

Night Market and the Reconstruction of Public Realm in Seattle's Chinatown-International District

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For the 6th Conference of the Pacific Rim Community Design Network, 2007

This paper chronicles the development of a Night Market in Seattle's Chinatown International District. With the multiple goals of economic revitalization, public safety, and community building, the event brought together a coalition of organizations and individuals in the development and implementation of the event to reclaim a problematic park in the neighborhood. Initiated by a youth program and supported by other community stakeholders, the Night Market event involved intergenerational and cross-cultural interactions that further reduced the social and organizational barriers within the community and with the broader public. By focusing on both the outcomes and community process for creating the Night Market, the paper discusses how events such as the Night Market can help expand the notion and design of the public realm in an urban community.

Crisis: Neighborhood Open Space

Open space and neighborhood parks have been an important component of the American urban landscape in the 20th Century. Dated back to the reform parks that emerged under the Progressive and social work movement around 1900, neighborhood parks nowadays provide a variety of uses including recreation, leisure activities and provide opportunities, and informal social gathering.¹ As part of the open space concept that emerged in the 1960s, neighborhood parks were seen as important to the vitality of cities.² Today, in many urban neighborhoods in America, they represent the last remaining true public space in the fabric of cities, besides streets and sidewalks. However, in recent years, even as new economic activities have returned to the inner cities after years of divestment, neighborhood parks and open space are often subject to crimes and vandalism particularly in poor neighborhoods. In an ironic way, the concerns for public safety have often turned these neighborhoods against development of parks and open space.

Take Seattle's International District for example. In 2000, citizens of Seattle approved a \$198 million Pro Parks Levy to support more open space development in the city.³ Specifically, the fund would support improvement of neighborhood parks such as the Hing Hay Park in the International District. However, in a recent public meeting to discuss the expansion and improvement of the park, Bob Santos, a long-time community activist, questioned the wisdom of expanding a park that has become a magnet for "riff raffs."⁴ As it turns out, the existing parks in the neighborhood are frequented more by drug users and vagrants than the district's predominantly elderly immigrant residents. The negative perception of the park has discouraged the residents from using it. The

disuse of the park reduces the opportunities for recreation, exercises, and social/public gathering in the community. It also reinforces the image of safety problem in the district which in turn impacts the local business and economy.

In the face of such problem, a collective effort has emerged recently to reclaim and revitalize public spaces in the neighborhood specifically through a proposed Night Market. This paper chronicles the development of the Night Market and examines the multiple social and spatial dimensions of the event. Based on participant observations and by focusing on both the outcomes and community process for creating the Night Market, it further discusses how events such as the Night Market can help to reclaim and expand the notion of the public realm in community design.⁵

Making of the Night Market

What is a Night Market? From selling food and clothing to public performance and entertainment, night markets have been an emblem of the bustling urban life in many Asian cities. In Asian communities in North America, night market has recently emerged not only as a popular form of leisure and commercial activity but also as a vehicle for community building and revitalization. Examples can be found in Vancouver and Richmond, BC, as well as San Francisco. In instances such as the large Richmond Night Market, they also reflect the cultural and demographic shift in a city. Over half of Richmond's populations are of Asian descent. But the event serves not only the Asian populations in the city. The Richmond Night Market for example attracts a multicultural clientele with visitors throughout the region. In such way, the event also carries the significance of diversity and multiculturalism in North American cities.

In the International District, the idea of creating a night market in the neighborhood as a way to bring visitors and revitalize the neighborhood has been floating for some time. The recent discussion for a night market emerged from an intergenerational design workshop organized by the Community Design Studio at University of Washington (UW) in collaboration with the Wilderness Inner-city Leadership Development (WILD) youth program in the fall of 2005.⁶ The WILD Program is a youth leadership development and mentoring program based in the International District.⁷ The program focuses on community building projects carried by mostly high-school age students that address environmental justice issues. In particular, the program emphasizes intergenerational interaction as a method of community building in the context of Chinatown International District where a significant portion of the populations consists of non-English speaking elderly immigrants. Supported with grants from various public agencies, the program activities included Elderly ESL classes taught by the youths, bilingual and intergenerational environmental education, and pedestrian safety program, as well as career exploration and internship placement.

