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**Civic Sideshows:
Communities and Publics in East Oakland**

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How do urban spatial practices contribute to the formation of collective identities and action and to the hierarchical structures of a city's varied communities? This paper examines this question by presenting a comparative case study of two East Oakland public spaces – the streets and parks of a residential neighborhood and the hybrid public spaces of the Eastmont Town Center. A comparative analysis of the implicit property relations and “publics” produced at each site shows that, despite their differences, these spaces and their attendant collectivities share the same fundamental logic and limits.

Introduction

East Oakland's city spaces do not bustle. In part, the silence of Oakland's streets is rooted in its 1920s physical design in the idyllic suburban image of the 'industrial garden.' But we must follow its history into the present – through industrial and then commercial disinvestment in the area, changing demographics, rising unemployment and crime, and the forging of its contemporary identity – to understand what does go on in the area and why it looks so different from other parts of Oakland.

In this paper, I examine two very different public spaces in East Oakland, the streets and parks of a residential neighborhood and the hybrid public spaces of the Eastmont Town Center. In these places, as elsewhere, both the state and the market's inability to address local concerns has led residents to seek alternative means to meet their needs. The development of community groups, non-profits and voluntary associations in East Oakland is part of a wider national and international trend that emphasizes the capacities of civil society, or what Nikolas Rose (1999) and others have called a 'third way.' This process plays itself out differently in the spatial practices of the sites we examine, producing distinct public spaces and collective identities. Yet despite the visible differences between the two spaces and their implicit collectivities, I will show that they share some of the same fundamental historical and structural limits.

In particular, I will examine the 'public' that is produced in the ways that Oakland residents use the two sites, both practically and discursively. Neighbors in Maxwell Park, a quietly gentrifying residential area near Mills College, aggressively police its public spaces in an assertion of a civil society based on racialized hierarchies of property relations. The staff

members and clients of the organizations housed at the Eastmont Town Center, on the other hand, are brought into social relationships mediated by notions of a ‘public good.’ Both modes of sociality, however, are finally embedded in and inform the same structural dynamics that serve to define the inequalities endemic in Oakland and its environs.

Theory and Methods

Theoretical Framings

A payoff of the recent cultural turn in the social sciences has been greater attention to the subjective processes by which social and economic structures are produced through collective identities or social imaginaries (Appadurai 1996, Taylor 2004). The literature on the formation of publics ranges from Jürgen Habermas’ (1995) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to Michael Warner’s (2002) cultural studies approach in *Publics and Counterpublics*. The present study aims to employ the theoretical insights of such works to help us better understand persistent inequalities in Oakland, as well as to contribute to the literature by specifying the importance of spatial practices in the construction of collective identities.

Habermas’ foundational historical study examines the emergence of the European bourgeois public sphere – a body of ‘private persons’ assembled to discuss matters of ‘public concern’ – as a counterweight to absolutist states. For Habermas, these publics serve to hold the state accountable to society, through the medium of publicity. In her important critique of Habermas, Nancy Fraser stresses the exclusions – particularly of women – inherent in the idealization of the public sphere as an “unrestricted rational discussion of public matters that is open and accessible to all in the service of producing consensus” (Fraser 1992, 112). Informed by this recognition of omissions, I examine how people use public spaces in Oakland to construct boundaries for their collective identities. I argue that public spaces and public interests cannot be defined in contrast to private spaces and private interests. Rather, the subjective experiences of

communal ownership and *communal* benefits more readily define the social spaces of the city. It is precisely the enactments of shared private property interests that create exclusive publics, and place even the hopeful attempts of voluntary associations squarely within the racial and class hierarchies of the city.

Despite recent attempts to define a ‘third way’ as a social space outside the inexorability of the market and beyond the authority of the state, scholars such as Nikolas Rose (1999) emphasize that such a space only “appears [to be] a kind of natural, extra-political zone of human relations” (167). Rose examines the way that third sector non-governmental work “involves a double movement of autonomization and responsabilization... Politics is to be returned to society itself, but no longer in a social form: in the form of individual morality, organizational responsibility and ethical community” (174). All of the invocations of ‘community’ described in this study define modes of civic participation forged through the construction of normative subjectivities (Joseph 2004). While Nikolas Rose focuses on ethical choices that inform the production of those collective identities, my own focus is on the process of that production through practices in putatively public spaces. We will see below how these practices are limited by the objective relations that have shaped those spaces. The forms of ‘community’ forged through those practices, then, are ultimately shaped by state policies and activity as embedded in the histories of the spaces, their institutional contexts and their embedded inequalities.

Thus apparently apolitical modes of sociality that are described by the term ‘third way’ are fundamentally informed by political relations. Relatedly, the common assumption that ‘third sector’ work – a term commonly used for the non-profit arena – is driven by non-market considerations must be questioned as well. We will see below how non-profit organizations such as community organizations come together through practices that enact a communal ownership of neighborhood public spaces. Their actions are clearly part of an attempt to further extend

individuals' shared property interests. I employ the term 'communal ownership,' however, to emphasize the ways that modes of sociality produced by spatial practices are framed by a normative sense of a local commons (Goldman 1998) and a new form of the bourgeois public sphere.

