



# Case Study



## **A Community United: Parque Niños Unidos—in San Francisco, California**

The Mission District of San Francisco, California, the oldest neighborhood in San Francisco is a vibrant community with a rich Hispanic heritage. Its population is predominantly middle- and low-income, although the technology industry in the San Francisco Bay Area and the popularity of city living are attracting more affluent residents. Long-time residents have been combating this gentrification.<sup>1</sup> They also have been urging their city leaders to provide a healthier living environment by establishing more parks. And in this case, the city listened.

In the heart of the Mission District at 3070-3090 23rd Street (the corner of 23rd Street and Treat Avenue) sits an empty one-half acre lot now owned by the city/county of San Francisco (herein referred to as city of San Francisco). By 2003 this contaminated lot will be redeveloped into a much needed and anticipated park, Parque Niños Unidos (Park of United Children), for the local community that fought so hard for its transformation.

### **Background**

The grassroots campaign to turn 23rd and Treat Avenue into a park began in the early 1990s when a materials supply company building on the site was demolished, leaving a half-acre triangular empty lot. The parcel, previously used for various manufacturing purposes was contaminated with two underground storage tanks (UST) that had seeped gas into the soil, lead railroad tracks that had been left behind, and illegal dumping.

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<sup>1</sup> During the 1990s, PODER estimates that owner move-in evictions rose by 300% while housing cost rose approximately 200%. Source: *PODER Junto Somos: Together We Are*. March 1999, pg. 1.

Next door to the lot is light manufacturing and residential housing. Located just north of the property is Cesar Chavez Elementary School. For the past ten years, neighbors, activists, students, and teachers have been urging the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department to purchase the property and redevelop it into a park. In 1991 a local Mission District community group, Calle 22, started an organized lobbying effort to persuade city officials to take this action. In 1996 another local community group, People Organizing To Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER), continued to pressure the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department to purchase the site and convert it into a park.

According to PODER, the Mission District has the lowest number of parks per child of all districts in San Francisco. Approximately 80 percent of its residents rent housing, and well-maintained open spaces are very scarce. Within the Mission District, seven small parks are available for recreation purposes for 12,000 children.<sup>2</sup> Larger, impressive parks are situated in San Francisco, such as the Golden Gate Park and the Presidio, but these parks are in other districts and at least two buses or a car ride away—not easily accessible to Mission District residents.

## History

Local residents have been using the 23rd and Treat Avenue lot for recreational purposes long before the materials supply company closed and the city of San Francisco bought the property in 1998. Kids have played on the property for decades, while unbeknownst to them or their parents, it was contaminated. Specifically, lead has been present since the early 1900s, and tests have shown that hydrocarbons were leaked into the soil and, consequently, the water table. Because of the lack of greenspace in the Mission District, children had nowhere to play other than on sidewalks and in the contaminated lot.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1800s and early 1900s, a Victorian house was located on the property. The house

burned down in the 1906 earthquake, contaminating the soil as a result of the lead paint.<sup>4</sup> The lot was then converted into an industrial site. In 1926 and 1927 a building was constructed on the southeast portion of the lot. Various businesses, such as Production Tool and Machinery, Diamond Drilling Company, Diamond Springs Lime Company, and the San Francisco Materials Company occupied the property. Over the years, the building contained sand storage bins, sand washing and handling equipment, a concrete trench, and a conveyor. While the building lay empty for approximately ten years, it served as an ad hoc shelter for homeless people and a hang out for drug users and dealers. Sometime between 1990 and 1992 the building was demolished. No further construction took place until the groundbreaking for the Parque Niños Unidos in 2002.

