Final Project

Research Proposal

Sustainable Implementation of New Infrastructures in Cities:

A Look at Parks Through Classification Systems, Controversy Studies and Boundary Objects

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As cities try to cope with increasing stress - environmental, social, infrastructural - they are looking at new ways to design and implement old infrastructures. Often, these new infrastructures appear to meet the criteria of certain identifiable objects, causing people to classify them as such, but fail to be formally incorporated into the city's classification schemes for such objects. With this, they fall into a classification limbo that leads to social and political consequences. My research will focus on the classification confusion surrounding the introduction of new park-like infrastructures, temporary mini parks known as parklets, and the social and political consequences of this confusion. My research aims to answer three main questions. Firstly, how does the introduction of new park-like spaces, such as parklets, into cities affect the formal and informal classification scheme of city parks? Secondly, how does the tension over classification confusion around such objects affect the way that the public engages with them as boundary objects and subsequently alter their function in the community? And thirdly, how can cities implement such infrastructures more peacefully and efficiently while continuing to support openness and creativity?

Jane Jacobs' book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* discusses the importance of parks in cities and communities and the symbiotic relationship parks have with their users and surroundings (1961). As a space where many different social worlds collide, community members engage with parks as boundary objects, a place to collaborate without sharing intent (Star, 1988; Star & Griesemer, 1989). But as the phenomena of parklets, temporary parks and park-like spaces emerges as an increasingly popular design addition to cities, it is important to expand our understanding of this mutual influence of parks and their users. As cities try to find new ways of beautifying and greening, they will only increase their use of creative interpretations of parks and open spaces, and when these spaces are not classified by the city as they are by the individual and community, they fall into a classification limbo that leads to boundary tension.

In his book *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies*, Sergio Sismondo (2004) looks at the role this tension plays in introducing change through the process of social controversy. Both Jacobs (1961) and Sismondo (2004) emphasize the ebb and flow of life and how this contributes to a constant change in the relationship between people and infrastructure. Jacobs (1961) illustrates how neighborhood parks change over time, changing over decades as buildings are constructed or

demolished around their borders, and also changing by the hour, as different groups of users enter and exit (pp. 89-111). Sismondo (2004) writes that "Interests are usually taken as fixed, and society as stable, even though these are...constructed and flexible" (p. 47).

These changes will inevitably lead to tension between actors - governments, neighborhoods, communities, individuals and different social worlds - and this tension will increase over classification confusion. Classification confusion usually leads to unmet expectations and unmet expectations usually lead to tension. As Sismondo (2004) writes, "...a position that contradicts or runs against the grain of established scientific understandings is less likely to be accepted than one that agrees with expectation" (p. 106). As we become accustomed to classification systems, we learn to expect certain rules regarding these systems and we become uncomfortable when these rules are broken because our ability to group and make sense of things breaks down also (Bowker & Star, 1999). To ground these ideas in empirical evidence, my research will focus on the controversy over the Castro Parklet in San Francisco. Certain social worlds had certain expectations of appropriate behavior in the Parklet based on the behavior they had previously experienced in like spaces. When those expectations were not met, the tensions grew, resulting in city-wide legislative changes. If city executives understood the tension surrounding classification confusion they could work to prevent such tension, which would allow cities to implement new types of infrastructure with less controversy and more efficiency.

Defining Parks

The classification confusion around city parks can be seen in two main ways. Firstly, the expansion of the individual's and/or community's informal park classification scheme to include new types of park-like spaces, such as parklets. Secondly, the exclusion, or perhaps more accurately lack of inclusion, of new types of spaces, like parklets, that are becoming park of city infrastructure and that fall into the typical informal definition of a city park but are not being incorporated into the city's formal definition. As Bowker and Star (1999) point out in their study on the consequences of classification schemes, what matters is not what is real but what is perceived as real (p. 13 & p. 53). Even though the

city did not classify the Castro Parklet as a city park, the fact that it was perceived as one by the community meant that the community expected it to function and be regulated like one.

In order to understand why there was confusion around what was and was not a city park, I first have to establish what is classified a city park by law. According to the San Francisco Planning Department, public parks are classified into two main categories, regional parks and urban parks (San Francisco Planning Department). It is important to note here that "urban park" and "city park" have the same meaning in this research as they have in past research. Regional parks are defined as spaces that "encompass delicate ecological systems which are strained when subjected to intensive recreational use" (San Francisco Planning Department). The city's urban parks, which are what this research focuses on, are defined as spaces that, depending on size and features, "may accommodate organized field sports and other forms of active recreation, more passive recreational pursuits, or a combination of activities" (San Francisco Planning Department). Additionally, urban parks in San Francisco fall into three subcategories, city-serving, district-serving or neighborhood-serving, depending on their size and the facilities they offer (San Francisco Planning Department).