To help better define the theoretical framework I elaborate in this paper, I rely on Carol Rose (1994) and Nicholas Blomley's (2004) helpful perspectives on the performativity of property. Carol Rose writes of the illusory element of property, that is, the assertion and acknowledgement of property claims, regardless of the status of those claims. These claims to "un-real estate" can also be understood as the enactment of alternative modes of property – not private property, and not truly public property, but communal property that defines the boundaries of collectivities. Blomley extends our understanding of the persuasive element of property with his focus on property's enactment "in more material and corporeal ways. Bodies, technologies and things must be enrolled and mobilized into organized and disciplined practices" (xvi). It is this *embodiment* of public spaces and publics through such practices that is the least explored in the literature on publics and the particular contribution of this study of East Oakland.

From City Beautiful to Present Methods

Oakland sits at the enviable corner that connects San Francisco to the East Bay. With its incorporation in 1852, Oakland was imagined as a genteel family option to San Francisco's profane and mostly male Gold Rush population. When the western end of the first transcontinental railroad was set down on Seventh Street in 1869, city boosters predicted that the city's role as a transportation hub would soon make it "the great manufacturing city of the Pacific Coast" (Woodward and Taggart [1877] qtd. in Bagwell 1982, 56).

This history is critical to both the social and economic character of the city's urban development. On the heels of such high hopes for the city, East Oakland was built in the early

1920s in the City Beautiful vision then sweeping the nation's cities. This planning model forged the wide streets and spacious housing lots that establish the physical infrastructure of East Oakland. Implicit in this urban design was the moral enterprise of an ordered civil and political society that contrasted with the "gritty political bossism of San Francisco" (MacDonald 1999, 4). The economics of this vision, in turn, were to be upheld by the industries that city officials sought to attract to East Oakland.

Such a progressivist vision of East Oakland contrasts starkly with its role in the contemporary urban imaginary, in which it is clearly distinguished by its deficiencies. In media marketing of the city image – such as the new *Oakland Magazine* and Ishmael Reed's book *Blues City* – East Oakland is simply absent. There's North Oakland with its hip new restaurants and chic shops, Fruitvale with its vibrant Latino community and West Oakland with its historic role as the hotbed of black power. There are the hills, Chinatown, and Lake Merritt. But East Oakland? Journalistic images of the city get fuzzy east of about 38th Ave. That vast swath of flatlands between Fruitvale and San Leandro is portrayed indistinctly and viewed through abstracted numbers of crime, unemployment and violence.

To get a sense of the postwar trajectory of the area – East Oakland's course from suburban idyll to urban ghetto – we turn to historian Robert Self (2003). Self skillfully dissects the complex interactions between the federal government and the municipal and individual interests that produced urban and racial inequalities. That is, while massive federal subsidies racialized suburban development, city builders contributed to that uneven development by seeking to create and maximize industrial and residential property markets. White homeowners, in turn, conflated their personal financial interests with a populist discourse of fairness, lobbying for low taxes to the detriment of older city neighborhoods. The formation of the homeownership public culminated in the state passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, "the nation's first and most

influential tax limitation measure” (1). Its byproducts were the spatial inequalities and disinvestments of Oakland’s urban landscape in the 20 years after World War II.

White homeowners went where their taxes were lower and property values secure. Those conditions depended both on the attraction of industries through the guarantee of a stable and non-contentious workforce as well as home loaners’ redlining. As risk was racialized, so were city borders. White residents moved south of Oakland, to San Leandro and beyond. Thus East Oakland began to be accessible to African Americans in the 1960s; it increasingly became home to dispossessed African Americans from West Oakland. African Americans had been denied access to the huge postwar capital investments in real estate, and many of their homes and businesses in West Oakland were razed by such renewal projects as the interstate highway system, the general post office, and BART. Unemployment and poverty in East Oakland rose as jobs left the city along with its white residents. In the two East Oakland sites I look at, past and present mix and together mold the way that residents use the spaces they’ve been bequeathed.

My research for this study has involved various forms of interviews and participant observation. In Maxwell Park and nearby neighborhoods and in the Eastmont Town Center, I conducted ten interviews, averaging about an hour and a half each, with residents who are involved in organized activities of the areas. In the course of spending time in the area, I have also spoken more briefly with many residents who simply live in or use the neighborhood’s spaces. I have taken part in Maxwell Park’s very vibrant listserv for the past five months, which includes over 1000 emails on topics ranging from lost dogs, to electrician referrals, to suspicious activity in the neighborhood, and attended half a dozen neighborhood gatherings in the area. As I have a good friend living in Maxwell Park, I have also spent leisure time in the area, on her porch and in the park.