The owners prior to the city of San Francisco, the Embarcadero Trust Fund II, obtained the property as a result of a loan default.<sup>5</sup> They were apparently unaware of the property's contamination problems until the city and neighborhood residents brought this to their attention. In 1998, trustees of the Embarcadero Trust Fund II conveyed the property to the city of San Francisco. According to PODER, the top two feet of dirt at 23rd and Treat were considered a California hazardous waste site. Lead, heavy metals, and petroleum products, in addition to illegally dumped materials (such as televisions, microwaves, refrigerators, and car parts) contaminated the site.<sup>6</sup>

## Stakeholders

### PODER

PODER (People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights) is a grassroots not-for-profit organization located in the heart of the Mission District. This multicultural organization is dedicated to environmental justice

<sup>2</sup> "Weeding through Red Tape for a Park," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 18, 1997, p. A17-A18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Marvin Yee, Projects Director, San Francisco Recreation and Park Department. February 22, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> "Weeding through Red Tape for a Park," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 18, 1997, p. A17-A18.

<sup>6</sup> "Mission Toxins," *The Independent*, October 18, 1997.

issues, but it incorporates in its work social, economic, and racial justice concerns. The group believes that one of these issues cannot be tackled without taking into consideration the other important concerns.

In 1996 PODER launched the Mission Anti-Pollution Action Project (Proyecto MAPA) to determine the number of properties that store and use hazardous materials in San Francisco. Proyecto MAPA initially examined childhood lead poisoning issues and then expanded its investigations to include other contamination issues. The group found more than 330 sites in San Francisco using toxic materials or contaminated with toxic materials. Thirty-one of those sites contain underground storage tanks that have leaked petroleum into the soil, and four Mission District parks have lead in the soil. Geri Almanza explained that PODER hoped to empower the Mission District residents by alerting them to what toxins could be found in their neighborhood. This project led to community interest in the property at 23rd and Treat Avenue.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the 23rd street lot project, PODER representatives continually met with staff from the city of San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department, the Department of Public Health's Local Oversight Program, and the Real Estate Department; a member of the Board of Supervisors; Mission District residents; and other stakeholders.

### **City of San Francisco**

The city of San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department became involved in the 23rd and Treat Avenue property in 1995 as part of the Park and Open Space Program. Under this program, begun in 1974, the city started to acquire green-spaces for high-need districts.<sup>8</sup> The Mission District is considered a high-need area due to its lack of greenspaces and high population density. After looking at a variety of vacant properties in the Mission District, city officials decided to

acquire the vacant property at 23rd and Treat Avenue. It took approximately three years from when the city of San Francisco opened negotiations until its final purchase of the property on December 9, 1998.

The city became a key stakeholder with some trepidation after Calle 22 and PODER were unable to garner the financial support of local open space and land conservation organizations. The city of San Francisco had the legal and real estate expertise, and the funds, to tackle a very complex land contamination and greenspace concern.<sup>9</sup> The San Francisco Materials Company, defaulted on its loan, thus leaving the property in the hands of Embarcadero Trust Fund II. Unaware of the contamination levels when it acquired the property, Embarcadero Trust Fund II was unable to remediate the property and let it sit empty for years. The city stepped in after approximately six years of organized community activism in support of turning the brownfield into a community asset. In order to involve community members in the project, city officials held numerous neighborhood meetings and went to local elementary schools to discuss the project.

### **Residents of the Mission District**

The Mission District of San Francisco sits in a valley surrounded by Bernal Heights to the South, Noe Valley and the Castro to the West, Potrero Hill and Bay View Hunter's Point to the East, and the SOMA district to the North. It is a mixed-zoned district with approximately 50 percent of the district designated light industrial and the other approximately 50 percent zoned for residential and commercial uses.

Compared to the surrounding neighborhoods, the Mission District has a much higher population density. It has approximately 85 residents per acre compared with 34 residents per acre in the rest of San Francisco.<sup>10</sup> According to the Mission Economic Development Association, 16.1 percent of those residents own their homes and the remaining 83.9 percent rent their homes.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Geri Almanza, PODER, March 19, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> The Park and Open Space Program has been renewed twice by the voters and is currently active through fiscal year 2030-2031. Interview with Marvin Yee, March 19, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> "Weeding through Red Tape for a Park," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 18, 1997, p. A17-A18.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Geri Almanza, PODER, March 19, 2002.

