



Paying to Play in the Mission District

Naomi Adiv

Naomi Adiv unpacks a viral video showing an argument between longtime San Francisco residents and “dot-commers” over a soccer (futbol) field in the city, raising questions about how public spaces are allocated, who gets to use them, and who counts as “the public.”

The video appears

On October 9, 2014 the details surfaced of the latest battle in the San Francisco gentrification wars: a face-off between longtime residents and newcomer tech industry employees over the use of a soccer field in a public park in the city’s Mission District. Under blog posts titled variously “Bros Attempt to Kick Kids off Mission Soccer Field” and “Turf Wars at Mission Playground’s Soccer Field,” a video¹ of the incident shows young men arguing over use of the field, surrounded by their friends and supporters.

In the video, a Latino youth who grew up in the neighborhood, 20 years old, is surrounded by other young Latino men in their teens and twenties. This group is defending the “pick-up” style of play long established as the rules of the park. Teams of seven play to an agreed-upon score until one team wins and advances; the losing team goes to the back of the line. Opposing them is a group of white men who appear to be in their late twenties or early thirties, many of whom wear T-shirts with the logo of their well-known internet-based company, Dropbox. As representatives of their respective groups, the men shout and posture at each other; one gets the sense that this is not the first time this conflict has taken place.

About halfway through the 4½-minute video, another man from the “tech” group appears, waving a permit purchased through the booking system of the San Francisco Parks Department. When the Latino group refuses to leave the field, he is first confused, then angry; he asks, “Do you guys understand this? It’s pretty simple, man. We paid \$27 to reserve the field for an hour.” Rebuffed, he demands, “Read it! Read it!”

The dispute, and the symbolic conflict

Each man in this conflict, a leader of his “crew,” also symbolizes groups in conflict in present-day San Francisco. The Latino youth represents a “historic” or “authentic” Mission District. *This* Mission District is both transnational—with connections to the Latin American countries of its residents’ origins—and deeply local. These youth are *of* this place, and have been playing by pick-up rules their whole lives. The men from Dropbox, on the other hand, symbolize San Francisco’s new tech elite and their sense of immediate ownership, in which local soccer-field rules are un-sacred, and pitch times can be bought and sold. Their presence evokes other acts of claiming space in the city through control of capital, including the rampant use of “Ellis Act” evictions to

¹ See “Video: Tensions Arise Over SF Soccer Field Between Neighborhood Kids And Recent Transplants” on the website of the *SFist*: http://sfist.com/2014/10/10/tensions_arise_over_mission_playgro.php.

remove longtime tenants from rent-controlled apartments, and Google buses monopolizing Muni² bus stops. That afternoon, the two groups settled on playing together – but the dispute continued to be hashed out on the internet and in City Hall in the weeks that followed.

While on its face, this conflict was over the entitlement of dot-com gentrifiers versus the longstanding practices of Mission district locals, this dispute also involves the policy issue of fees in organizing the users and uses of public space. It points at the fundamental question of what and whom public space is for, particularly in places where specific-use fields like this are in extremely high demand.

What access means

It is possible to describe access to public space in terms of three aspects: supply, distribution, and belonging.

The question of supply asks, is there enough to go around? Although space is a finite resource, municipal land policy can respond; when cities build more parks, *supply* increases. In a geographically small city like San Francisco, where many forms of space are contested, this is difficult.

If we assume that there could be enough of a particular kind of public space for everyone to have some, then we can consider an even *distribution* so that if we were to color in the public spaces on a map of a city, we would find places of similar kind and quality close to all people’s homes and schools. As some commentators point out,³ the recent long-term renovation of local parks has put even more pressure on the city government as it supplies and distributes a finite number of soccer fields.

Finally, access describes the ways in which people are made to feel that there is a quality of belonging. More than an equal distribution of decent public places across a city, access in these terms means that a person or group can go to a place and feel that the space is theirs to use. Public spaces *belong* to their users in some capacity, through the mechanisms of social membership. To say that a space belongs to its users means not only that they have paid for it (through tax dollars) but—more importantly—that they feel a sense of power over the decisions that get made in and around the space. In the case of the argument over the Mission soccer field, questions of belonging and exclusion were largely at stake.