Parks As Boundary Objects

Positioning parks within the concept of boundary objects helps to explain the importance of them in communities and why controversies surrounding them have social consequences. Parks fit in to a broad definition of boundary objects but not so much in to more narrowly defined definitions. Still, I believe that the relation is strong enough to warrant discussion, and the concept of boundary objects is helpful in explaining the use of parks as objects of negotiation between different social worlds. I explore this further in the literature review section of this proposal.

As boundary objects, parks play a role in the community. In using parks, people collaborate without sharing intent, and in so doing they build informal social ties which strengthen the community. As a boundary object, parks also provide a set of rules that all users must follow. When the rules are broken, users are forced to renegotiate how they engage with the object and that affects the object's impact on the community. In my case study, the Castro Parklet served as a boundary object for the

Castro community and when nudists started to use the park on a regular basis, the community viewed this as breaking one of the rules of the boundary object.

This rule was broken informally since the nudists were not breaking any city laws, but rather breaking a community code of conduct by acting in ways the community felt was inappropriate for what they perceived as a city park. Once the behavior and informal rules changed, community members started to engage with the boundary object differently than before. Instead of it being a place where different actors from different social worlds crossed paths, it became almost exclusively a hangout for nudists. Instead of increasing informal social ties within the community, the space became controversial, which led to the deterioration of neighborhood cohesion. Since one social world started to take over the space and push all other social worlds out, the park lost its place as a boundary object and the neighborhood struggled with the purpose of the space which no longer seemed to fit its definition of a city park.

Case Study

In May 2009, the San Francisco Pavement to Parks operation, a collaborative effort between the San Francisco Planning Department, the Department of Public Works, the Municipal Transportation Agency, and the Mayor's Office, built a parklet in the San Francisco Castro neighborhood at 17th Street and Castro Street (http://sfpavementtoparks.sfplanning.org). Pavements to Parks defines parklets as converted curb-side parking spaces that have been made into new public spaces for seating, greenery, and gathering (http://sfpavementtoparks.sfplanning.org). Another general rule of parklets is that they are temporary, at least initially. The Castro Parklet was designed as a temporary space, but was converted to a permanent space in 2010, and was renamed the Jane Warner Plaza (www.castrocbd.org). However, it was never classified by the city as a public park and remains under the care of the Castro/Upper Market Community Benefit District, which oversees and pays for maintenance and improvements of the space (www.castrocbd.org).

San Francisco has always been a very liberal city. Nudity has been an interesting and somewhat

iconic part of the city for a long time, reaching its height in popularity during the 1960's free love movement. Since then, nudists have remained active but in small enough numbers to be accepted, or perhaps simply tolerated, by the other residents of the city. Within the city limits nudity remained legal. However, city departments have the right to pass laws on places under their jurisdiction that superseded the city laws. One department to do this was the San Francisco Parks Department, which has outlawed nudity in the city's public parks. The San Francisco Parks Code states that "No person shall, in any park without permission of the Recreation and Park Department: Expose his or her genitals, pubic hair, buttocks, perineum, anal region or pubic hair region or any portion of the female breast at or below the areola thereof" (San Francisco Park Code, p. 27).

While the community had classified the Parklet as a city park - it met the criteria and fit the concept that community members had of a city park - the fact that the city had never classified it as such meant that nudity in the space was perfectly legal. Over the years, the parklet became a favorite hangout of a group of nudists (Bajko, 2012). It gained such nicknames as "the buff spot," and members of the community started to complain (Bajko, 2012). This controversy intensified, leading to a proposal by the Castro Supervisor to ban public nudity in the city. On Tuesday, November 20, 2012, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved a new ordinance outlawing public nudity in the city by a 6-5 vote (Riley, 2012). The new legislation prohibits "nudity on public streets, sidewalks, street medians, parklets, and plazas and on public transit vehicles, stations, platforms and stops, except as part of permitted parades, fairs and festivals" (Committee/Board). The ordinance had to be specific, singling out parklets and plazas since they fell outside the jurisdiction of the Park Code. As Sismondo (2004) writes, "...as issues become more controversial they tend to become more technical..." (p. 103).

