Ganesha Park

From Nature to Nuisance
Introduction

Urban parks have been society’s way of breaking from the city and becoming one with nature. They provide scenic background to induce relaxation and recreation. They’re a great place to exercise with relatively cleaner air than their surroundings. Some may even include special amenities for visitors to enjoy.

Ganesha is Pomona’s (Ca.) largest public park. The park contains its own concert stage, swimming pool, children’s playgrounds, basketball and tennis courts, as well as many picnic tables for visitors. An ideal park, some may imagine. But taking a closer look reveals that Ganesha Park is far from perfect. The nuisances that occur within its premises defeat the initial purpose of having such amenities. Transients of Ganesha have brought the park’s purpose into question.
Importance of Parks

Parks have played a major role in the well-being of urban societies. Aside from serving as a nature preserve, they intend to bring a communal sense of unity by setting a place for social gatherings (Low, Setha M, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld, p. 38). Urban cities are often closely divided into a wide range of social economic groups. Parks are believed to act as a tool that helps fill in the voids of social polarization (Jennifer Wolch, John P. Wilson & Jed Fehrenbach, p.5). The purpose of parks was explained by architect Frederick Law Olmsted who once claimed, “...parks would make the city healthier and exert a soothing influence on the weary and wary city dwellers.” (Low, Setha M, Dana Taplin, and Suzanne Scheld, p.210) In essence, the invention of parks was intended to serve as a machine to help improve a flawed society (Young, p. 3). Many agree that parks indeed are a refreshing, calm place that brings people together.

Another book that offered insight on the importance of parks is, Public Space. The book states, “These dynamic spaces are an essential counterpart to the more settled places and routines of work and home life, providing the channels for movement, the nodes of communication, and the common grounds for play and relaxation.” (p.3). Parks not only provide a setting for physical activity, but also add scenery to the community. Furthermore, “successful public spaces will also increase and protect the value of building investments...that help improve the image of the city and create points of pride” (Public Space, p.12). Parks indeed add scenery to the community, but most importantly, provide a safe, comfortable space for recreational activities. Poverty, crime, and poor health are just a few of the many factors that
affect American urban areas. An article written by Jennifer Wolch explains, “Urban parks were widely deemed to represent nature that would promote a better society, by combating such social problems as poverty, crime, and poor health and providing major benefits such as better public health, social prosperity, social coherence, and democratic equality” (Wolch, p.6). Therefore, regaining touch with nature can be interpreted as, “a source of goodness” (Young, p.2).

**Parks Are Meant for All People**

Advocates have criticized those opposed to transients living in parks and other public spaces. They lament criminalization of the sub-population clamming, “No amount of criminalization or harassment can prevent people from performing activities intrinsic to life itself” (Kohn, 130). In the book, *A Brave New Neighborhoods The Privatization of Public Space*, Margaret Kohn claims that the homeless have no private space to perform bodily functions and therefore, must use public spaces to alleviate themselves from what is humanly natural (p.130). She continues to mention that having restrictions on homeless who live in public spaces such as parks, “prohibit basic life functions” (p.134). Kohn sets a touching argument when she questions which component causes greater dismay: those witnessing suffering or those actually living it (p.133). Furthermore, Kohn claims that allowing the public to witness such misfortune will bring awareness about existing social conditions. If no one ever saw a homeless person camping on a park bench, then no one would ever take action and advocate for more government programs to assist this marginalized group (p. 133).
A similar argument is also found in an article by Will La Page titled, *Homeless and Hopeless in the Park*. The author focuses on issues about ethics of park management. In the article, La Page emphasized that parks are public greenspaces and therefore are for all people. He argues that parks allow homeless to reintegrate with the society that “they feel alienated from” (La Page). He suggests that parks should find ways to involve the homeless by setting aside gardens where they “might find purpose in nurturing plants” (La Page). Similar to Kohn, La Page agrees that allowing park visitors to witness homeless dwellers will persuade the community to get involved and help “evoke hope where all hope is lost” (La Page). Overall the article encourages parks to not turn their backs on the weary, yet welcome them with open arms, for they too shall benefit from “that safe and special place” (La Page). Both arguments are compassion towards homeless people. Let’s take a closer look at how transients have adapted to Ganesha Park and the effects that have transpired.