The district has a fairly young population. More than 3,200 children, 19 and under, live in the “heart of the Mission.” In this specific tract, children make up 29 percent of the population, and in 1998 the estimated median age was 34. However, throughout the remainder of San Francisco, children on average make up about 18 percent of the population.<sup>11</sup> Ethnically/racially, the district is comprised of 51.9 percent Hispanics, 29.7 percent whites, 13.1 percent Asians, 4.5 percent African Americans, and 0.6 percent American Indians. The residents of the Mission District are considered middle and low-income. Approximately 36 percent of the residents earn less than \$25,000 annually.<sup>12</sup> The majority of Mission District residents are employed in service and manual labor positions.<sup>13</sup>

### **Mission district youth**

Converting the brownfield at 23rd and Treat Avenue into a greenspace can only be described as a full-fledged community effort. No part of the community was left out, and an equal voice was given to everyone. Incorporating local children in the process not only empowered them, but taught them about engaging in community action behind a common vision. Because of the concerted efforts of local community groups and the city to involve them, residents now feel a sense of pride and ownership in the property.

### **Stakeholder coordination**

The redevelopment efforts to turn the corner lot at 23rd and Treat Avenue into a park started when a local neighborhood association, known as Calle 22, demanded that the city of San Francisco demolish the building in the Southeast corner of the lot and erect a fence around the site for safety purposes. The neighbors then decided to take the project one step further and ask the city to develop the empty lot into a park. Calle 22 organ-

ized meetings with the Board of Supervisors and convinced the Supervisors to approach the San Francisco Real Estate Department about purchasing the property. However, once the Real Estate Department and the Department of Public Health learned of the contamination issues, city officials deemed the property too expensive to purchase and remediate. They considered the contamination problems to be a liability too serious for the city to assume.

PODER became an active and leading participant in the revitalization of the property in 1996 after Calle 22 had worked on the project for about five years. Calle 22 had actively sought the assistance of other groups such as land trusts, but no organizations had stepped in to help the process along. PODER staff and members chose to work on the redevelopment of the brownfields-to-greenspace project after reading about the efforts of Calle 22 in a local newspaper. PODER representatives then met with city of San Francisco staff and other stakeholders. PODER also canvassed the district to get a feel for neighbors’ perspectives and opinions regarding developing the property into a park.

This was PODER’s first brownfields project. To further its agenda, PODER immediately recognized that it needed to educate its own staff and community members on the basics of brownfields remediation and redevelopment. The group also solicited information and resources from other organizations that contend with environmental justice issues, such as The Urban Habitat Program’s Brownfields Working Group.<sup>14</sup>

Because of limited resources, PODER staff and volunteers had to be creative and persistent to win support. Staff and volunteers knocked on more than 200 doors in the neighborhood. Flyers and newsletters in English and Spanish updated residents on the status of the contaminated lot and alerted them about monthly community meetings. At these meetings, PODER provided Spanish translation services and offered refresh-

<sup>11</sup> PODER, “Junto Somos: Together We Are,” July 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Mission Economic Development Association, Mission Corridor Project, MEDA 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Geri Almanza, PODER, March 19, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> The Urban Habitat Program works to develop multi-cultural environmental leadership in low-income communities of color in the San Francisco Bay Area. <http://www.brownfieldsnet.org/moreuhp.htm>.

ments and childcare, allowing residents to concentrate on the issues at hand. The group also created surveys in Spanish and English for those who were unable to attend the community meetings but wanted to voice their opinions. An estimated 46 percent of the population in the Mission District speaks primarily Spanish at home so it was imperative that PODER provide information in both languages.

PODER also organized “toxic tours” to publicize the plight of the lot at 23rd and Treat Avenue. The two-hour tour covered a four-block radius. Mission District residents could see firsthand what their community really looked like from a human health, safety, and quality of life perspective. Residents walked by buildings with lead poisoning, counted the number of liquor stores in those four blocks, and discussed the noise and air pollution with which they lived every day. The tour ended at a local garden where tour participants and PODER staff discussed the benefits of greenspace and its absence in the Mission District. As a result of the tour and the door-to-door recruitment efforts of PODER, a core-group of twenty individuals participated in the monthly community meetings, with other residents joining in when they could. PODER also formed an environmental justice committee made up of approximately ten individuals. It met biweekly to perform research on the site and provide direction for PODER’s campaign efforts.

