

# DECADES OF DISCRIMINATION:

## The Gentrification of Travis Park

Part Two of a series by Rachel Jennings



**From San Fernando Cathedral to Martin St., from Flores St. to the RiverCenter Mall, police are pushing the homeless out of central San Antonio...**

...The consensus among city leaders and business, or what has come to be known as the public-private partnership, is that office workers, loft residents, and thick-walleted tourists should be free to live in a cocoon. This partnership does not wish these highly valued populations to be confronted with the reality that some people are destitute, jobless, drug-addicted, or mentally ill. The city has established a form of apartheid that segregates the homeless from people who live and work downtown. Travis Park, a long-time refuge for the homeless in the heart of downtown, illustrates in microcosm the ways in which they have been displaced for the sake of tourism, high-end commerce and developers.

If the homeless are currently targeted for removal from downtown, they are only the last in an interlinked, intergenerational sequence of populations that have been defined as undesirable. Historically, San Antonio officialdom has discouraged people of color and LGBT people from relaxing and recreating in Travis Park. In a familiar pattern, authorities in the past year have designated the park as *Housed Only*, as opposed to “homeless”. The Travis Park Confederate memorial there symbolizes the exclusionary, hostile environment faced by people of color, the poor and LGBT people in the park and the broader city. Ironically, the huge size of the memorial conveys a sense of victorious triumphalism, since the Confederates whose peers had died for the Lost Cause managed to maintain their power and status in Texas during Reconstruction.

**P**eople of color in downtown San Antonio were frequently subject to discriminatory treatment in the late 19th century. According to Arnoldo De León — “In August 1883, the lessee of San Pedro Park announced that thereafter Mexicanos would not be allowed access to the dance platform in the public grounds.” Outraged, San Antonio Tejanos concluded that “the lessee’s motive in keeping Mexicanos off the grounds was to appease whites who had threatened to stop patronizing him should he persist in admitting Mexicanos to the dance floor” (32). Organizing fiery and intense protest rallies, Tejanos “regained access to the platform” (32) through legal action.



While late 19th century Mexicanos won their suit against the lessee of San Pedro Park, racial discrimination in San Antonio parks continued into the 20th century. In 1954, San Antonio Mayor Pro Tem R. L. Lester arranged for City Council to be “called into an extraordinary special session,” where he “proposed an ordinance mandating the segregation of all city-owned and operated swimming pools” (González and Romero). City Council passed the ordinance banning “people of color from city swimming pools” and “making law of a de facto segregation that had existed for 90-plus years”. Nine swimming pools were designated for use by whites, while two were available to African Americans (González and Romero). The immediate impetus for the ordinance was the courageous effort by “several African-American youths . . . to swim in a North Side city pool that, again solely by custom, had been reserved for whites only.”

According to reporting in *The Dallas Morning News*, “A burned cross had been found at the pool entrance the next morning” (cited by González and Romero). Ostensibly, to provide an “educational period” before the gradual integration of swimming pools in order to prevent cross burning and what we now term hate crimes, the San Antonio City Council punished African Americans for whites’ racism. One can assume that the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling of Topeka, Kansas in May 17, 1954, by the US Supreme Court that mandated school desegregation at the federal level, further inflamed the backlash by racist whites. Rubbing salt into African Americans’ wounds, the San Antonio ordinance took “effect on ‘Juneteenth,’ the 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Texas” (“June 19”). Two years would pass before the law was repealed on March 16, 1956, thanks to City Council member Henry B. González who had also voted against the original ordinance along with fellow Council member Emil O. Scherlen. Later in 1956, Gonzalez was elected to the Texas state senate. In May 1957, Sen. González joined Sen. Abraham Kazen in a legendary 36-hour filibuster that prevented passage of a sweeping series of bills designed to extend and intensify segregation in Texas.