At the Eastmont Town Center, I am involved in a Junior Journalists pilot project with the Eastmont Computing Center. A staff member from the Computing Center and I are working

with a group of five high school students to interview and film area residents' concerns and opinions about the neighborhood. We have conducted a dozen brief interviews with workers and clients of the organizations inside the Town Center. Through my involvement in the project, I have spent one or two days a week at the Eastmont Town Center for the past 3 months, and interacted with staff members and clients of several organizations housed at Eastmont.

Maxwell Park

Policing Communal Property

As the rainy season ends in the neighborhood of Maxwell Park, bright buds and green grass color the quiet car-lined streets. Poised between the hills and the flatlands and at the very northwestern corner of East Oakland, the neighborhood is described by realtors as “desirable” (Otero 2005) and “up and coming” (Mansfield 2005). The largest income category of Maxwell Park households is \$50-75,000 a year, compared with *below* \$15,000 for East Oakland households more broadly. The neighborhood clearly stands on the frontlines of East Oakland gentrification. As I will demonstrate below, the conditions of this position – including common perceptions of crime¹ and the realities of the neighborhood's history – have led to residents' claims of public space that articulate property-based conceptions of civil society and the public sphere.

Maxwell Park is a neighborhood literally framed by community policing of crime. Although the neighborhood's name marks a much smaller area developed in the 1920s, the current, more ample, boundaries match the 1996 territorial designation of the Oakland Police

¹ Although East Oakland does have a relatively high crime rate, regional perceptions of crime in the area far exceed the reality. Two police districts that cover East Oakland encompass about a third of the geographical area of Oakland. Crime statistics from the Oakland Police Department for the first three months of 2005 are only slightly disproportionate to its relative size, with 39 percent of the city's violent crimes and 35 percent of all its crimes taking place in East Oakland. Yet in a random sampling of a dozen stories about East Oakland published in *The San Francisco Chronicle* during the same time frame, eight reported on violence and crime in the area, two covered local conflict over sideshows and the other two were about a large church gathering that sought to attract residents in an attempt to “combat crime, drugs, alcoholism, homelessness and unemployment” (Johnson 2005, B1). In the same newspaper, only one out of more than three-dozen stories on Oakland mentioned violent crime in other parts of the city.

Department's Neighborhood Crime Prevention Councils. The official designation of the Maxwell Park neighborhood now follows the police borders of Beat 28x. This collective focus on crime, as we shall see below, has brought a particular group of neighborhood residents together to claim communal ownership of their public spaces and to enact a voice for the neighborhood and the public, defining the parameters of membership and civic engagement.

The Maxwell Park neighborhood organization established its presence as an active community forum through an effort to reclaim the neighborhood's public spaces from an "undesirable" private business. In 2001, residents acted together through the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) to shut down a liquor store suspected of harboring drug activity. As Jan Hetherington (2004), Neighborhood Council secretary, told the story:

What brought people together was the White House Market liquor store. There was drug activity and loitering around the area, and there was nothing we could do about it. Finally, people nearby came together and as a group, we were able to make something happen. [...] Instead of going through the city, which couldn't respond to our complaints, we went through small claims court.

Residents kept thorough logs of every nuisance that took place in and around the liquor store, including noise, litter, vandalism and intimidating or disturbing behavior. By working persistently to keep such detailed logs, each household member in the surrounding area was able to bring a lawsuit of up to \$5000 against the store for nuisance and damages, effectively putting the liquor store out of business. Maxwell Park resident Grace Neufeld, executive director of the nonprofit Neighborhood Solutions, recommended this strategic neighborhood action. Her organization, dedicated to working with neighbors to solve local problems, prides itself on having "cut its teeth" with the White House Market case in Maxwell Park (Bender 2005). It has most recently won a similar lawsuit for 21 Berkeley residents against a nearby university student cooperative. Such actions not only help neighbors solve problems, but actually help define who is considered to be inside and outside the community of neighbors.

Another tangible outcome of residents' efforts to reclaim public spaces is the small park that is the neighborhood's namesake. Maxwell Park proper is an intimate woodsy space well-used by neighborhood children. On a bright spring day, the dappled light shines through the trees and onto a grassy area where kids climb, run and swing. But this too is a recent development. Not long ago, the shady trees and park nooks harbored drinking and drug deals, according to neighborhood residents. Residents organized as Friends of Maxwell Park and worked with the non-profit Friends of Oakland Parks and Recreation to raise money and volunteer their time to improve the park and discourage criminal activity in it. The local nursery co-op school helped pay for the play structure that their small students now use.

These examples of residents coming together voluntarily to ensure the safety of their streets and children can be seen as acts that are in the 'public interest.' My emphasis, however, is on the boundaries of the particular 'public' whose interests are served. By terming such actions enactments of 'communal ownership,' I want to emphasize the subjective emergence of the 'community' as forged through shared private property interests. While apparently benign examples of 'third way' activity, the community organizations' claims to public spaces are shaped by and reinforce the social and economic hierarchies that define the area. The exclusionary spatial and political history of East Oakland and contemporary pressures of gentrification are definitive of residents' need to 'take back' increasingly valuable public spaces.