Literature Review

In Bowker's and Star's (1999) research on the consequences of classifications, they write that research is lacking in the area of "how people in industrialized societies categorize on an everyday basis" (p. 59). My research will help to fill this gap, and in so doing provide information on how cities can

more peacefully and efficiently implement new infrastructures. By pulling together research on classification systems, controversy studies and boundary objects, I hope to present a more complete understanding of the ways in which these concepts help to determine whether implementation of news types of infrastructure into existing communities and social words will be successful or not. Understanding the impact that classification systems have on the acceptance of new infrastructure is important. Bowker and Star (1999) identify two basic problems with the classification schemes of large-scale infrastructures. Firstly, that different designers of the classification schemes have different needs (p. 70). In the Castro Parklet controversy the needs of city planners and the needs of users differed, resulting in the unforeseen need of classification clarification on the part of the user. Secondly, that classification decisions become immutable over time, preventing valuable future developments (p. 69). This is important to keep in mind throughout this research in order to keep from producing research that recommends efficiency at the cost of openness. The goal is to provide information on how cities can more efficiently implement the ideas that are derived from openness and creative brainstorming, not to squash openness and creativity for the sake of efficient implementation.

The definition of boundary objects is discussed in many papers written by Susan Leigh Star. Using the boundary object concept to describe the use of parks as an object of cultural negotiation is helpful, and parks do fit into the broad definition of a boundary object. However, Star has clarified her original concept of the boundary object in subsequent publications, which has narrowed the definition (Star, 2010). In '*Translations' and Boundary Objects*, Star and Griesemer (1989) describe a boundary object as "weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual use....They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable" (p. 393). As I describe in the information section of this proposal, parks meet this criteria very well. However, in her later paper *This is Not a Boundary Object*, Star (2010) emphasizes the need for boundary objects to organically emerge from a need for people in different social worlds to communicate. Parks do not fit this definition. For the most part, city parks do not organically emerge, they are strategically placed by a city's planning department. The Castro Parklet may be a slight exception to this rule since its location may have been chosen due to its prior use as an informal meeting spot, but I would need to do more research to establish this. By and

large, city parks are imposed upon people and communities rather than emerging from them. And while I believe they do facilitate communication between social worlds, that's not usually cited as their purpose, which tends to focus on relaxation and exercise, as well as the maintaining of city green space.

However, the concept is useful and parks fall into the definition of boundary objects enough to defend using the concept in my research. Individuals use parks repetitively for the same reasons but collectively for different purposes, making them weakly structured in common use and strongly structured in individual use. Different social worlds view parks as spaces to achieve different goals, such as playing organized sports, dog walking, or relaxing, however a park's general structure remains relatively constant, making it recognizable across social worlds. Furthermore, parks meet the criteria for a boundary object in that although people use the object for different reasons, everybody has to work within the same set of constraints. Everybody that uses the space has to follow the rules of the park, which usually prohibit certain activities like alcohol and drug use as well as being in the park after and before certain hours.

In *'Translations' and Boundary Objects*, Star and Griesemer (1989) identify different ways that controversies due to conflicting viewpoints can be managed through boundary objects. At least two of them fit in well with the topic of this research proposal, simplification and parallel work. Star and Griesemer (1989) explain that "each participating world can abstract or simplify the object to suit its demands (p. 404)" and that "work in the worlds can proceed in parallel except for limited exchanges of standardized sorts (p. 404)." These management techniques are definitely applied in city parks, however in the case of the Castro Parklet, the conflict was one that could not be managed by either of these techniques. The lack of classification clarity surrounding the Castro Parklet led to a conflict that could not be resolved through informal negotiations, resulting in the involvement of formal institutions. In *'Translations' and Boundary Objects*, Star and Griesemer (1989) give an example of such a controversy. "A social world, such as the world of amateur natural history collectors, 'stakes out' territory, either literal or conceptual. If a state of war does not prevail, then institutionalized negotiations manage ordinary affairs when different social worlds share the same territory...Such negotiations include conflict and are constantly challenged and redefined" (pp. 411-412).

In the Castro Parklet, the nudist social world staked out the territory as their own, resulting in

the need for institutional organizations to manage the conflict and negotiate a resolution. These negotiations were very controversial as nudists throughout the city fought to maintain their right to be nude in the space and much of the rest of the community fought against this right. This controversy led to a redefining of what constitutes public decency throughout the city. Over time the issue of public nudity in the city's parks will probably be revisited, reevaluated, challenged, and redefined. Because of this clear relationship between the way that different social worlds' engagement with city parks leads to the renegotiation of the use of parks, it is clear how viewing parks as boundary objects can help explain their importance in cultural renegotiations across social worlds.