PODER also brought the project to the attention of the Mission District students at Potrero Hill Middle School, Horace Mann Middle School, Bryant Elementary School, and Cesar Chavez Elementary School, because they would be the ultimate beneficiaries of a clean and safe park. In October 1997, approximately 100 students from Cesar Chavez Elementary School and Horace Mann Middle School demonstrated at the lot in a protest organized by PODER. The students posted along the fence enclosing the lot wooden signs and brightly colored posters warning neighborhood residents about the site contamination and the possible dangers it posed. Students from Horace Mann Middle School continued to voice their concerns by writing letters

to the San Francisco Supervisors and the owners of the 23rd and Treat Avenue lot. Students from Potrero Hill Middle School designed a model of a future park at the site after hearing Marvin Yee, Projects Director of San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, describe the city’s intent to buy the property for the community. The students presented their design in September of 1998 to Mission District residents, representatives from the mayor’s office and the Recreation and Park Department, and PODER and Calle 22 staff. After the presentation, the same students wrote letters in support to Mayor Willie Brown and Supervisor Jose Medina’, and to neighborhood groups to advocate turning the lot into a park.

### Open space in San Francisco



San Francisco has many beautiful parks within its borders and just beyond, such as the Golden Gate Park, the Presidio, and across the Golden Gate Bridge looms the Marin Headlands. It is a city that is surrounded on three sides by water. Because it can only be built upward, its population density is fairly high. San Francisco’s inhabitants enjoy recreating in the outdoors. However, space is limited, and not everyone has easy access to the various parks. The brownfield property at 23rd and Treat Avenue turned out to be the perfect spot for much-needed greenspace in that neighborhood.

In 1991, approximately 5,592 acres of parkland existed in the city of San Francisco. According to the census of 2000, 777,000 people lived in San Francisco. Thus, 337 square feet or 0.007 acres of parkland existed per person in 1990. The parks-to-children ratio in San Francisco’s Mission District is seven parks for the district’s 12,000 children. PODER explained that this is below average when compared with other San Francisco districts. However, San Francisco is making a concerted effort with its Park and Open Space Program to develop greenspace in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Sources: Marvin Yee, Projects Director, San Francisco Recreation and Park Department. February 22, 2002.

U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001.

## Cleanup and redevelopment

The city worked closely with the Mission District neighborhood residents while developing the 23rd and Treat Avenue greenspace project. Marvin Yee, of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department commended the residents for their knowledge of environmental issues and said “the community was very involved and very informed.”<sup>15</sup> The initial environmental assessment of the property administered through San Francisco’s Department of Public Health indicated that the contaminants found on the property included high levels of petroleum and lead. Environmental consultants found two underground storage tanks leaking gasoline. They were subsequently removed. Environmental inspectors found lead in the soil throughout the site. The source of the lead is thought to be the result of lead paint in a Victorian house that burned down in the 1906 earthquake. Twenty-three fifty-five gallon drums of hydraulic fluid and lubricant were also found in a yard that had been behind the structure. A ten-foot-square sump was located at the center of the site that reached five feet in depth, and railroad tracks were found on the North end of the property. San Francisco’s Department of Health determined that the top two feet of soil were of greatest concern and needed to either be removed or covered over. City officials were not too concerned about the contamination reaching the water table because the city is not reliant on groundwater for drinking. Nonetheless, city officials are monitoring the site for movement of petroleum.

During the remediation process, the city of San Francisco offered the residents three remediation choices: paving over the entire site, digging out the top two feet of soil where the majority of contamination was found, or building a retaining wall around the site and bringing in two feet of clean fill. The Mission District residents decided that they wanted a retaining wall to be built, a liner placed over the contaminated soil, and then two feet of clean fill. The residents chose this solution because they did not want other commu-

nities to be burdened with their contaminated soil. The city of San Francisco will be responsible for long-term maintenance of the park and for monitoring for contaminants.