Another example of such practices by residents of Maxwell Park is the physical enactment of communal ownership through neighborhood walks. On a weekend last June, a rash of car thefts spurred neighbors to discuss their options. The group took advantage of the virtual public space of electronic communication. Within a few days, because of email, the group was able to organize and meet. One of its members suggested neighborhood walks, in which residents could survey hot spot areas, see what was going on, and also have an opportunity to get

to know their neighbors. Once or twice a week, twenty or so neighbors meet to stroll about the area.

We can see a pattern in how neighbors claim communal ownership of the area's park and its streets: individuals' safety and/or property is threatened, the city and police are perceived as unable to protect residents, residents constitute and reinforce themselves as a group around common private interests. As a collective, they are better able to solve problems that are beyond the ability of the city to solve. As a council member described, "The city is not effective enough. The neighborhoods have to do something."

As an indicator of the embeddedness of these activities in unequal social structures, we will explore below the exclusions implicit in such collective actions. Those who do participate in the group's activities *enact* the identity of the neighborhood, representing their own interests through the group. Further, as these types of groups gain influence in city politics, they constitute what is more broadly perceived as 'the public.' As the recent explosion of literature on civil society shows,² participation in political decisions is increasingly decided by membership in such associations. But as Habermas emphasized, the 'public' must appear independent of the state to legitimate its voice, despite their mutual influence. The minutes of a meeting after the start of the neighborhood walks note that: "Officer Greg Patterson expressed appreciation for our 'Walking,' but stressed that we should also be careful. No 'Taking the Law into our own hands'" (MPNC 2004). We shall see below how such clear boundaries between state and society are belied by community policing that reifies hierarchies implicit in the construction of the community.

Naturalizing the Neighborhood

² For pertinent examples, see Cox (1999) and Fine and Harrington (2004). For more general reviews of the literature on civil society and the state, see Cohen and Arato (1992), Ehrenberg (1999) and Edwards (2004).

In the past few years, curtailing dangerous activity has been only one of the projects of the Maxwell Park Neighborhood Council. This is apparent in its change of name last year from “Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council” to “Neighborhood Council.” The Council’s Neighborhood Action Teams also include the Beautification Team and Traffic Team. Reclaiming space is not only a matter of reclaiming it from physically threatening activity, but also from the “un-natural” and “instrumental” effects of capital and efficiency.

We can see such an enactment of communal territorializations in beautification projects such as daffodil planting. Last fall, the Council organized a group of volunteers to join in a citywide Keep Oakland Beautiful campaign. Keep Oakland Beautiful is Oakland’s Department of Public Works’ effort to “create a culture of caring within our community” (OPW 2004). The invocation of caring and community suggest an attempt to alleviate the negative effects of development. These daffodils were not planted in parks or near homes, but in the unwelcome spaces at the edges of neighborhoods such as median strips, parking lot borders and along highway ramp walls.

Of a piece with beautification projects are recent pedestrian-friendly endeavors by Maxwell Park residents. For example, according to a local advocate, the goal of the redesign in the nearby Laurel Commercial District is to make it “more pedestrian friendly, and to encourage people to use this area.” The Streetscape Improvement project to redesign the strip’s façades and street includes a large arch built over MacArthur at High Street to territorially mark off this “new and improved” space.

Other examples of attempts to assert a communal ownership of the neighborhood spaces include traffic calming devices, aimed at slowing cars down in order to make streets safer and more attractive for pedestrians. As David Engwicht (1999) writes in his book *Street Reclaiming*, “[Traffic] is like an unwelcome guest that has barged into your private space.” He advocates the reclaiming of the “home territory tradition” by which shared use of space “builds a sense of

identity” and community (13-14). The Maxwell Park Neighborhood Council has been instrumental in the installation of traffic barriers, a traffic circle and a three-way stop sign. They are now looking for ways to lobby for speed bumps on one of their streets.³

Residents laud these attempts to raise the quality of life in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, it is important to examine the ways that such practices call into being a collectivity – a community – that is as productive of public discourse at the municipal level as it is exclusionary of many Oakland residents. The European bourgeois public sphere that Habermas describes may be geographically and temporally distant, but the elements of its omissions are still with us. The ideal of a public sphere where ideas of ‘public interest’ are rationally debated is readily apparent in the listserv’s conversations about what can and can’t be discussed. One resident posts: “We should be able to bring up and discuss any problems that are in the neighborhood.” A message from the moderator, responding to the practice of posting national political commentary on the listserv, notes: “Some members resent this, don’t feel it’s part of this group. So the first ‘rule’ – keep the discussions to MP related issues.” In these and other examples, the boundaries of the public is policed precisely by efforts to define what is public and of common concern on the one hand, and what is private and personal on the other. Information may be the “currency of democracy,” as one listserv member quotes, but defining what counts as relevant information is at the heart of the constitution of public discourse.