The purpose of the Intergenerational Design Workshop was to engage the youths and elders in envisioning improvements of existing open space in the neighborhood. Six different design proposals were produced by intergenerational teams of youths and elders. One group in particular came up with the idea of including vendors in the park as a way

of serving and attracting people to the park. Discussions following the workshop eventually led to the youth-led effort to develop a pilot night market in the district. To get feedbacks from the community, youths from the WILD program developed questionnaire for local businesses. Feedbacks on willingness to participate in the event, duration and location of the event, and program activities were collected that informed the planning of the night market.

The youths also took a trip to the Richmond Night Market to observe a real night market in action and what would make a successful event. For those who spent their childhood in Asia, they were also informed by their memories of night market in their home countries. In planning for the pilot night market, they also studied and compared the different locations in the neighborhood. Hing Hay Park was eventually selected in consultation with other neighborhood organizations as the site for the pilot Night Market. The event took place in August 2006 as part of the community's National Night Out event.⁸

Night Market as a Social and Spatial Event

Beyond a community festival, the Night Market event was an attempt to address a wide range of challenges in the community, including rebuilding and reclaiming the district's besieged public realm. Besides the typical commercial activities in a night market, the WILD youths organized a series of activities to engage visitors and residents of different ages and ethnicities. The activities included mahjong, fortunate telling, fishing, ring toss, chess, go, Chinese calligraphy, and cooking demonstration. There was also an inflatable jump toy for the younger kids to play and an outdoor Karaoke contest for all ages. The Chinese-style pavilion in the park served as the backdrop for the Karaoke contest. The multicultural activities, with Chinese Lion Dance, Vietnamese cooking, and Kung Fu demonstration, reflect the neighborhood's multicultural heritage and identities.

The organized activities achieved two outcomes: bringing culturally familiar activities to the public space and creating opportunities for social interactions. In such way, the event activities expand how the park has typically been used and how people in the neighborhood have traditionally interacted with each other. At the pilot Night Market event in August, kids can be seen playing Mahjong, Go, and chess in the park with the adults. Outside visitors inquired from the locals about the specific games and foods. Aspiring singers both inside and outside the neighborhood joined each other on the Karaoke stage. The event and the specific activities transformed how the park has traditionally functioned. They helped activate not only the space but also the social relationship among people in the space.

Night Market as Collaborative Action

Behind the scene, the planning and implementation of the pilot Night Market also strengthens the social relationships and involved a different kind of public realm, namely a broad network of organizations and individuals. The potential of the Night Market to address a multitude of issues including economic development, public safety, community building, and recreation brought the diverse groups and individuals together despite their

differences. The organizations included non-profit social service organizations, business associations, Seattle Police Department, Department of Parks and Recreation, and Department of Neighborhood. Sponsors of the event included a local grocery market and even a major developer.

Each of the key organizations played a different but equally instrumental role in the planning and implementation of the event. After conducting the initial business survey and getting support from other partners, the WILD program took the lead in developing the program for the night market. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce helped communicate and mobilize the support from the local business owners. The Community Action Program helped develop the public safety aspect of the event. The Chinatown/International District Business Improvement Area (CIDBIA), the organizer of the regular summer festival, helped coordinate the logistics.

The collaboration of the different organizations and individual was critical to the event's success. Besides bringing together unique resources and expertise, the collaboration also ensured that all the major stakeholders in the neighborhood took ownership and pride of the event. The success of the pilot Night Market generated much excitement in the community and has led to continued collaboration among the partners to develop a full-fledge Night Market in summer 2007. A grant was secured from the City's Office of Economic Development to support the development of a business plan for the proposed summer-long Night Market in the district. More recently, the success of the Night Market has been used by the City as an argument for expanding Hing Hay Park.⁹

Night Market as Cross-cultural Learning

Following the pilot event, the WILD program continued to collaborate with the Landscape Architecture faculty and students at UW to further develop the Night Market program and activities. In fall 2006, a collaborative studio was organized to explore design and construction of outdoor installations that would help strengthen the identity and functions of the Night Market.¹⁰ A program was developed that involved WILD youths and Landscape Architecture students at UW in weekly workshops to collectively design the installations. The installations were constructed by the student teams and presented to an audience of community stakeholders and professionals at the end of the school term. Altogether, six installations were constructed, ranging from seat walls and lighting to a game booth and movable benches. Each of installations also incorporates a narrative element that represents an aspect of social life or history of the immigrant neighborhood.