In Jane Jacobs' book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, she analyzes the relationship between cities and their parks and how they influence one another (1961). "Like all neighborhood parks, it is the creature of its surroundings and of the way its surroundings generate mutual support from diverse uses, or fail to generate such support" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 98). She writes that many people, residents and urban planners alike, believe that more parks are always a way to improve a city, but points out that because of negative externalities this is not necessarily true. She writes that cities and parks interact to create unique circumstances. Each park is different because the circumstances around each park vary and this can manifest in positive or negative ways. "Parks are not automatically anything, and least of all are these volatile elements stabilizers of values or of their neighborhoods and districts" (p. 92). She argues that communities and city parks have symbiotic relationships, writing that a city park affects its community -
"Unpopular parks are troubling...because of their frequent negative effects....their dangers spill over into the areas surrounding, so that streets along such parks become known as danger places too and are avoided" (p. 95) - and that a community affects its park - "...neighborhood parks themselves are directly and dramatically affected by the way the neighborhood acts upon them" (p. 95). As users change, city parks change, and as city parks change the neighborhood surrounding those parks change. This understanding is what incensed many Castro community members who saw the increase in nudity in the Parklet as an increase in deviant behavior and the beginning of a breakdown in social order.

As I examine this case, it is important to understand the role that controversy plays in the implementation of new infrastructures into cities. My overarching goal is to identify ways to limit the

controversy surrounding the implementation of new city infrastructures in order to make the implementation process efficient and positive for as many impacted social worlds as possible. Thus it is important to understand a bit about the process and consequences of controversy and how the Castro Parklet controversy can be applied to city infrastructure implementation in a more general way. As Sismondo (2004) writes in *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies*, controversy often ends with the triumph of the status quo. Public consensus is often what brings a controversy to its conclusion (Sismondo, 2004, p. 106) but it does so by "assuming that the positions adopted by key participants are of intrinsic value" (Sismondo, 2004, p. 100). However, much can be gained from entertaining unattractive and seemingly implausible ideas, and this should not be overlooked. For example, the use of a space in unorthodox ways, while it is galling to some, can expand the possibilities of a space and lead to infrastructural improvements that would never have been considered otherwise. Sismondo (2004) writes that "At the level of local interactions, people do considerable work to create order" (p. 120), but points out that to obtain this order and manage the controversy, viewpoints and data can be ignored and certain positions can be given more weight than others without merit (p. 106). It is important to keep in mind that while mitigating controversy and increasing efficiency should be a goal of infrastructural implementation, so too should an environment of creativity and openness. A delicate medium must be met in order to support the ultimate growth of a city and the study of related controversies can help us understand how to create that equilibrium.

Theory

I will conduct my research using a theoretical framework. I will use the concepts I have mentioned, such as classification schemes and boundary objects, along with the definitions I have examined, such as city parks and parklets, to build on top of existing research, much of which has been reviewed in the literature review. I will examine my research questions through the lenses of classification systems, controversy studies, and boundary objects. This will allow me to illustrate the importance of these meta concepts in understanding and mitigating the problems cities face when trying to implement

new infrastructure.

Methods

My research will incorporate quantitative and qualitative data focusing on the Castro Parklet as my research object. I will use the Castro Parklet example as my case study and I will put this case study into historical context by looking at past issues regarding classification confusion over park-like spaces in cities. My quantitative data will come from my research on the formal classification schemes of parks. It will include detailed information on how the city of San Francisco formally classifies its city parks, looking at what standards and criteria a space must meet in order to be classified a city park. Additionally, I will collect quantitative data on the criteria for city park exclusion, which will allow me to explain why a space like the Castro Parklet was not classified as a city park. Further quantitative data will include information on the history of the Parklet itself, such as when it was built and when it changed from temporary to permanent status.

My qualitative data will consist of research on the informal park classification schemes created by neighborhoods, communities, and city residents, most notably those directly affected by the Castro Parklet controversy. Important actors in this interview process will include the San Francisco nudist population, more specifically the nudists who spent time in the Castro Parklet, the Castro/Upper Market Community Benefit District which oversees the maintenance of the Parklet, Supervisor Scott Wiener who represents the Castro district on the city's Board of Supervisors and who proposed the public nudity ban legislation after increased complaints from his constituents, and of course the constituents themselves, a broad cross section of Castro district residents. Ideally, this will allow me to see the controversy from many different perspectives, because, as Sismondo (2004) writes, even though controversies are often framed as an argument between two points of view, there are usually many more (p. 99).

I will collect qualitative data on these users' perspectives and expectations of the Parklet, as well as how they view and/or use the Parklet as a boundary object. My qualitative data will also look at the Parklet's effect on the community as a boundary object by asking community members what role

they feel the Parklet plays in the community. I also need to interview the officials, most notably from the Parks Department. One Castro resident made the simple suggestion of designating the Parklet a city park, therefore making nudity illegal in the space (Bajko, 2012). I want to know why this solution was not considered sufficient. Finally, through my qualitative data collection, I will find out how the actors feel the Parklet could have been better introduced to and implemented in the community to prevent such controversy.

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