The exclusions inherent in the public implied by such discourse are palpable. Not surprisingly, the neighborhood association that claims public spaces in the name of its collectivity is completely made up of homeowners, as were the other two nearby neighborhood associations I looked at. Even though nearly 30 percent of the residents of Maxwell Park are renters, neighborhood association members maintain that renters are *in* the neighborhood, but not

³ The movement to make streets more pedestrian-friendly is international. Oakland is one of the few American cities that has created a Pedestrian Master Plan (City of Oakland 2002) and a local, nonprofit organization, Urban Ecology (2004), has published a guidebook to help residents advocate for more walkable streets.

of the neighborhood. A member of another nearby neighborhood association explains, “There are some people who have lived in rentals... without that sense of commitment, who just don’t have that sense of commitment to the neighborhood.” This is strikingly similar to the attitude of white residents to the first African Americans moving into East Oakland in the 1960s. A woman who was one of the first black residents in her neighborhoods describes her first months in East Oakland: “Everyday she called me and my kids the N word. Because I’d become a person in this neighborhood that wasn’t in this neighborhood, I didn’t have no business in this neighborhood.” Just as blacks were perceived to make property values drop in the 1960s, so now are renters.

Racial dynamics also provide an undercurrent of tension in Maxwell Park Neighborhood Council’s discussions and activities. Though more than half of the neighborhood’s residents are African American, few African Americans participate in Council meetings or activities. One white female resident related her surprise upon attending a MaxPark Families gathering: “There were 40 to 60 people there, including kids. Mostly white – I think I saw one Asian man and also my neighbor Walter, who is possibly African American.” The Neighborhood Council secretary says this is of constant concern to the group: “There are Asians and Latinos and Whites, but for some reason, there are hardly any African Americans.” The day I spoke with her, she had just set up a meeting with a new African-American church pastor to ask him for his advice on integrating black neighbors into the association.

The churches that many black neighbors participate in, however, are also those that are policed by the association. The secretary goes on to describe, “Unfortunately, there are some ‘problem churches’ in our neighborhood. [...] In one, they’re yelling and hollering and drumming – it’s joyous and all but really loud, with the windows wide open. And it’s every Sunday and Wednesday night. The lady across the streets is screaming, ‘Shut up over there!’” Although the church-goers may be from a few blocks over, council members feel that they are not respectful of those who live nearby, since “they’re from outside,” and liken church-goers to

the renters in the neighborhood. Not all churches are perceived as problematic. One of them, for example, was host to some holiday concerts, which was clearly supported by the association as a positive contribution to the neighborhood. At issue, of course, is the policing of the boundaries of participation in the ‘community,’ the enforcement of its ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’

A powerful example of the way that community boundaries overlap racial boundaries is seen in recent discussions over burglaries in the neighborhood. After a neighbor alerted others to African-American teenagers knocking on doors and trying doorknobs, the listserv generated attempts to observe and record the “suspicious activity” of these three “brazen” African-American teens. Throughout the discussions it was generally assumed – though never confirmed and occasionally questioned – that these were the same teens each time and were also the perpetrators of the recent burglaries. One extreme response was from a resident whose house was broken into and who later found evidence of another attempted break-in: “It's time for some good old fashioned vigilantism. :)... Innocent until proven guilty?? Not in my court! and they've already been in my court twice. For the most part I'm kidding, however I am really pissed off.” Early in these discussions an African-American neighbor wrote,

I urge all of you not to forget that Maxwell Park has a large population of long-time African American residents. Several generations of children have grown up here in Maxwell Park... Many of us house-sit, pet-sit and babysit for one another. So, I urge you to check to ensure that this is not an honest mistake before you call the police on each an every African American young person you see out and about in Maxwell Park.

After receiving “several hostile emails” to her posting, she wrote again,

I agree we should all be cautious and look out for one another... There must be a balance between your feeling safe and the Black community within Maxwell Park also feeling safe. There must be a way for the children to play in the neighborhood without having the Police bearing down on them each time they come outside.

Outdoor public spaces are, to an extent, the privatized realm of those who police it as its communal owners. Despite neighbors’ attempts to remain objective and avoid what another neighbor calls “dangerous conclusions,” the very real fear of loss of property and safety – fueled by both racialized media portrayals and the realities of inequalities – feeds a construction of race

which shapes daily racialized experiences. The same African-American woman quoted above recounted how police approached her son sitting in his own car in their driveway: “Was this suspicious behavior or perception? [...] [I]t isn’t okay, we endure it, but we don’t like it.”

Subjective experiences forged by participating in a community and a wider public help to define the shifting boundaries of that collectivity, boundaries that must be constantly redrawn and reinforced.

Eastmont Mall and Town Center

Absent Town Center

Maxwell Park shows us that the collectivity implicit in uses of neighborhood public spaces – and a consequent notion of public interest at the city level – is defined by racialized hierarchies of private property. Are there other types of spaces that might ground the possibilities for a more inclusive public? According to its owners and tenants, the Eastmont Town Center aims to serve such an inclusive public. We will see below, however, that the urban context and history of the space likewise limits the potentials of such promises. Eastmont Town Center is less than 20 blocks from Maxwell Park, similarly situated just below MacArthur Blvd, East Oakland’s dividing line between its higher income hills and its lower income flatlands. Yet the spaces of Eastmont seem of another world. Once complete with JC Penney’s and a multiplex theater, it now mostly houses public agencies and non-profit organizations.