**A**t the same time that African Americans and Mexican Americans experienced segregation and ostracism in public parks and swimming pools, LGBT people in San Antonio suffered harassment, police entrapment, and arrest in public parks. “In San Antonio,” according to Melissa Gohlke in *The Entrapment Operations in San Antonio Parks Collection*, an archive donated to the UTSA Libraries by LGBT activist Michael McGowan, “police had been ferreting out gay cruisers in Travis Park—located in the heart of the city—since the 1940s.” As she points out, however, “undercover operations and demonization of those caught in the web of such actions” were not “indicative only of the era that predated Stonewall.”

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Rather, undercover operations and entrapment of gay men and transgender persons continued into the 21st century.

In “Homo Patrol: Are San Antonio Rangers the Real ‘Perverts in the Park?’” (*San Antonio Current* Jan. 27-Feb. 2, 2000), the investigative story that cracked open the questionable practices of the San Antonio Park Police, Debbie Nathan suggests that the “rangers’ trickery” may have had “its origins in the early 1990s” when “the police, park officials, and some city council members started getting increasing reports of gay presence in the parks” (11). Hundreds of arrests over ensuing years followed. For a long time, the names of arrestees would appear in the *San Antonio Express-News*, which resulted in the suicide of Benny Hogan, a USAA employee and perhaps others as well. Although “no complaints” of the time “describe indecent exposure or other explicitly sexual activity . . . , the reports are about men gathered in parking lots and outside bathroooms” (11). In

other words, complainants were worried about the presence of LGBT people in the park just as white people in earlier decades had felt compelled to complain about the presence of people of color in parks.

Just as Mexicanos in 1883 fought against discrimination, LGBT activists in San Antonio likewise protested and filed suits. After “the city of San Antonio” arrested “more than 50 men for indecent exposure and related offenses in city parks,” The Gay and Lesbian Community Center of San Antonio issued a travel advisory, discouraging LGBT people from spending their money in a city that might be dangerous for them. By 2005, as Lisa Sorg reported in *the San Antonio Current*, “the relationship between the LGBT San Antonians and the City Police had improved, largely due to the hire of an LGBT liaison at SAPD” (Jhery Hallman quoted in Sorg). Since the city did not want bad publicity or lost dollars, it was essential for the SAPD to build bridges with the LGBT community.

In contrast to improvements within the City Police force, however, the relationship with San Antonio Park Police had changed very little by 2005. The Park Police increased its undercover contingent. In addition, Park Police began “video- and audio-taping public-indecency busts” (Sorg). Such videotaping was largely a form of self-defense rather than an effort to protect gay men from police groping, harassment or entrapment. Park Police, that is, were trying to deflect charges of enticing gay men to engage in sex (Sorg).

In terms of their percentage in the population, however, gay men were arrested much more frequently than straight couples. As Nathan pointed out in “Homo Patrol,” “a hetero pair, hard at it in the bushes or in a car on lover’s lane, generally elicited a wink, or at worst, a warning from cops and the citizenry. Meanwhile, super-market magazines frequently run articles advising wives to spice up marriages with risqué sex romps in a forest or on the beach” (10).





Responding to sensationalized reports about “homosexual acts” in parks, authorities planned “a massive police operation that would completely ignore public sex between heterosexuals, downplay commonplace ‘flashing’ and exhibitionism, and instead focus obsessively on gays” (11). What one sees, then, is a double standard that ignores ordinary lewdness or public sex between straight people — singling out gay men for arrest even if entrapment is necessary. Just as African Americans and Mexican Americans were subject to discrimination in 19th and 20th century public parks, so LGBT people have been denied their civil rights and treated as second-class citizens unworthy of fair treatment.

Likewise, Park Police have cracked down on the homeless who seek refuge in city parks. Signs forbid “sleeping and loitering” in the park between “11pm and 5am.” Skateboarding and rollerboarding are also banned, even though Segway riders cruise the park or tour the city on Segways. In contrast, homeless people are closely watched, dispersed or cited by the police for “loitering”. Even jaywalking, of which Michael Brown was accused, has been used to deter the homeless from the area around Travis Park. When double standards of enforcement are used for different demographic groups, police policies would seem to have no legitimacy.