One project features a giant-size lantern with a video installation inside that depicts one day in the life of the neighborhood. The lantern in this case represents the stereotypical image of the neighborhood as perceived by outsiders. The video installation represents the reality inside the neighborhood. The representation and juxtaposition of the layers provides opportunities for interpretation and understanding. Another project features a series of three movable benches in the shape of islands, representing the past, present, and future of the community. Two of the bench/island feature built-in display boxes with

collection of photos and artifacts from the past and present, collected by the youths. The third bench/island has a built-in slot where users can insert a note with their wishes for the future of the community. The three benches form a continuum that represents the ongoing evolution of the community.

These outdoor installations are designed to adapt to different locations throughout the district where Night Market can be held. As functional objects, they support the activities of the market through seating, signage, lighting, etc. In an event that would attract outside visitors as well as different cultural groups within the district, the installations provide a window for interpreting and understanding the unique cultural heritage and the everyday life of the neighborhood beyond the stereotypical image of Chinatown or Asian enclave. As artistic and interpretative elements, they expand the typical, commercial nature of most night markets. Combining both functional and interpretative elements, they draw users to interpret and understand the layers of meanings behind the Night Market. They provide opportunities for conversation and interactions in the public space.

Opportunities and Possibilities: Reconstructing the Public Realm

By utilizing and activating an existing neighborhood park, the Night Market in Seattle's Chinatown International District helped reclaim a space that has been besieged by issues that plague many urban open spaces. But the event and the effort behind it achieved more than simply taking back the park for one night. With the multiple goals of economic revitalization, public safety, and community building, the event brought together a coalition of organizations and individuals in the process. Initiated by a youth program and supported by other community stakeholders, the event involved intergenerational and cross-cultural interactions that further reduced the perceived barriers within the community and with the broader public. The design/build installations have been envisioned to help strengthen the identity and functions of the event as well as generating opportunities for interactions and cultural interpretation and understanding in the public realm.

The outcomes of the Night Market suggest ways through which the public realm in urban neighborhoods can be reclaimed, reconstructed, and reconceptualized. Through planning of event and activities and possible reprogramming, neighborhoods have the ability to transform the way open space is currently used. The activities and events can also be designed to challenge the existing boundaries within the community and to expand the notion of public in the community. Through partnership and collaboration, neighborhood organizations and individuals can pool together resources to transform the public space. The partnership and collaboration in turn help strengthen another dimension of public realm in the community. The positive experience of working together can empower them to take on further challenges in the future. Through specific design interventions and displays, the culture and everyday life of the community can be brought into the public realm against isolation and misconception.

As a temporary event, the impact of the Night Market on how the park is used on everyday basis has to be examined in such context. The event alone does not take away

the need to address how the park can be improved and/or reprogrammed to address the needs of the community and conflicts of uses that take place in the park on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the outcomes of the Night Market do demonstrate the opportunities and possibilities of reshaping the public space and social relationships in the community. In expanding the notion and design of public realm in an urban setting, the Night Market plays an instrumental role beyond a temporary event.

Endnotes

¹ See Marcus, C. C. with C. M. Watsky, E. Insley and C. Francis. Neighborhood Parks. In Marcus, C.C. and C. Francis, eds. *People Places: Design Guidelines for Urban Open Space*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998)

² Ibid.

³ For details of the Pro Parks Levy, see <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/proparks/>.

⁴ See Crary, M. Letter: Bigger Hing Hay Park means better Chinatown. In *Northwest Asian Weekly*, Vol. 26, no. 15 (2007), p. 11.

⁵ The author is a Board member of International District Housing Alliance whose youth program spearheaded the effort to create the night market. He has been involved in planning meetings and discussion in the development and implementation of the event.

⁶ The studio was led by the author. The focus of the studio was to develop open space strategies to address the proposed increase in housing density and issues of livability in the neighborhood. Specifically, the studio focused on how designs should consider the specific cultural and social needs of the community.

⁷ For more information on WILD, see <http://www.apialliance.org/idha/>.

⁸ National Night Out is a crime/drug-prevention program that encourages neighborhoods around North America to organize against crimes. (See <http://www.natw.org/nno/about.html>)

⁹ See Bedard, L. "Few resist park plan, but questions remain". In *Northwest Asian Weekly*, Vol. 26, no. 15 (2007), pp. 1 and 11.

¹⁰ The studio was taught by the author and funded through the Mini-grant for Internationalizing UW's Undergraduate Education by UW's Undergraduate Academic Affairs, Curriculum Transformation Project, and the International Program and Exchange. More information is available at <http://courses.washington.edu/nightmkt/>.