Eastmont Mall was opened with great fanfare in 1970 (Berkley 1970, Sun Reporter 1973). By the 1990s, however, its occupancy plunged to 30 percent. Eastmont’s last national retail tenant – Mervyn’s – left unannounced in the middle of the night in 1993, and later that year, Jack Sumski and Bob Bridwell became the owners of the largest commercial retail property in Oakland. Faced with the huge empty space, and unable to find retail stores that would sign leases in the mall, Sumski and Bridwell hit upon a novel if desperate idea – to court social service and community-oriented organizations instead. Since recipients of such services already lived near the mall, bringing the services to the area would be beneficial all around. As owner Bridwell described, “The redevelopment followed a traditional model, but instead of using retail as an anchor, we used community services” (qtd. in Tate 2005). In 1996, the Alameda County Wellness Center opened up in the former JC Penney’s site. In addition, Eastmont currently houses offices of the Social Security Administration, various Alameda County Social Service

Agencies, a branch of the Oakland Public Library, a Head Start preschool, a charter school that prepares youth for college, and several nonprofits such as the Center for Elders Independence, the Oakland Community Organizations and the Eastmont Computing Center. Downstairs, there are also a scattering of stores, a café and two tiny, lonely coin-operated carousels. The former Mervyn's is now an Oakland Police Department substation.

With its change in occupancy came the ambitious new renaming of the space –“Eastmont Town Center.” Owner Sumski explained, “It's a Town Center. A Town Center is a place where the community can come” (qtd. in ABC7 2004). The idea was to get the ‘community’ in there, and newspaper articles from 2000 on have lauded the attempt. But the hope for a center where such a romanticized ‘community’ can come together assumes a collectivity that particular types of public space help to construct, and rapid social changes in the 1960s – which included the construction of the mall and the changes in technology and transportation – drove out. A long-time Eastmont area resident recalls the community that once was:

Yeah, when there were little stores, we would walk, we used to walk a lot. We didn't have cars. [...] And you had small stores, little Mom & Pop stores, that was on the corner, and that's where you got a lot of stuff. And you could get in on credit there, till you get the check [...] when we grew up, we had the neighbors which was called the village people. Like we had here before, everybody helped each other out, everybody knew each other.

The construction of the mall forced out those locally owned stores on the nearby MacArthur Blvd. Instead of walking to buy fresh vegetables every day from local merchants, Wiley stays home: “We bought a freezer than held 800 lbs of food. [...] So you don't come out as often.”

Yet the social services of the Eastmont Town Center would seem to offer up the ideals of an *inclusive* collectivity bound by altruistic concerns, one in which people help each other out regardless of race and class. Those who access government and non-profit social services benefit from the collective's commitment to a comprehensive public good. Staff members of the non-profits and government agencies are dedicated to serving the public good by providing assistance to members of the community, the local articulation of the public. Commitment to

“community” is mentioned in almost every one of the organizations’ mission statements. The mission, for example, of the Alameda County Wellness Center is to be “responsive to the diverse cultural needs of our community.” The Oakland Public Library branch at Eastmont “informs, inspires and delights our diverse community.” The Eastmont Computing Center is “a community learning center committed to providing...technology access to the local community.” Oakland Community Organizations “seeks to reweave the fabric of our communities.” Each of the organizations housed at the Eastmont Town Center bases its mission on an implicit vision of a community. But as we clearly saw in the Maxwell Park case, ‘community’ does not exist outside or before its active construction. It is in part through the everyday uses of public spaces that collective identities are forged.

So what are the spaces of Eastmont like? Do they encourage any kind of collective identification? The first thing one notices entering Eastmont is its emptiness. Its emptiness is felt by the absence of people one would expect to find in a mall during weekday hours, but a more profound emptiness is apparent, as well. You can hear it in the way loud voices reverberate through the space. Although only about a quarter of its space is vacant, none of the occupied sites colorfully compete for your attention. Eastmont is a space unmistakably marked by the departure of capital. Those who use and even work in the Town Center are fretful and dissatisfied with its spaces. Discomfort in the Town Center is evident in frequent comments regarding its strange status as a former mall: “Look at this place now – what is this? What are those kids doing there just sitting around [pointing to kids from the charter school]?” “This is not a place where people are going to come.” And most strikingly, “When stores moved out, the space was gone.”