When examining how the homeless have been pushed out of Travis Park, one must look not only at city ordinances about panhandling, public camping, loitering, and sleeping in public but also look at park design and aesthetics. One evening, as I strolled across Travis Park, I happened to look up at the towering structure of the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, a complex

that incorporates the shell of the former Municipal Auditorium as well as a newly constructed building. To the northeast, I was conscious of the expensive new lofts that line Broadway as well as, further down, the Pearl Brewery shopping complex. To the south along Travis St. were proposed new buildings of Weston.

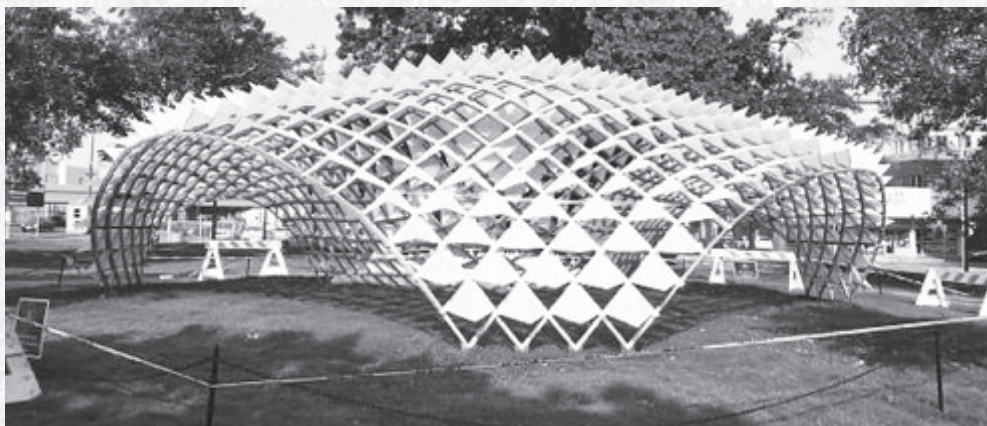
Beginning in late 2013 and continuing into 2014, Travis Park underwent major renovations. The park now provides recycling bins, filtered water, and free Mutt Mitts. Workers have planted new shrubs, potted plants, small trees, and colorful flowers. Two Civil War cannons are freshly painted. The Popcorn Wagon, a concession stand that sells drinks and snacks, is parked along a sidewalk that leads to the Confederate monument. At mid-day during the work week, a variety of food trucks line Jefferson St. on the eastern side of the park. Wooden picnic tables offer a place to have lunch under the trees. In addition, yellow and blue metal tables with umbrellas encircle the Confederate monument during the workday. For office workers who want a pleasant site to eat their lunch rather than wait in a crowded restaurant, these portable tables are ideal. A small yellow and blue kiosk loans books and games to park visitors.

At first glance, little may seem problematic about the new amenities. However, the new features of the park seem designed to exclude certain populations. The games kiosk and the portable metal tables that encircle the monument are available only from 11am to 2pm. After the mid-day lunch crowd disperses, they are taken down and stored in an on-site shed. Such storage protects the tables from birds and squirrels but also prevents people who live outside from resting at the tables. Those features of the park that are most inviting disappear in the early afternoon. Thus, the overall design of the park seems planned to discipline and



disperse those who cannot afford hotel fees or rent for housing.

For that same interim, food trucks park on the north side so that tourists and downtown workers will have easy access. For longer hours on weekdays and weekends, the Popcorn Wagon sits in the middle of the park, offering snacks and drinks and playing buoyant pop music. Prices at the food trucks limit the consumers who can purchase treats. At the popcorn wagon, I saw bottled water sold for \$2.00, corn dogs for \$3.00, nachos for \$4.00, cotton candy for \$4.00, frito pie for \$4.50, a large tea or lemonade for \$3.50 and so on. While some can afford such prices, I cannot as an adjunct English instructor at San Antonio College. I saw an entire wedding party in tasteful burgundy gowns and black tuxedos pose in front of park trees and flowers for wedding photos. The bride in her wedding dress also posed in front of the Popcorn Wagon. In my blue jeans and worn shoes, I wondered if the bridal party would be made anxious or upset by my presence.