Charging a fee to reserve the space adds a complicating factor because each group’s method of rationing access—one by paid reservation, the other by skill (winning the game)—is fair in a different way. In contrast to the widely agreed-upon rules of the winner-keeps-playing system, the Parks Department fee-and-permit system offers a clear and rational mechanism for allocating space to those who value it most. However, the notion of “value,” under the fee-based regime, is narrow; embedded in it is the assumption that the ability to pay for something and the willingness to pay for it are functionally indistinguishable. It relegates those with no ability to pay to the sidelines, organizing their desire for the space as something less than “value.” Further, it doesn’t account for the rich social life that occurs on the edges of the field, where non-players hang out, young children are minded and learn to play, and in-group familiarity is established.

Fees for access to public spaces are, and have long been, a site of struggle because they tie the question of broad access that is at the heart of what makes a space “public” at all to a system of hard currency. They diminish a system of belonging that is based in physical dwelling or presence, and vest the control of space in those who are able to intervene with dollars. The rules for fee-based systems of access are often made more available or transparent to those who have power in the first

² “Muni” (or “the Muni”) is the local nickname for the city’s public transit network, the San Francisco Municipal Railway, as well as the associated local-government body, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency.

³ See “Turf War at Mission Playground’s Soccer Field” on the website of *MissionLocal*: <http://missionlocal.org/2014/10/turf-wars-at-mission-soccer-field>.

place. Indeed, many of the original accounts of the Mission soccer-field story claimed that the dot-com group had reserved the field with a city parks app on their smart phones that was tied to their credit cards. That turned out not to be true: they had obtained their permit at a Parks Department office. Nonetheless, that version of the story gained steam easily because we know that power gives some groups of people greater ability to lay claim than others.

Sympathy for the young people resisting the receipt-wielding tech employees exemplifies resistance to the rationing of public space with dollars. But the long-standing community-control system also has limitations. That system reduces access for less-skilled users, groups that may want a more organized framework (such as league play or a birthday-party game), or those who feel excluded for other reasons—perhaps new players, women, or children.

Still, an imposition of a fees-based system to divide space requires places that belong to “all of us” to adhere to a market logic—even if permits are not priced at market rate. Indeed, it is often not the actual amount of fees that drives conflicts like the soccer-field dispute—though that should be taken into account—but the fact of money changing hands at all. Fees also have long conveyed an underlying message that people who use public goods will only “value what they are given” if they exchange money for use (neglecting the fact that they already pay for it with tax dollars.)

Conclusion

Within a week, the soccer-field video and various analyses⁴ of it were all over the web. The San Francisco Latino Democratic Club drew up a list of demands,⁵ and protesters came to City Hall to demand that the booking rules be changed back to a no-fee system, which had been the case until at least 2012, when renovations began on the field.⁶ This resulted in a cancellation of the fees and permitting system for that particular field, and the return of soccer rules to what many have called “community control.” The city, in turn, sponsored a series of community meetings to discuss park usage, and the Parks Department said its *mea culpas* about not being culturally sensitive enough, including a promise to post signs with rules at parks in a variety of languages.

Though it’s clear from the video of the conflict that the men from Dropbox behaved badly (they subsequently apologized⁷), the question of how to allocate space in dense and diverse urban spaces is not straightforward. Community control *and* reservation systems (fee or no) each have their advantages in terms of transparency, access, and belonging. Each system allows a different group to feel like the soccer fields belong to them, and each excludes some people. For those who grew up in the neighborhood, belonging means that community-established rules govern space; for those new to the city, the fee-based rationing system that doesn’t care who you are—or if you are any good—means the city can belong to you from the day you arrive.

The soccer-field argument lays bare an underlying conflict over the rationing of state-owned space, pitting a market mechanism against a method that draws on community norms and operates outside a cash economy. Put otherwise, this is a question of access and who counts as “local” in a rapidly changing city where money increasingly determines control over space.

⁴ See, for example, “Dropbox, Airbnb, and the Fight Over San Francisco’s Public Spaces” on the website of *The New Yorker*: <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/dropbox-airbnb-fight-san-franciscos-public-spaces>.

⁵ See “Follow-Up on Mission Playground Rally and Press Conference” on the San Francisco Latino Democratic Club’s website: www.sflatinodemocrats.com/events/follow-up-on-mission-playground-rally-and-press-conference.

⁶ See “Video: Tensions Arise Over SF Soccer Field Between Neighborhood Kids And Recent Transplants” on the website of the *SFist*: http://sfist.com/2014/10/10/tensions_arise_over_mission_playgro.php.

⁷ See this tweet by Jean-Denis Greze: <https://twitter.com/jgreze/status/521126149993152513>.

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