My sense is that the very architecture of a mall aimed at forging consumer identities is a poor idiom used to try to articulate a definition of ‘community’ or ‘public good.’ Margaret Crawford (1992) writes that the first suburban mall built outside of Minneapolis enclosed its

stores within a temperature-controlled space to facilitate customers' shopping throughout Minnesota's long winter months. The basic mall trope relied on an exaggeration of differences between the outside world and inside world; it resembled "an inverted space whose forbidding exteriors hid paradisiacal interiors. This combination was compelling enough to ensure that enclosed malls soon flourished even in the most temperate climates" (22), like Oakland. Sealed off from everyday life, mall spaces were designed to be purely recreational and escapist. As a Town Center, Eastmont's new mission is contradicted by the architectural separation of its spaces from the outside world. While the provision and reception of social services evokes a notion of 'community' and 'public good,' the disjunctive experience of the mall's enclosed spaces oddly separates that 'community' from residents' daily lives.

Furthermore, operating in the context of our mass-mediated and market-driven society, malls provide a sign-saturated environment to encourage identity formation through market participation. In malls, the subjective experience of civic engagement is replaced by identity formation through consumption. Eastmont Town Center, in contrast, provides little that one might identify with. Walls are mostly blank, spaces are empty and social service offices are hygienic and bureaucratic. There is not much in Eastmont's spaces that one can claim as one's own, limiting the space of possible identifications. As a local resident says, "I'm looking for a mall. I'm looking for grocery stores. I'm looking for clothing stores. All of a sudden, you have just a certain type of person come to this mall. And now, that store that had these other things don't come in here. They don't sell the right clothes, the right items."

Rosemary Coombe (1998) suggests that in our contemporary context the appropriation and interpretation of commercial media is central to how we make meaning. "Self, society and identity are realized only through the expressive cultural activity that reworks those cultural forms that occupy the space of the social imaginary" (270). Since the social imaginary is formed in large part by commercial media, she argues, we find ourselves in "a historical situation in

which identity, tradition, and community are themselves constituted through, and in diverse relationships to, commodification and its discourses and practices” (272).

Eastmont organizations position themselves as driven by non-market ideals and publics. I suggest that this has led to a lack of appropriable signs (given that our language and images are now inextricable from those of commercial media) and spaces (since mall spaces are public spaces designed and legislated⁴ to admit only one type of use). As with the Brasilia that James Holston (1989) describes, the impossibility of experiencing Eastmont as one’s own prevents the Town Center from becoming central to the town.

Sidelong Claims

There is, however, a set of residents that does identify viscerally with Eastmont. In the mid 1990s, groups of local – mostly African-American – youth began to congregate with their cars in the empty lower level of the mall’s huge parking lot. Hundreds of teens gathered on weekends to show off their cars, spin donuts and figure eights, play music and hang out. The now infamously contentious sideshows were born. Though since declared illegal, sideshows nevertheless provide a moment of collective identification with Eastmont spaces. The rap duo Luniz evokes that sense in “I’m A Raider”:

Now we to Eastmont wit the sideshows
But it’s fun, and I’m famous, but I ain’t tryna die tho
Niggas be goin out in a gang but not I tho
... Floatin, doin it all,
Ghetto nigga from da Eastmont Mall.

Yakpasua Zazaboi memorialized the participants’ perspective of the sideshow in his documentary *Sydeshowz*. He remembers fondly:

It was just black folks and cars *everywhere*. It filled up the whole lot, all down there by Taco Bell and where the old McDonalds used to be. People was walking around just talking. Having fun. And the thing that made me fall in love with it was [that] people weren’t looking at us as if we were a threat. They was

⁴ In 1972, the Supreme Court decided in *Lloyd v. Tanner* that shopping mall spaces are privately owned, and as such, their uses can be controlled and their users policed by their owners. The Court’s decision supported a Portland mall’s right to ban distribution of anti-Vietnam War handbills.

more like a welcoming thing, like, ‘Man, you *see* us, now get out of the car and *be* with us (qtd. in Allen-Taylor 2003).

Swinging and showing off cars were only an excuse for gathering and dancing and laying a claim to some space beyond the nighttime drug-related shooting and fights endemic to the area. Zazaboi reflects upon the early days of sideshows, when there was little of the tension that contemporary media coverage of sideshows at Eastmont highlights (*East Bay Express* 2002). As we will see below, Oakland residents currently contend that sideshows are both dangerous and violent, while their young participants counter that more injuries are sustained running from the police than at the actual sideshows, and that the dangers of the gatherings are exaggerated by racism and fear. Nevertheless, both in their early days and now, sideshows were and are stolen moments for the youth who attend them, in spaces they can only temporarily claim as their own. Another participant describes the contemporary scene: “Like you know, they’re not trying to rob anybody, they’re not trying to shoot up anybody, they’re just there to chill, relax, see some cars, do some tricks, and you know, be with their friends in a chill atmosphere.” The basic idea of the sideshow has not changed since a decade ago; a woman who lived in the Eastmont area as a teenager reminisces: “I really miss living over here. All our friends used to come over here. People would be out showing their cars. It was tight.”

