon the space threatening its existence, but it is possible if not exceedingly likely that cleaning up the area contributed to the neighborhood becoming an environment less unfriendly to outside investment. The process of gentrification is far more complicated than the stories of this particular green space can speak to, but nevertheless, community projects do carry larger impacts. Without formalizing agreements, purchasing property, or legitimizing parks, neighborhood improvements could, in many ways, clear the brush for enterprising developers, carrying implications for the spaces themselves as well as those who use and rely on them. Existing at the intersections of discussions of gentrification and urban nature, the construction of this park, both physically and symbolically, exemplifies this potentiality.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