Parallel to Pecan St. on the north side of the park is a tiny dog park in a cramped space in which a bench, a dog fountain, and a small shade tree are enclosed within a black steel fence. Over several months, I noticed only a couple of individuals sitting inside with their pets. In short, the dog park is not a very inviting space, although, it allows owners to rest for a moment if they are tired of keeping an eye on their pets. Its two functional purposes seem to be to provide an imposing security fence for the storage shed and to take up unused space near Pecan St. to discourage the unwanted visitors such as the homeless who arrive in San Antonio at the Greyhound station just two blocks away.

For a brief period after the city reopened Travis Park, another feature appeared: an abstract sculpture. A steel chain held up with short steel posts encircled the sculpture. White, triangular shapes were attached to crossed wooden beams, seemingly made of raw lumber. A generous observer might associate the shape with a boat sail. One might ask, though, what relevance a boat with a sail had to San Antonio, its culture, or its history. Alternatively, the white shapes could also have represented reptilian scales or sharp blades. An acquaintance described them as “porcupine-like.” The sculpture seemed hostile, even violent, and exclusionary. Signs attached to the an iron-linked chain announced, “Do not climb on the artwork.” I typically am open to all forms of aesthetic expression but I bristled with anger when I saw it. Unlike most public sculptures, this one failed to engage viewers. In contrast, one might consider such colorful works as Dale Chihully’s *Fiesta Tower* at the main library or Sebastián’s *La Antorcha de la*

*Amistad* in the center of town. Both have attracted many visitors. The sculpture in the park, however, although designed by local architecture students representing “community,” seemed cold, unfriendly and uninviting. A couple of months after I first noticed the sculpture, it had partially collapsed, a testament to its flimsy, unstable design. Within days, the city had removed the sculpture. As with the dog park, it had served little purpose except, for a time, to take up space and to discourage the homeless from lingering on the grounds.

What is most noticeable now in Travis Park is the decreased presence of homeless people, a development that will please many well-to-do visitors. Within the public-private partnership that is in the process of re-“developing” all of downtown, pushing the homeless out of the park is a major victory. Even the B-cycle Station, where bicycles can be rented for a \$10-a-day pass, a \$24 seven-day pass, or an annual pass for \$80 seems designed to appeal to the affluent. The B Station contains the names and logos of corporate sponsors. A sign tells bike riders to order from “local restaurants and discover healthier meals with tons of flavor, not fat or sodium.” The restaurants include Luby’s, Delicious Tamales, McDonald’s, Pico de Gallo, Jim’s, Estela’s Mexican Restaurant, Papouli’s Greek Grill and others. While low-fat meals are indeed available at all of these, I do not normally associate healthy food with many of these restaurants.

The public-private partnership is not only about marketing and public relations, however. Private businesses

also have a vested interest in segregating the poor and homeless and discouraging their presence in the park. In all of these goals, the public-private partnership has succeeded.

On September 3, 2014, Police Chief William McManus proposed to the City Council’s Public Safety Committee that an ordinance be passed giving police authority to ticket those who give money to panhandlers. It would be a crime to panhandle or to give money, food, or other items to panhandlers. According to him, the measure would help reduce aggressive panhandling, especially in the Prospect Hill neighborhood where Haven for Hope is located. What he does not mention is that the concentration of homeless people at Haven for Hope has been made possible by aggressive efforts to push them out of downtown. As a resident of Prospect Hill since 2003 and someone who drives by Haven for Hope almost daily, I am appalled that Chief McManus would try to pit the interests of Westside residents against the homeless population when, in fact, it is affluent people in other parts of the city who initially drove homeless people to the Westside.

Taking inspiration from Mexican American, African American, and LGBT historical struggles against an elite class of city movers and shakers, San Antonians who live on the streets and their housed allies must step up to protest both the social segregation of homeless people and the criminalization of homelessness. ♦

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