In the late 1990s, sideshows began to grow popular beyond East Oakland, attracting larger, younger and rowdier crowds. At the behest of annoyed or fearful neighbors and businesses, Oakland police began to ban sideshows from the Eastmont parking lot. But their momentum was too strong to stop. They simply slid down the street to the Pak ’N Save on Hegenberger Road, near the Coliseum, and these days emerge in any number of large intersections or street sections of East Oakland. Oakland Police Department Chief Richard Word admits that, “We made a mistake, by pushing them out of the parking lot of Eastmont Mall and into the neighborhoods” (qtd. in Analla 2002, B3).

The mostly African-American youth who participate in sideshows are criminalized for attempting to claim their own space, read as a challenge to “civil” society. What these groups challenge is precisely the propertied public that the Maxwell Park Neighborhood Council articulates, as is clear from a flyer circulated on the Maxwell Park listserv that advertised a meeting about sideshows. The flyer begins, “Are you sick of sideshows? Do you think they’re dangerous and hurting our community?” The answers to those questions are clear in the flyer’s last line, which advocates ensuring “that the people terrorizing our community are held accountable.” These same “terrorists” are others’ children, thus entire families are excised from the “us” implied in “our community.”

An African-American writer whose own kids happily attended sideshows at Eastmont Mall gives another perspective on them: “Although these gatherings have a particular Oakland, African American, hip-hop, turn-of-the-millennium beat to them, they are not much different than what American kids have been doing on American streets since cars were invented. It’s a lot like the 1960’s-era, Central Valley white kids in *American Graffiti*” (Allen-Taylor 2002) – except that the more extreme racial and economic marginalization of sideshow participants has made them take on a darker image in the public imaginary.

A Complicit Third Way

The spaces of Maxwell Park and Eastmont provide viscerally distinct experiences, and as we have seen, serve very different social and political purposes. Yet juxtaposing them can help us better see how East Oaklanders’ overlapping notions of ‘community’ and ‘public’ articulate visions of their relationship to others, to the state and to the market. In looking at Maxwell Park, we saw that a claiming of public spaces in the name of the community actually enacted the boundaries of that community and reinforced racialized urban inequalities. At the Eastmont Town Center, we saw that state and other top-down notions of a collective based on altruistic

relationships can fail to produce the ‘community’ that its owners and participating organizations seek to serve. We saw in the Eastmont-based sideshows, however, that a collective identity based on marginal spatial practices is also possible. Taken together, these cases show us that the extent of possible constructions of ‘communities’ is inescapably framed by East Oakland’s urban history and social and economic hierarchies. Despite the hopeful framing of the ‘third way’ as an alternative to state and market inequalities, we have seen that its articulation of ‘publics’ is shaped by the very structures it seeks to escape.

It takes five minutes by car to get from Maxwell Park to Eastmont Town Center. Yet there is little interaction between the two areas. Few of the people I spoke with in Maxwell Park had been inside Eastmont Town Center, nor did any of the Town Center clients I spoke with frequent Maxwell Park. When Councilmember Desley Brooks (2005) tried to rally interest over the Maxwell Park listserv to challenge a Detox Facility and Sober Center that Alameda County is hoping to put in the Eastmont Town Center, there was no discussion about it on the listserv.⁵ In contrast, a woman feeding pigeons in the nearby Walgreens parking lot generated email conversations that lasted over 10 days and included over two dozen participants in its conversation thread.

An exception to the mutual isolation of these two sites is represented by a staff member at the Eastmont Computing Center who lives in Maxwell Park. Young, bright and committed to social justice, Damon is typical of progressive attempts to extend the boundaries of the community defined by the propertied public. However, as we have seen above, the historical and institutional limits of non-profits in Eastmont Town Center problematizes his and other activists’ work.

⁵ Those interested in challenging the Detox Center may have gotten in touch directly with Desley Brooks. The point is, however, that the issue did not become one of communal concern. It was thus constructed to be outside the bounds of the community issues.

In addition, the recent reduction of funds available for non-profits has forced many to limit the public they serve. The Eastmont Computing Center, for example, recently lost its funding from Intel for its youth-oriented Computer Club. Meant as an alternative safe space that encourages the creativity of local youth, the Computer Club is now considering closing its doors for over an hour a day to teach computer classes to ex-offenders. The funds from this program will help to keep the Club's finances afloat. Other plans such as the Sober Center and Detoxification Facility, in addition to existing programs at Eastmont, threaten to further narrow the population that uses its spaces. Already, the sense is that, as one local resident put it, "It's good for senior citizens with medical problems." Further marginalization of its population through catering to marginal populations may serve to reinscribe inequalities and further limit participation in a politically effective public sphere.

Both Coombe (1998) and Craig Calhoun (1993) suggest that an inclusive and democratic political community must be one in which, as Calhoun writes, the "public sphere recognizes the [indeterminate] diversity of identities people bring to it...Identity formation needs thus to be approached as a part of the process of public life" (267), rather than assuming that individuals come ready made to become part of publics. By focusing on the ways that spatial practices contribute to and limit the processes of subjective formation of different publics, I have sought to explore some of the cultural conditions we must consider in our search for a more participatory democracy.

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