San Francisco city officials considered implementing institutional controls to inform future property owners of the 23rd Street and Treat Avenue contamination. However, they decided against it because no city/county greenspace has ever been sold or transferred. For the city of San Francisco to attempt to rid itself of a greenspace, it must be brought before the vote of the residents. According to Marvin Yee, the chance of that occurring is extremely unlikely.

## Parque Niños Unidos

In April 2002, the remediation process commenced that will transform the one-half acre corner lot into a 1,000 square foot clubhouse, an adjacent outdoor courtyard, and a gazebo. Two children’s play areas will be built, one for preschool-age children and the other for school-age children. Natural turf will be planted in the open areas, and a community garden will be built using raised planters that will contain eighteen inches of clean soil.

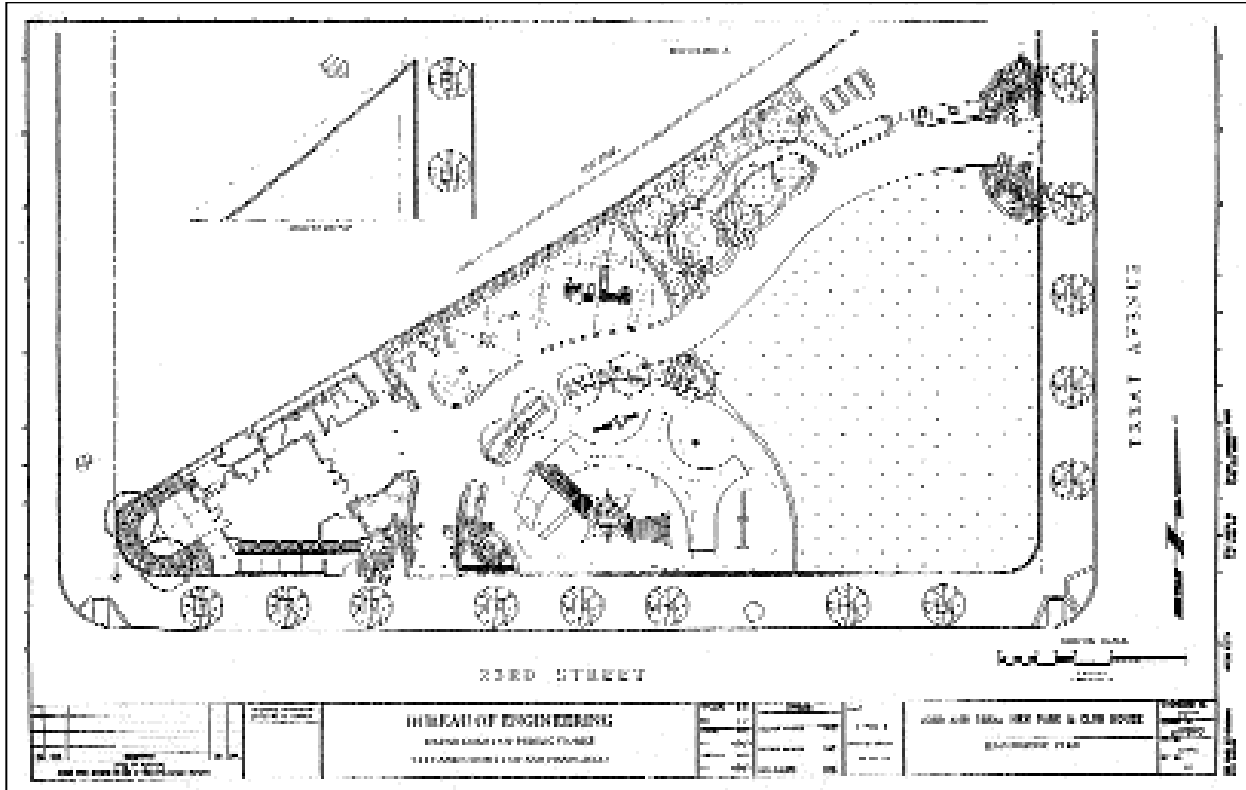
## Funding

The city of San Francisco paid for the property out of its Park Improvement and Acquisition Fund, which is taken from the General Fund. The city agreed to pay \$1,775,000 for the property and estimates it will pay approximately \$800,000 for the remediation and construction of the park, which will take place simultaneously. Another \$325,000 had been set aside on reserve from the former owners for the remediation process. Because Parque Niños Unidos is a park owned by the city, its upkeep will be funded and carried out by the city of San Francisco.

