

A Place of Resistance: Oppenheimer Park, East Vancouver, Coast Salish Territories

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. John Irwin's Geography 100 course *Our World: Introducing Human Geography*. The assignment asked students to describe an urban landscape, its history and development, and the ways that people have used and continue to use it, tying it in with a clear thesis and concepts discussed in the course. The assignment includes photos from the urban landscape and uses APA citation style.

Oppenheimer Park is a public park at the conjunction of Powell and Jackson Streets in Vancouver's impoverished Downtown Eastside. However, a survey of the park's present use and past history reveals that it has long been a place of *resistance* to oppressions such as poverty, racism, and misogyny.

The city of Vancouver itself rests on unceded Coast Salish Territories. This means that the Tsleil-Waututh, Squamish, and Musqueam peoples *never* surrendered legal title to this land, which created a layer of oppression to fight right from the start (Duffek et al., 2016, p. 5). Anti-Native oppression has thus been a common thread of many battles fought in this park.

City parks, meanwhile, have a long history in North America's urban centres. They began to emerge in the late nineteenth century, starting in the east and moving west (Martin et al., 1983, p. 7). This trend began because, by this point, increasing numbers of people were living in cities, as a result of industrialization. Unlike their parents, they lived far from nature, and had no way to readily reach it; "cities began to respond to this need by setting aside areas as public parks"

(Ibid). They typically did this by purchasing prime land at going rates, or they received donations of land instead (Ibid).

Such needs can be seen in Vancouver's city parks. Oppenheimer Park is the size of a city square block. It contains a baseball diamond, a fenced-in children's playground, a tree-lined avenue, park benches, grassy fields, and small square stone tables. Today, there are also a few tents placed in the park. All of these features are important to the way the park has been used in the past and today.

Around the park are other significant features as well. On the Jackson Street side of the park is the Vancouver Buddhist Temple. On the Dunlevy Street side is *The Door is Open*, a Catholic soup kitchen and drop-in centre that is adjacent to St. Paul's Catholic Church, and opened in the 1970s. They tout their non-judgmental services (ranging from a women's group to a seniors' group to youth service opportunities) and community space ("Spirit in the City," <http://sacredheartvan.rcav.org>, July 12, 2017). There are also many buildings with barred windows and boarded-up fronts. The temple, church, and soup kitchen indicate the religious and cultural diversity that has always characterized this area of Vancouver. The presence of the soup kitchen, however, clearly indicates the poverty of the neighbourhood, as do the barred windows and boarded-up fronts.

In the early days of Vancouver as it presently exists, this area was used for grazing cattle, revealing the frontier nature of the neighbourhood and the city (Atkin, 1994, p. 23). It is situated in what was once Japantown, an area bordered by Cordova Street on the south, Jackson Street on the east, Alexander Street on the north, and Gore Street on the West ("First Immigrants: Dreaming of Riches"). Japanese newcomers first began arriving in the 1870s, and while some returned, plenty of others stayed to begin families and make lives for themselves (Ibid). Despite the prejudices of the day, the Japanese-Canadians built a flourishing community that endured until 1942, when the people of the neighbourhood were deported to British Columbia's interior after imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour (Ibid).

A point of pride for the people of Japantown, especially in light of the prejudice they faced, was the Asahi baseball team. From the 1910s right until 1941 they played at Oppenheimer Park, then called the Powell Street Grounds ("Asahi: Legends of Baseball"). Through the 1920s and 30s they won every title

in the Pacific Northwest (Ibid). Even when the team was disbanded with the deportation orders, the team members brought baseball to the internment camps; as baseball has long been a cherished part of Japanese culture, this was a welcome reprieve from the fear and uncertainty that the people were facing (Ibid).

Oppenheimer Park/Powell Street Grounds have indeed seen various resistances to oppression through their whole history in Vancouver as we know it. Due to its climate and geographic location, Vancouver has a long history of struggles for human rights, ranging from free speech to labour justice. As the province drew its wealth from forestry, fishing, mining, and other industries, the workers who laboured under harsh working conditions paid the price physically, socially, and economically (“March to Ottawa.”). On multiple occasions, law enforcement brutally put down workers’ protests (Ibid.). This militancy and reaction came to a head in the 1930s. The Powell Street Grounds were often used as a gathering place for striking and unemployed workers, with one demonstration ending in police chasing workers through the halls of nearby Strathcona Elementary School, breaking windows and banging on doors, and a tear gas fight in the school yard (Atkin, p. 66).

Today, Oppenheimer Park continues to be a focal point of resistance to oppression, in which I myself have sometimes participated. This past February, the annual Women’s Memorial March, which commemorates the lives of missing and murdered aboriginal women and calls for action to stop the deaths and disappearances, culminated at Oppenheimer Park (“February 14th Women’s Annual Memorial March: Their Spirit Lives Within Us,” February 13, 2017). One week later, Vancouver’s National Day of Action march, calling for a coordinated response to address the opioid overdose epidemic, began with a rally at Oppenheimer Park, and ultimately culminated there. Participants were given carved wooden feathers on which they were invited to write the names of loved ones that have died, or good wishes for all at risk. Those feathers were subsequently hung from the branches of the trees that line the walkway (Brach, “Vancouver drug users take to streets in national day of action,” February 21, 2017).

The fight for sustainable housing in the Downtown Eastside is another issue that has seen Oppenheimer Park as a battleground. In 2014, neighborhood

residents erected a massive tent city in protest of the unsanitary and unsafe conditions in which they are forced to live (CBC News, “Oppenheimer Park: 5 arrested as tent city comes down,” October 16, 2014). The encampment’s ultimate takedown culminated, once again, in some arrests (Ibid). However, some tents remain in the park even today.

Finally, Oppenheimer Park remains a focal point of resistance as a place for socializing and celebrating. To paraphrase Liz Evans of the Portland Hotel Society, the marginalized residents of the neighbourhood need a space where they can exist without being harassed, stigmatized, or challenged on their right to be present (Mate, 2008, p. 11). Oppenheimer Park serves as a setting for such events as National Aboriginal Day, the Powell Street Festival, and the Union Gospel Mission’s Annual Barbecue (“Oppenheimer Park Programs,” July 22, 2017). The Carnegie Community Centre also provides regular social, artistic, athletic, and cultural programming at Oppenheimer Park (Ibid.). Meanwhile, chess tables and the baseball diamond provide opportunities for everyday fun and socializing. A celebration of life for community activist Tracey Morrison, who was heavily involved in many of the issues previously discussed, was recently held at Oppenheimer Park. Mayor Gregor Robertson and city councilors were among those in attendance (Lye, “We’re the person, not the addiction: Downtown Eastside activist remembered,” July 21, 2017).

The people of the Strathcona/Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, along with their allies, have always used this urban landscape as a place of resistance. The socio-economic factors that have shaped so much of their lives have made it necessary. This resistance has come in the form of marching, gathering, celebrating, playing sports, and simply *existing*. It is clear that Oppenheimer Park will continue to be a site of resistance as long as that resistance is necessary.

Appendix A: Oppenheimer Park, July 7, 2017

From top to bottom: tree hung with wooden feathers in honour of opioid overdose victims; children's playground; Oppenheimer Park sign; baseball diamond. Photos taken by the author.





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