**Transients Living in Ganesha Park**

**Pavilion**

Ganesha has three pavilions available for the public to reserve. Pavilions are used for private events, parties, or BBQs. Reservations run on a first come first serve basis. There must be a reservation made at least 14-days prior to the event, along with a $50 refundable deposit. The refund will not be returned if there is presence of alcoholic beverages, excessive trash, guests exceed usage time, or if fees are not paid after the 14-day period (*City of Pomona*). Once all requirements have been met, users can arrive early and begin setting up for their event.
Suppose you arrive with all your food, decorations, and team, ready to begin preparations. As you begin to take a closer look, you notice a person sleeping among the area that you have so diligently reserved. You realize that making use of this amenity has brought on yet another challenge. Not only are your plans set back, but you are also faced with the possibility of an aggressive repercussion from the person that you are about to remove. Studies have shown that issues recurring among homeless people involve deriving from abusive homes, mental illness, and alcohol/drug use. These problems directly contribute to criminal behavior (Brenda, D.Rodell, L. Rodell, 2003; Baillergeau, 2014). “Infringing behaviors are regarded as dangerous and harmful to the physical safety of fellow users of public space” (Baillergeau, p.355).
Bandshell

Ganesha Park is host to a Summer Concert series. The Bandshell is often used by the Pomona Concert Band, as well as independent groups. A 14-day notice is required to purchase a permit. Permits costs $200 for the first hour, and $50 for each additional hour. There is a $50 refundable deposit (City of Pomona).

On May 29, 2015 while walking through Ganesha Park I observed a banner advertising a “Healing Concert” that was hosted by the Potter’s House Church. I approached 2 very nice women who had been setting up their instruments on the stage of the Bandshell. I kindly asked them if they would please provide me with their opinion about the homeless currently residing within the park. One of the ladies mentioned that before setting up, they had removed someone sleeping on the stage. They also dealt with an excessive amount of trash left behind. This presented as a nuisance to them since they had no idea whom the trash belonged to, nor how “dirty” the litter really was. In addition, the women also mentioned an earlier incident that occurred with someone who appeared to be homeless. This person was riding a bike through the park and nearly ran over one of their teenage sons. The women also mentioned that the bike rider did not hesitate to stop for the child’s sake. They emphasized that at times, they did not feel safe with some of the transients roaming within the park.
Trails

The park has multiple trails where visitors can exercise by jogging, or taking relaxing strolls. In addition to trails, there are steps that lead up the hillside of the park. These steps are intended for an intense work-out.

As I took a stroll around the park I noticed a camp with a person peeking in and out of it. I also noticed many personal belongings, litter, and cardboard boxes. About 30ft. away I saw a shopping cart with additional belongings. I made sure to keep a respectful distance to avoid having a threatening encounter.
Picnic Areas

Two picnic areas are located further south from the Bandshell. As I approached them, I noticed a male occupying that section. He then stood up and walked right passed me while carrying a lingering pungent smell. I discreetly turned to where the man had arose from and saw an ensemble of personal belongings, litter, a Smirnoff liquor bottle with the red cap, and another cardboard box. I visited the site 2 weeks later and found the set up still in place.
How many transients?

As of 2013, the city of Pomona has identified 630 homeless in total. 345 were found living on the streets, and the remaining 285 were reportedly living in shelters or other facilities (Lazzaretto, DeFrank, Cicco, p. 11). A survey was conducted in which transients “were asked to name 3 factors that contributed to their homelessness” (Lazzaretto, DeFrank, Cicco, p. 13). The responses pertaining to public safety in parks are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Record</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Choices</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty Living with Others</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addiction</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>1%</td>
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By allowing transients to inhabit Ganesha Park, we are putting the public safety at risk. We are exposing individuals and children to an area that is being diminished by potentially dangerous people. On top of that, we are allowing the monopolization of space by those who have not paid to reserve. Public space will no longer remain ‘public’, but yet be “hijacked” by undesirable users (Mitchell, p. 2)

Public Opinion

Although the park is still continuously used by the public, it is difficult to determine the amount of people that avoid it. Surveys on the general public’s opinion about homelessness have demonstrated a fatigue with the issue. “The Public sees homelessness as an undesirable social problem and wants something done about it” (Link, BG, S Schwartz, R. Moore, J Phelan, E. Struening, and A Stueve, p.533). The media has also reported a “growing public indifference and anger toward homeless people spawned by extensive contact with them” (Link, BG, S Schwartz, R. Moore, J Phelan, E. Struening, and A Stueve, p.534).