## Designing and naming the park

Once the property had been purchased by the city of San Francisco, staff from the Recreation and Park Department, together with PODER’s staff and volunteers set out to design and name the park with the community’s input. PODER

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Marvin Yee, Projects Director, San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, February 22, 2002.



This plan illustrates the park and clubhouse designs for Park Niños Unidos in San Francisco's Mission District

conducted door-to-door surveys of nearly all residents who would be impacted by the park; it worked closely with school children from Bryant and Cesar Chavez elementary schools in design development; and it assisted the Recreation and Park Department in soliciting feedback from the 23rd and Treat Avenue neighbors during community meetings.

City officials and other stakeholders decided that the residents should choose the park's name. Throughout the process to acquire the property at community meetings, neighborhood residents mentioned their desire to name the park because they had a vested interest in the redevelopment efforts and future of the property, and had been key participants in persuading the city to buy the property. City officials and PODER agreed to this because it would give the residents a feeling of pride and ownership, and "keep up the morale in the neighborhood." To decide on a name for the park, PODER's staff and volunteers developed a two-part naming process with the neighborhood children taking the lead.

The first phase of the naming process included Bryant Elementary School students providing their peers as well as students from Cesar Chavez Elementary School with background information on the project. A visual display chronicled the history of the site, the community's efforts to turn the brownfield into a green-space, and the remediation efforts. Next, students from Bryant and Cesar Chavez proposed possible names. Students wrote essays on why their name should be chosen. Thirteen park names were suggested. Five students from Bryant Elementary then conducted presentations for their classmates and for students at Cesar Chavez, Potrero Hill Middle School, and Horace Mann Middle School. Then the students voted on their favorite name—202 votes were collected and tallied.

The second phase of the process incorporated a local Mission District youth group and residents within a four-block radius of the property. PODER staff and student volunteers walked door-to-door requesting residents' name preferences—in all 163 votes were collected and tallied.

The youth group added another 65 votes. Once residents decided the final name, Parque Niños Unidos (Park of United Children), the city of San Francisco's Recreation and Park Commission approved their choice.

## **Conclusion**

Parque Niños Unidos in San Francisco's Mission District is an excellent example of a community taking leadership to pursue a brownfields-to-greenspace redevelopment project. The blighted site had for many years been used as an ad-hoc children's playground, clearly showing the need for this type of greenspace in the area. Although the project redevelopment efforts took almost a decade, the community never lost its vision, and the end result will give both community residents and city officials a feeling of pride and accomplishment. Most importantly, all stakeholders important to the process participated in the design, revitalization, and naming of the park.

One unique aspect of this project is the involvement of children. Over 250 children and youth participated in the revitalization efforts,

specifically in the design and naming of the site. Stakeholders such as PODER, Calle 22, the city of San Francisco, and the community residents recognized that children will most likely use the park more than other residents will. Therefore, stakeholders should be concerned not only with its current plight, but its future state as well. Because of their involvement, the children gained a feeling of achievement and ownership in the park.

The one-half-acre triangular site, once an eyesore and hazard, will become a much desired and much needed greenspace that encourages people to spend time outside and interact with each other and with the outdoors. By putting an idle site back into use, the city is revitalizing a neighborhood and bringing a piece of nature into a highly populated area that lacks parkland. At first, residents advocated for the removal of a public health threat. This led to an understanding of the ecological and physical value of converting a brownfield into a greenspace. With its play areas, community garden, gazebo, and community center, Parque Niños Unidos will be a source of pride in the community for years to come.