I decided to investigate using Yelp. Yelp is an online resource used for public reviews about a location. In this case, I wanted to find people’s opinions regarding Ganesha Park. Erick R. from Pomona rated the park 3/5 stars, warning that it “isn’t the best place to bring a family around because there are a considerable amount of transients and drug use that goes on here and there” (R., Erick, 3/15/2015.Yelp). A second review came from Steph M. in Pomona. She gave the park a 1/5 stars stating, “This would be such a beautiful park if there wasn’t so many homeless people. Homeless people living in toddler playground” & “Strange people climbing mountain and disappearing” (M.Steph.7/30/2014.Yelp). Lastly, Mathew E. from Ontario who
gave the park a 1/5 star rating wrote that he found “homeless people, spent condoms, and trash everywhere” (E., Mathew. 10/11/2014.Yelp.).

To find out more about the public’s opinion towards Ganesha Park, I resorted to Pomona’s Homeless Services Coordinator, Jan Cicco. Mrs. Cicco explained that there are weekly complaints about transients in this park, particularly from residents of the surrounding community. Some of the concerns of the community are: homeless people taking up reserved areas, leaving behind trash and waste, along with sleeping in the Bandshell at night. At times, play areas are occupied by transients, leaving families concerned about bringing their children.

Homeless advocates argue that it is illegal to prevent anybody from using the park. How does the city of Pomona then respond to the concerns regarding transients? Mrs. Cicco explained that the city focuses on addressing behaviors that are illegal for anyone to do. The following table lists behaviors found among transients along with the city or state codes forbidding them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illicit Activity</th>
<th>Pomona City Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ Drug activity</td>
<td>❖ Chapter 46—ARTICLE XII.- camping, sleeping or storage of property in public place is prohibited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Public drunkenness</td>
<td>❖ Chapter 34- ARTICLE IV-Illegal consumption of alcoholic beverages in public. ARTICLE VII- use of illegal drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Camping in park</td>
<td>❖ Chapter 34- ARTICLE V-Offenses involving public morals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Sleeping in playgrounds</td>
<td>❖ Public urination may be considered disorderly conduct (California Penal Code section 647) or creating a public nuisance (California Penal Code sections 370 and 372).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Sexual activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Public Urination</td>
<td></td>
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Possible Solutions

There are many strategies that Ganesha park management take into account to help discourage transients from lodging within their park’s premises. The following is a list of possible solutions derived from popcenter.org

- Fences
- Proper lighting
- Arm rests in the Middle of Benches
- Bans on “Public Feedings”
- Diverting donations from the public to safer areas
- Educating the community about homelessness
- Enlisting community support to address the problem
- Helping with your community's long-range homelessness plan
- Working with land use enforcement officers
- Cleaning up camp sites

| • Increasing the capacity of local shelters. |
| • Lobbying for more resources for mental health and substance abuse |
| • Opening a day resource center for basic life needs |

Conclusion

Although to some it might seem cruel and unjust to keep transients out of parks, in reality the issues fall under protecting the well-being of the general public, including the homeless themselves. Tired parks have been targeted by criminals and drug-dealers who are well informed of the ability to thrive among transients. We can argue that this issue further worsens their suffering, addictions and disparities. If allowing transients to successfully dwell among Ganesha park has bettered them and positively allowed them to feel closer to society, we wouldn’t continuously witness criminal activity and aggressive behaviors towards visitors. We wouldn’t see bottles of alcohol scattered throughout the lawn from those who want to
further drown their sorrows. If parks truly inspires hope in the hopeless and stirs the imagination of those who have lost sense of themselves, then it would have been apparent at Ganesha Park.

It is essential to attempt restoring this potentially beautiful park so that it may bring a wider range of people together in a safe and healthy way. The park would then serve its purpose of being a place to break away from the urban stresses, be one with nature, and relaxing. If you would like to learn more about what the City of Pomona is doing to help the homeless please visit:

References


Jennifer Wolch, John P. Wilson & Jed Fehrenbach. “Parks and Park Funding In Los Angeles: An Equity Mapping Analysis” Sustainable Cities Program/GIS Research Laboratory, USC.


"Potter's House Healing Concert." Personal interview. 29 May 2015.

